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## Grit attitudes demonstrated by school superintendents in California urban school settings

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Pepperdine University  
Graduate School of Education and Psychology

GRIT ATTRIBUTES DEMONSTRATED BY SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS IN  
CALIFORNIA URBAN SCHOOL SETTINGS

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Andrea Elena Arias

June, 2017

Laura Hyatt, Ed.D. – Dissertation Chairperson

This dissertation, written by

Andrea Elena Arias

under the guidance of a Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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## DEDICATION

This body of work is dedicated to my parents and my children. My parents exemplified grit throughout their lives. My children foster my resilience and desire to succeed. Thank you to each of you for your presence in my life.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are so many helpful individuals who supported me in this journey. First and foremost, thank you to my two children. I know how many days, nights, weekends, and school breaks you tolerated your mother working on the big project.

Pepperdine University has brought some amazing people into my life. Claudia and Jose, you two have been part of my tribe. We managed to make some great things happen with a sense of humor and a dedication to produce excellent work. I am glad that the universe brought us together.

My sister Michelle is my rock—thank you for supporting me and keeping me grounded in reality. Our family dealt with some real setbacks during this time and you remained steadfast in keeping me on course. I draw from your example of integrity and capacity to love so deeply.

I have been humbled with the support of those wanting me to succeed in this journey. To Cheryl Akagi for being such a huge supporter, to Sue Cabezas for watching my children while I attended classes, to Dr. Aleta Peters and Mari Luna for keeping things afloat at work while I tackled this task, and to my friends and colleagues who have walked this journey with me. I am truly blessed.

To Hon. Judge John Tobin, and Dr. Paul Sparks, thank you for your willingness to serve on my committee. To Dr. Laura Hyatt, thank you for your patience with me and for guiding me in a way that will leave me much stronger than you started with me. You are a true mentor.

Thank you God and the universe for putting events in my path that forced me to see how resilient I am. I am a true believer that where there is a will, there is a way.

## VITA

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## ABSTRACT

This study's purpose is to explore grit attributes California urban school superintendents demonstrated. The literature review revealed 5 grit attributes: courage, conscientiousness, endurance toward long-term goals, optimism and resilience, and excellence over perfection. There is scant scholarly research connecting urban school superintendents to the 5 grit attributes and understanding grit's 5 attributes school district leaders reflected is valuable to the industry and the profession.

This research implemented a qualitative methodology. Following an extensive review of the literature, a panel of experts developed and reviewed research questions to establish validity. The data collected were gathered from publicly available and accessible published texts regarding superintendents from 7 California urban school districts. Corresponding text from the data sources were reviewed and compared with the grit attributes in the theoretical framework in order to code for themes. The themes were reviewed for alignment to the 5 attributes of grit theory that formed this study's conceptual framework. Limitations included that there was no interaction with superintendents in this study as only publicly available information served as data, and urban school districts in only 1 state were represented in this study.

Findings based on publicly accessed information revealed 15 practices of demonstrating grit in 5 categories: 2 practices demonstrating the attribute of courage; 3 practices demonstrating the attribute of conscientiousness; 5 practices demonstrating the attribute of endurance toward long-term goals; 3 practices demonstrating the attribute of optimism and resilience; and 2 practices demonstrating the attribute of excellence over perfection. In addition to correlating practices with the 5 attributes of grit theory, more than 70 authors supported the 4 theoretical components.

The results of the study provide information that can assist leaders, persons providing professional development, and policymakers in education. The data in this study support the relationship of the grit attributes as school superintendents in California urban settings demonstrated. This research adds to the literature regarding the disciplines of educational leadership, organizational leadership, and positive psychology in organizations, including topics related to persistence and resiliency studies. Additionally, the results of this study add to the existing body of literature specifically related to grit theories.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Leading school districts is a challenging task, which the current inadequate funding complexities, the regulatory climate, and ensuring each organization member embodies the skills and knowledge to meet student needs complicate (Asher-Schapiro, 2015; Kowalski, 2013; Wagner, 2010). Angela Duckworth is an educational researcher studying the grit theory, which combines sustained interest and perseverance to meet long-term goals. Grit predicts achievement in challenging domains over and beyond talent measures (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). Demonstrating grit makes goal accomplishment possible for school leaders guiding stakeholders through constant systemic change. This research explored grit attributes demonstrated by California urban school superintendents.

According to the CalEd Facts Report (California Department of Education, 2015), there are 1,022 public school districts and 10,393 public schools in the state of California with at least 6.2 million students enrolled in Kindergarten through Grade 12. There is little dispute that California makes a significant contribution to the total number of students attending K-12 schools with more than 10% of the largest school districts in the United States located within the California state borders (American School & University, 2016). Therefore, those who lead schools have an opportunity to make an impact on students', staff members', and community members' lives, as well as society at large (Wertz, 2003).

Each California school district has a chief operating officer, known as the superintendent, serving as organizational leader and oftentimes, secretary to the school board (Orange County Department of Education, 2014). The role demands high visibility, accountability, and a propensity for conflict resolution and collaboration (Wagner, 2010). In addition to a district leader's day-to-day managerial tasks, superintendents are involved in pivotal activities, such as

visioning and goal setting to lead stakeholders through the continuous changes presented from federal, state, and local mandates (Kowalski, 2013).

Much of the prior research's focus on grit has been to identify its five attributes and distinguish between natural talent and persistent effort as a determinant for personal and career success (Duckworth, 2016b). Less frequent are studies of grit practices school leaders embody, more specifically, district superintendents working in urban settings. Duckworth and Quinn (2009) noted that grit is distinct from striving for achievement, as there exists a greater emphasis on persistence and long-term goals while facing setbacks. However, an interest exists for further research to determine the relationships between other personality attributes and grit in high-demanding professional fields (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). An additional body of research on urban school district superintendents and their demonstration of the five attributes of grit supports the potential for leaders in these roles to be truly transformative (Fowler & Cowden, 2015).

This research focused on exploring grit attributes demonstrated by California urban school superintendents. Olivarez (2013) suggested that emerging leaders be identified and prepared for the dramatic changes in school climates in recent decades. This study added to the scholarly literature surrounding the concepts of grit attributes aligned with school leaders in urban California.

## **Chapter Structure**

Chapter 1 includes the background of the subject area, states the problem, and explains the purpose of the study. The research questions are presented along with an explanation of the significance, relevance, and innovation of the study. There is also a brief summation of the

theoretical framework and study design. The chapter also includes operational definitions and concludes with a chapter summary.

### **Background and Statement of Problem**

Superintendent leadership is widely acknowledged to be integrally necessary to the success of school improvement efforts and the overall success of districts (Whitt, Scheurich, & Skrla, 2015). The role requires the ability to serve as a manager, a teacher-scholar, a democratic political leader, an applied social scientist, and a strong communicator (Bjork, Browne-Ferrigno, & Kowalski, 2014). District leaders in the role of superintendent have shown success through the ability to support energetic actions, make difficult decisions, and handling conflicts with political savvy (Cuban, 2008). Sergiovanni (1991) recommended intensive study required for current or aspiring school leaders in organizational behavior, human relations, conflict resolution, and group processes. In the pursuit to identify further the attributes that lead to success as a district leader, Giaquinto (2011) noted, “If the educational community and the public in general, genuinely desire to improve our schools and increase student achievement, efforts must be made to identify effective district leadership” (p. 5).

The American Association of School Administrators introduced eight original standards for superintendents, including competence and demonstration of leadership and district culture, emphasis on communication and establishment of community relations, policy and governance, organizational leadership and management, institutional management, curricular planning and development, values and ethics of leadership, and human resources management (Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2006; Kowalski, 2006). The Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium modified the original eight and produced six standards and expectations required by school

administrators (Kowalski, 2006). Each of these competencies contributes to the success of school district leaders.

According to Cuban (2008), those school leaders who have shown tangible accomplishments to their stakeholders, including increased test scores and greater access to innovative instructional practices, are extraordinary individuals. Superintendents can inherit districts suffering under the weight of bureaucratic resistance to change, managerial incompetence, and chronically low student performance (Bjork et al., 2014; Cuban, 2008). Farmer (2010) listed additional challenges school leaders face, including increasing costs, decreasing revenue streams, unfunded mandates, increased accountability, increased poverty, changing demographics, teacher morale and retention issues, and aging facilities, to name a few. Superintendents face adversity and public scrutiny both from outside of their organization and from within (Wagner, 2010). The superintendent role is complex, demanding, and requires a strong sense of passion and commitment.

At the time of this study, there was scant scholarly research connecting urban school superintendents to the five grit attributes. Previous research has indicated that individuals with grit tend to demonstrate a passion and perseverance in order to achieve goals (Duckworth, 2016b; Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). However, the theory of grit was still in its nascent stages and researchers called for additional information (Duckworth & Gross, 2014; Perkins-Gough, 2013; Snyder, 2014; Windle, 2011).

In her book, *Grit*, Duckworth (2016b) noted, “If you want to be grittier, find a gritty culture and join it. If you’re a leader, and you want the people in your organization to be grittier, create a gritty culture” (p. 245). However, existing or aspiring superintendents and researchers interested in the relationship between the theory of grit and success in their role required



additional study to identify the personification of grit and how school leadership display it. This research aimed at contributing to the body of knowledge surrounding superintendents and grit attributes.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore grit attributes demonstrated by California urban school superintendents. Understanding the grit's five attributes reflected in school district leaders added value to the industry and the profession. With superintendents' physical and emotional demands, the ability to actualize grit showed importance to the success of a school organization (Perkins-Gough, 2013; Von Culin, Tsukayama, & Duckworth, 2014).

### **Research Questions**

Exploring grit attributes demonstrated by California urban school superintendents began with a thorough literature review. Multiple authors supported each of Duckworth's (2016b) five grit components and each contributes to the theoretical framework for this study. The research questions were:

1. How do superintendents demonstrate courage?
2. How do superintendents demonstrate conscientiousness?
3. How do superintendents demonstrate endurance toward long-term goals?
4. How do superintendents demonstrate optimism and resilience?
5. How do superintendents demonstrate excellence?

### **Theoretical Framework**

An extensive literature review resulted in multiple authors supporting the concepts associated with Duckworth's (2016b) grit theory. Therefore, grit theory served as this study's theoretical framework. Grit is identified as the passion and perseverance for accomplishment that

is not directly related to innate talent (Duckworth, 2016b; Perlis, 2013). Grit has five attributes, including courage, conscientiousness, endurance toward long-term goals, optimism and resilience, and excellence over perfection.

Courage is the ability to persevere after failure (Brown, 2012; DeYoung, 2013; Duckworth, 2016b; Garfat & Van Bockern, 2010). Conscientiousness is the dedication of effort to build skill and make skill productive (Arora & Rangnekar, 2016; Duckworth, 2016b; Fleming, Heintzelman, & Bartholow, 2016; Ivcevic & Brackett, 2014; MacCann, Duckworth, & Roberts, 2009). Endurance toward long-term goals is an individual or group setting a long-term objective and without deviation, even in the absence of positive feedback (Beattie, 1992; Duckworth et al., 2007; Taormina, 2015). Remaining optimistic involves appraisal of situations without distortion; to reflect on setbacks of challenges as temporary and specific versus assumption of permanent and pervasive causes of blame (Duckworth, 2016b; Mayberry, Pope, Hodgins, & Hitchener, 2010; van Wyk, 2014). Excellence is the process of making and sustaining progress as a priority over achievement of perfection (R. Hill, 2010; Perlis, 2013; Stoeber & Crombie, 2010). These five attributes constitute grit theory. A thorough literature review expanded on supporting authors' work related to these concepts.

### **Design of the Study**

This study explored grit attributes demonstrated by California urban school superintendents. Creswell (2013) suggested that exploratory studies lend themselves to qualitative research in order to gain insight into the lived experience. Therefore, a qualitative design was selected for this research.

Data collection began with the literature review, which resulted in the theoretical framework for the study. The data collection continued by gathering information from publicly

available and accessible published text such as articles and books. Using multiple sources of publicly available text is congruent with the method of qualitative inquiry, defined by Creswell (2013) as aligned with “data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes” (p. 44). Content analysis provided themes resulting in information about grit attributes demonstrated by California urban school superintendents. The data was displayed in both text and graphics.

### **Significance, Relevance, and Innovation of the Study**

This research is significant as it added to the literature regarding the disciplines of educational leadership, organizational leadership, and positive psychology in organizations, including topics related to persistence and resiliency studies. The results of this study also added to the existing body of literature specifically related to grit theories.

This study’s findings offered relevance for current superintendents as well as aspiring school leaders. The demands and expectations of individuals pursuing school leadership positions require a high level of passion and perseverance (Duckworth, 2016b; Wagner, 2010). School leaders who apply grit practices influence the climate of their organizations (Whitt et al., 2015). Exploring the grit attributes demonstrated by superintendents of California urban schools can support the success of school leaders as well as support the development of a culture of grittiness (Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014).

The foundation of the study provided an opportunity to explore a relatively new theory and produce innovative information. Innovation synonyms include originate, renew, and update. Studying grit attributes demonstrated by superintendents in California urban schools offered the potential for current and future innovation in actualizing grit. Additionally, this study may contribute to future research regarding grit attributes of leaders of other types of organizations.

## Operational Definitions

The following definitions were used for the purposes of the study:

*Association of California School Administrators (ACSA):* The ACSA is the largest organization to serve school administrators in the United States, with more than 17,000 members (Association of California School Administrators, 2016a).

*Adaptation:* A process of deliberate change in anticipation of or in reaction to external stimuli and stress. Adaptation is a continuous stream of activities, actions, attitudes, and decisions to provide knowledge that influences decisions about all aspects of life while reflecting social norms and processes (Nelson, Adger, & Brown, 2007).

*American Educational Research Association:* A national research society that strives to advance knowledge about education, to encourage scholarly inquiry related to education, and to promote the use of research to improve education and serve the public good (American Educational Research Association, 2016).

*American Reinvestment and Recovery Act:* The American Reinvestment and Recovery Act of 2009, introduced the Race to the Top initiative in which local school districts could apply for federal funding to support educational reforms (Sass, 2011).

*Attribute:* An attribute adds to the being or reality of a thing. The basic properties of a thing (Keizer, 2012).

*Brown Act:* The Ralph M. Brown Act is known as California's Open Meeting Law. The Brown Act states that it is the intent of the law that actions of public legislative bodies be taken openly and that their deliberations be conducted openly (Ralph M. Brown Act, 2014).

*Common Core State Standards:* The Common Core State Standards were adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia (Toscano, 2013). As of September, 2011, adoption included

the U.S. Virgin Islands and the Northern Mariana Islands, serving more than 80% of the total student population for the United States (Grossman, Reyna, & Shipton, 2011). The Common Core State Standards demonstrate a progression of learning expectations in the curricular areas of English-Language Arts and Math designed to prepare K-12 students to be career and college ready (Nueman & Roskos, 2013).

*Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*: The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 stems from the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act of 1965 (Neill, 2016; Sass, 2011). The reauthorization allows for more discretionary control by states to determine the quality of their public schools (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015).

*Grit*: Grit is the passion and perseverance to achieve long-term goals (Duckworth, 2016b). The five grit attributes are:

1. *Courage*: Courage is the ability to keep going after failure (Duckworth, 2016b).
2. *Conscientiousness*: The dedication of effort to build skill and make skill productive (Duckworth, 2016b).
3. *Endurance*: Endurance is setting a long-term objective and not swerving from it, even in the absence of positive feedback (Duckworth et al., 2007).
4. *Excellence*: Derived from the Greek work Arete, associated with the notion of fulfillment of purpose or function. The process of making and sustaining progress is a priority over achievement of perfection (Perlis, 2013).
5. *Optimism*: The appraisal of situations without distortion; to reflect on setbacks of challenges as temporary and specific versus assumption of permanent and pervasive causes of blame (Duckworth, 2016b).

*Leaders:* Persons possessing a unique set of attributes, traits, and skills used toward setting expectations for a group or an organization. Leaders establish a foundation in which to motivate their followers to perform beyond their expectations (Bass, 1990; Breevaart et al., 2014; Northouse, 2013; Stodgill, 1974).

*Leadership:* “A process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2013, p. 5).

*No Child Left Behind:* The No Child Left Behind Act enacted in 2001 was intended to support student development in public school and increase rigor through creation of frameworks for aligning curriculum, assessment, setting performance objectives, and professional development for educators (Wallender, 2014)

*Public education:* The mass compulsory schooling for children living in the United States based on adopted curricular standards (Schneider & Hutt, 2013).

*Resilience:* Resilience as the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress, such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors (American Psychological Association, 2009).

*School:* The common ground for learning for all backgrounds and persuasions (Alexander & Alexander, 2012).

*School board:* A governing body of elected officials with ultimate authority over general education processes in a local school district (California Department of Education, 2016a).

*School district:* The organization of school districts began with the outlining of school support provisions established by the framers of California’s Constitution in 1849 (California Department of Education, 2016a). Some communities view school districts as stable or even as

established governmental entities. However, school district boundaries do experience change. These changes include transfer of territory between school districts to, district division or combination with bordering communities, and occasional district termination.

*School leaders:* There are many sources of leadership in school districts including superintendents, deputy superintendents, associate-assistant superintendents, district office personnel, principals, assistant principals, and site-based leaders including administration and teacher leaders (California Department of Education, 2016b).

*School reform:* A system-wide school district needs assessment and restructuring process designed to assist underperforming school districts towards achievement of significant and sustainable improvements in the areas of student performance, efficient and effective systems of operations, and community support (Center for Reform School Systems, 2015).

*Self-efficacy:* A belief in one's personal capabilities. It regulates human functioning through cognition, motivation, mood, and affect. Individuals with high levels of self-efficacy approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than to be avoided (Bandura, 1997).

*Stakeholders:* Individuals or entities invested in an organization or system who stand to gain or lose from the success or failures (Gross & Godwin, 2005). In school districts, stakeholders can include (but are not limited to) parents, students, teachers, school leaders, school board members, community partners, and local governmental agencies.

*Superintendent:* The superintendent is the chief operating officer of a school district and serves as both a manager and a leader (Sullivan & Shulman, 2005).

*Transformational leadership:* A leadership style that embodies charisma, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and includes individualized consideration (Bass, 1990).

*Transitional leadership:* Leadership during a time of change introduced by business consultant William Bridges in 1991 (Bridges, 2009). The model highlights the difference between transition and change. Change happens to people. Transition, on the other hand, is internal: it's what happens inside people's minds when they're presented with change (Mindtools: Management Leadership and Training, 2016).

*Urban schools:* Schools located in urbanized areas. An urbanized area consists of densely developed territory containing 50,000 or more people. Two types of urban areas have been identified: Urban Areas of 50,000 or more people; Urban Clusters of at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people (United States Census Bureau, 2010).

## **Summary**

Superintendents working in urban settings face the challenge of shaping the school district culture to create a climate that supports student learning and achievement. Their role faces a myriad of reforms and a complex political environment (Fowler & Cowden, 2015). Ledesma (2014) notes that the sustainability of a school culture depends on resilient leaders. Service in this leadership position involves accountability, conflict, visibility, and collaboration (Wagner, 2010).

Grit is the demonstration and combination of passion and perseverance over time to achieve goals (Duckworth, 2016b). The theoretical framework for this study is based on Duckworth's theory of grit, which includes five attributes: including courage, conscientiousness, endurance toward long-term goals, optimism and resilience, and excellence over perfection.

Current and aspiring superintendents can benefit from studies highlighting applications of the grit theory. Additional research is needed to understand the relationship between the grit attributes as demonstrated by school superintendents in California urban settings. This leadership



role is demanding and requires a high level of grittiness and the passion and perseverance to endure in the face of conflict. The purpose of the study is to explore grit attributes demonstrated by superintendents in California urban schools.

## Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

U.S. education offered in a public-school format has experienced many changes since the presence of the one-room schoolhouse providing instruction in the three Rs of reading, writing, and arithmetic (Baker, 2004; Lutz, 1996). As states joined the Union, they introduced state constitutions outlining their initial designs and approaches to providing education for the children residing in the state (Falk, 1968; Schneider & Hutt, 2014). While state boards of education and state superintendents work in tandem to establish policy and procedure in the realm of public education, it is increasingly evident that public education has governances impacted by local, state, and federal laws. As school districts grow, so does the regulatory environment (Neill, 2016). School leaders find themselves managing complex systems with limited funding and greater regulation (Bjork et al., 2014; Cuban, 2008). The purpose of this study is to explore grit attributes demonstrated by California urban superintendents.

Local school districts employ superintendents to serve as the chief executive officers of the organization (Bjork et al., 2014). The role has developed over time seeking out leaders who can balance the political realities felt in public school education alongside the unwavering mission to provide quality instruction to the children residing within the district boundaries. The relationship with school boards is paramount in order to introduce educational reform and determine best practices to implement guidelines issued by federal and state governments (Maxwell, Locke, & Scheurich, 2014; Wertz, 2003).

According to Farmer (2010), the list of challenges faced by school leaders included (but are not limited to) managing increasing costs, decreasing revenue streams, unfunded mandates, outdated facilities, increased poverty and changing demographics, morale issues with certificated and classified staffs, increased accountability to the state and federal governments, decreased

autonomy, recruitment and retention issues, school board turnover, and tax payer revolt. The job is demanding and requires strong organizational skills and an unwavering commitment to the best interests of the students they represent (Sergiovanni, 1982; Sullivan & Shulman, 2005).

In order to remain sustainable in this demanding role, superintendents demonstrate high levels of grit. Their ability to provoke, contain, and repress conflict on a regular basis requires evidence of tenacity, strong coping mechanisms, and timely recovery (Cuban, 1985; Sergiovanni, 1982). Superintendents require high levels of stamina and longevity, referring to a resistance to succumb to recurring disruptions in demanding environments coupled with the ability to handle poor working conditions while maintaining awareness that these conditions exist (O'Leary, 1998; Wertz, 2003).

### **Organization of the Chapter**

In this chapter, readers were presented with a historical overview of the public education system in the state of California. The next section delved more deeply into the literature that exists to describe the evolution and professional ascent of the role of district superintendents in California public school systems from high-level managers to the chief executive officers within the districts they serve. Included was a synthesis of the literature identifying five personality attributes associated with grit, including courage, conscientiousness, long-term endurance or hardiness, optimism, and excellence over perfection. The theoretical framework for the study was also discussed.

### **Historical Review of the K-12 Public Education System in California**

**Early colonization.** Prior to the landing of Spanish explorers on the California shores in 1769, the Native American inhabitants educated each generation through oral storytelling (Hendrick, 1980). The Yuma tribes, including California Duguenos, Maricopas, and Mojaves,

were hunters and fishermen. Their education was simple and found to be taught by the lead female member of the tribe, serving as principal teacher. Alongside the lead female, the Native American tribal elders provided the children additional education. Boys and girls received varied instruction. Males were taught how to retrieve food, stay alive in their surroundings, and live harmoniously with peers. Females were taught to weave baskets, care for children, and prepare meals. The California Indians were not as advanced as the Aztec, Incan, and Pueblo Indian cultures that left a wealth of archeological artifacts and structures. Their primary objective was to develop effective hunters and homemakers (Cloud, 1952; Falk, 1968).

In 1769, missionary priests under direction of Father Junipero Serra and soldiers under the direction of Don Gaspar de Portola organized in present-day San Diego and began the arduous task of sharing the message of Christianity with the native inhabitants (Cloud, 1952; Garcia, Yosso, & Barajas, 2012). This conversion process also included the creation of 21 missions built by Native Americans throughout the span of 50 years. The missions represented the most outstanding educational efforts made by the Spanish in California (Falk, 1968). Each mission provided religious instruction in Catholicism as well as vocational training necessary to perpetuate the Spanish enterprise developing across California (Baker, 2004). Males were educated in industrial arts, including carpentry and farming, and animal husbandry. Females were educated in cooking, sewing, and homemaking. All received instruction in Catholic doctrine. Native Americans were educated by missionaries in their native dialect, as required by an obligation stemming from The Third Council of Lima in 1583 (Hendrick, 1980). Miranda (2012) elaborates on the internal struggle by Native Americans to preserve culture and tribal educational practices while simultaneously facing the learning expectations of the Jesuit society.

There were some intermitted efforts made by Spaniards to provide formal schools outside of the California missions. Diego de Borica, the seventh Spanish governor of California, attempted to establish schools for the children of Spaniards. There was limited and undocumented success in his efforts. This was largely because Spanish soldiers with little to no education were serving as teachers. They had limited ability in reading and writing and lacked sufficient instructional materials. In addition, several parents were indifferent and hostile toward the program implemented by Borica (Cloud, 1952).

**Under Mexican rule.** In 1822, Mexico assumed control of California and in 1824, a new constitution establishing the Republic of Mexico was written. Mexico proclaimed independence from Spanish rule and California had a new Mexican government to guide and support the development of formal education. As ownership of the missions was moving toward private sources, there were many efforts to secularize education. There were constraints felt by Spanish loyalists, lack of funding, and limited communication and transportation efforts between the federal capital in Mexico City and the provincial capital in the city of Monterey (Hendrick, 1980).

Several provincial leaders made noble attempts to further formal education during Mexican rule. Jose Figueroa, the eighth Mexican governor of California, called for better schools in the cities of Monterey, Los Angeles, and Santa Barbara and the development of new ones in Sonoma, Santa Clara, San Jose, San Diego, San Luis Rey, and San Gabriel (Cloud, 1952; Falk, 1968). He also encouraged the founding of the first college in California, the Seminario de San Jose, and a normal school in San Gabriel designed to train promising young men to become California teachers. The 10th Mexican governor of California, Juan Bautista Alvarado, served for six years. During his tenure, he encouraged teachers from other countries and parts of the

Eastern United States to relocate to California. Unfortunately, lack of funds did not sustain his efforts; however, the Mexican government saw the increased need to create laws surrounding the design and implementation of education. The last Mexican governor of California, Pio Pico, advocated for compulsory attendance laws and the establishment of taxes to support the opening and management of schools (Hendrick, 1980). He also proposed a public treasury from which teachers would be paid salaries. Each governor possessed an enthusiastic agenda to forward the educational movement in California. However, limited funding and lack of enforcement across the state oftentimes failed to put these orders into effect (Falk, 1968). While Mexican rule in California ended in 1846, which is less than half the time that Spain occupied the state, there were many attempts made by political figures to promote formal education.

**Mid-19th century.** By the mid-1840s, Mexican supremacy in California began to fade. The inherited problems of education from earlier Spanish rule along with the vast distance between Mexico City and the provincial capital of Monterrey, limited influence in California cities beginning to establish themselves. During this same period, on the Eastern shores of the United States, national educational leaders such as Horace Mann were working tirelessly to increase funding for public schools, improve teacher training, and create organizational models (Schneider & Hutt, 2013). Mann evaluated European school systems and introduced reform for grading practices. His belief in the importance of free, universal public education gained recognition across the nation (Sass, 2011).

Concurrently, the United States was also at war with Mexico in California, as a result of the United States western expansion (Garcia et al., 2012). The years from 1846 to 1848 promoted uncertainty in California and schools across the state were closed. While newcomers were migrating in increasing numbers to the Golden State, the system of education was in flux. Sam

Brannan, the publisher of the *California Star* newspaper, argued for the establishment of public schools (Cloud, 1952; Hendrick, 1980). His efforts were noticed and in 1848, a five-member school board was elected in San Francisco. Funding was set aside to build a school structure and compensate teachers. However, students in attendance left the school and headed toward the California gold mines in search of their fortunes.

Delegates assembled in the city of Monterey in 1849 to draft the first constitution for California. At the time, Monterey was the unofficial political, religious, and military capital. The overarching goal was to set the pattern for the role of the state in regard to the formal education of its citizens (California Department of Education, 2009). The majority of delegates charged with the task of authoring the constitution were not actually educators. The language surrounding education was borrowed largely from the state constitutions of Michigan, Iowa, and New York (Falk, 1968).

Robert Semple, a delegate from Solano County, appealed to the drafters to create a framework for a common school system. Through the language of Article IX, regarding education, section one called for the election of the first state superintendent of instruction. It was adopted without discussion. In addition, section two provided a controversial allowance of public lands to be sold for the benefit of a permanent, state-regulated, public school fund (Hendrick, 1980; Wood, 2013). The addition of this section was met with great debate and sharp criticism. While tradition devoted the sale of all public lands to the support of schools, it was argued that some of the acres might have housed gold mines, thus becoming a source of profit that should not be exclusive to the educational cause. A proviso submitted by Winfield S. Sherwood, an attorney from Sacramento, wanted to grant authority of the California legislature to use funds for other purposes if deemed necessary. The proviso went to vote and was defeated

(Cloud, 1952). Additional sections allowed for public funds to establish a state university and set forth a minimum amount of three months for required maintenance of schools by the state.

**Entering the Union.** The United States Congress accepted the constitution and on September 9, 1950, California became the 31st state accepted into the Union. It was a free, non-slavery state as determined by the Compromise of 1850 (California Department of Parks and Recreation, 2016). From 1851 to 1862, the first three state superintendents of public instruction had the task of upholding constitutional articles supporting the state-funded development of public schools. The debate around taxation to support public schools was met with frequent objection. This period also experienced the emergence of local school committees in larger urban cities, known later as school boards.

According to Falk (1968), “If Horace Mann deserved to be called the father of American public education, John Swett earned no less a title than that of father of the California public school system” (p. 48). Swett was a pioneer educator who became principal of Rincon School in San Francisco. He was known for his wit and solid articulation of ideas surrounding the continuous need for improvement of public education in the state. He secured the nomination for state superintendent of public schools in 1862. During his tenure, he victoriously secured taxation of real property to fund schools. During an 1865 state tour of larger California cities, including Los Angeles, San Bernardino, and San Jose, he expressed his content with teacher and student efforts and sharply criticized physical facilities. He devoted much energy to pass a school bill geared towards providing a governing system amongst common schools. The bill required each school district to provide school supplies to children in attendance, keep schools open at least five months out of the year, and provided the establishment of schools for non-White children (Hendrick, 1980). He also labored to create regulations for school conduct and the



establishment of a general curriculum. Although he was not reelected in 1867, his efforts serve as a cornerstone to the operations of public school education that are still regulated today.

**Post-Civil War.** The Civil War years and time period shortly after proved to be a challenging time for public education in California. Even though California was entered into the Union as a free state, prejudice was rampant in cities and smaller communities. Children of African American, Native American, and Chinese descent experienced severe discrimination. In addition, children of miners, living mostly in small towns developed as a result of the discovery of gold in local mountain regions, were also viewed as inferior. Schools for non-White children were established in minority communities (McCormick & Ayala, 2007). Several small, private Chinese schools established themselves in San Francisco in an attempt to preserve language and culture. State Superintendent Andrew J. Moulder was a Southerner by birth and had strong objections to integrated schools. He stated in a report (as cited in Cloud, 1952):

It is not desirable that such children (Africans, Chinese, and Diggers) be brought up in ignorance and heathenism. Any district may establish a separate school for the benefit of the inferior races and apply a certain portion of the public funds to its support, provided the citizens do not object. (p. 25)

In November 1871, African American parents in San Francisco launched a movement against segregation by hiring a respected, Caucasian attorney (Falk, 1968). In July 1872, the same parents attempted to enroll their children in a public school designated for all white students. The families were denied admission and applied for a writ of mandate from the California Supreme Court. The writ noted that the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments of the United States Constitution were violated with the denial of admission to the school geographically located closest to their home. The decision was precursory to the landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* case 22 years after this decision (Henrick, 1980); McCormick & Ayala, 2007). Although the parents did not win their case in court, two months after the decision, legislation

ended the separation of African American and Native American children from integration where separate schools were not available.

**Second constitution.** Prior to the second California Constitutional Convention in 1879, several developments influencing education in the state took shape. The California Teachers Association started in 1876 with the state superintendent of schools serving as president. A railroad monopoly was forming under the direction of Mark Hopkins, Charles Croker, Leland Stanford, and Collins P. Huntington (Johnson, 1952). The Bank of California had failed and widespread unemployment across the state caused political and social unrest. In San Francisco, the Workingman's Party formed, making demands such as eight-hour workdays; compulsory education; a better monetary system; state regulation of industries, railroads, and banks; as well as a more equitable taxation program (Cloud, 1952; Garrison, 2007). They were a large political force with almost one third of the convention delegates having Workingman's Party affiliation (Falk, 1968).

The Second California Constitutional Convention met in September 1878, and continued in session until March 1879. Most of the issues addressed taxation, regulation of banks, control of the railroads and other large industries, land and water monopolies, and Chinese immigration (Johnson, 1952). The committee on education accepted a compulsory attendance law of six months (Garrison, 2007; Schneider & Hutt, 2013). The outcome of the convention decentralized the governing power of state board of education and gave decision-making authority and budgetary management to local county offices and superintendents. A constitutional provision established four-year terms for county superintendents along with local boards of education to select textbooks for their region as well as determine teacher qualifications. Constitutional reform was paving the way for a split system of educational governance in California shared

between the state superintendent of public schools and the state board of education (California Department of Education, 2007; Haberman, 1999).

**Turn of the century.** At his 1903 gubernatorial inauguration, George Pardee complained that Californians were not taking advantage of public schooling (Hendrick, 1980). He also discussed the need to increase teacher compensation in order to attract talent and increase longevity in the field. The state was experiencing an influx of immigrants and the demographic landscape was changing (Garcia et al., 2012; McCormick & Ayala, 2007; Rafferty, 1992). Many ethnic groups saw compulsory schooling as an intrusion on their livelihood and need for survival (Baker, 2004; Garrison, 2007).

Additionally, California was moving into an industrial age, which warranted the development of educational programs to meet the demands of domestic and commercial technologies. The state High School Act of 1893 permitted cities with 1,000 or more inhabitants to establish a high school district. This allowance was a part of the establishment of California Education Code, which in turn, outlined in great detail the various types of school districts. These included union school districts, joint union school districts, union high school districts, joint union high school districts, unified school districts, city school districts, county districts, and junior college districts (Falk, 1968).

During this period, the state school system was modernized. Reformers looked at creating modern systems for a modern world (Baker, 2004; Schneider & Hutt, 2013). In 1911, county school boards were able to offer transportation for students. In 1912 and 1913, the first California teacher tenure law was passed and the California Teachers Retirement System began (Cloud, 1952). In 1916, physical education was required at all school levels and one year later, federal funding for vocational training, home economics, and agricultural classes was provided

through the Smith-Hughes Act. Several California school districts led teaching staffs toward progressive education, as introduced by John Dewey (Falk, 1968). The first California Curriculum Commission was established at a session of the 1927 state legislature (Cloud, 1952). Teachers in university preparation programs received instruction on curriculum geared toward student need.

World War I inspired patriotism that supported development of courses in United States history, citizenship, and acculturation to American life. However, the same lens of patriotism led the California Board of Education to suspend teaching the German language in high schools (Hendrick, 1980). Some teachers of German descent chose to change their names to avoid facing dismissal for not proving allegiance (Raferty, 1992). The feelings of xenophobia in the field of public education continued throughout the nation well into the mid-1920s (Garcia et al., 2012; Kuscera, Siegel-Hawley, & Orfield, 2015; McCormick & Ayala, 2007).

**Double-headed system of governance.** During this period, attention in the state capital, Sacramento, was focused on the emergence of a two-headed system of governance (Haberman, 1999). The state board of education and state superintendent of instruction were managing two separate state departments each with the shared goal of administration of public school education in California. The concern was based on lack of organization, misdirection of apportioned funds, and maintenance of a balanced system of governance. In 1927, a bill was introduced to create a reorganized state board of education, referred to as the state department of education. The emergence of the new system provided guidelines, including the appointment of board members and terms of service.

According to the California Department of Education (2007), the board was given power by the governor and the legislature to establish educational policy for the state upon

recommendation of the state superintendent. Within the department, 10 divisions were established with the responsibility for the supervisory and administrative activities of state schools. Haberman (1999) indicated from 1930 through most of the Second World War, little discord existed between the superintendent and the state board.

**The Great Depression through World War II.** The federal government supported the state of California and much of the nation during the years of the Great Depression. Funds were allocated to support unemployed teachers, restore school facilities, and create efforts toward adult education. The state saw the emergence of job retraining efforts for displaced workers and a constant attempt to keep public education solvent. It was during this time that the California Teachers Association entered the forefront of the political arena with high member representation at the state legislature meeting of 1933 to oppose bills presented to reduce funding to schools in ranges of 20% or more (Haberman, 1999).

As the nation faced World War II, the demand for vocational training and acquisition of technical skills increased. Courses from the National Defense Training were federally funded and offered through the California State Department of Education Commission for Vocational Education (California Department of Education, 2007). The impact and loss felt during World War II stimulated a national need to strengthen instruction in morals, ethics, and human values (Brady, 2002; Falk, 1968). Programs allowing for release time for religious education were established, allowing students to receive faith-based instruction during the school day. Schools nationwide found decreases in student enrollment, as many young adults dropped out of instructional programs to aid in the war effort. In 1942, California Attorney General Earl Warren outlined his educational position noting that high school and junior college classes should be taken during summer vacation in order to accelerate academic progress and position more

graduates to enroll in the draft (Cloud, 1952). The national climate toward the war impacted California politics (McCormick & Ayala, 2007).

The Strayer Report written by George D. Strayer of Columbia University, recommended several changes toward the administration of the state department of education and California school districts. His report called for the implementation of the Fair Equalization Law of 1945 (Falk, 1968). The law provided a fund to support county elementary school supervision for districts with fewer than 900 students, provided a minimum for teachers salaries in California, provided funding for the establishment of schools for special-needs students, and permitted local tax levies to support childcare centers. His report also recommended selection of the state superintendent by a board instead of popular vote as well as consolidation of the departments of the state department of education into one building.

**Cold War influences.** The nation was preoccupied with the threat of Communism. State Senator Jack B. Tenney of Los Angeles headed the California Committee on Un-American Activities (Hendrick, 1980). His focus shifted the power from university regents to the state legislature to determine the loyalty of university staffs. Nonsigners of the loyalty oath were dismissed. Many left the university system and took up careers elsewhere. In 1952, the California Supreme Court issued a writ of mandate and nonsigners were reappointed to their positions if they wished to return. One of the dismissed professors from UCLA returned and later assumed the role of university president in 1975.

President Eisenhower called the White House Conference on Education in 1953 as an attempt to grasp the problems at large nationally in regard to public education (Stone & Hempstead, 1968). Additionally, new federal money was available to states through the National Defense Education Act of 1958 (Sass, 2011). The programs under this act expanded educational

opportunities in math, science, and foreign languages in order to “keep up with the Russians” (Falk, 1968, p. 139). Student aid programs under the National Defense Education Act provided academic opportunities for students with the option of low-interest loan repayment or enlistment in the armed forces or Peace Corps. The nation was striving to remain competitive as a global leader and this impact trickled down into the public school system causing a “knowledge explosion” (California Department of Education, 2007, p. 45).

**A change-prone era.** The double-headed educational system of K-12 governance in California was subject of another study, the Little Report, published in 1967 (California Department of Education, 2009). The report noted that the mission of the state board was to govern the state system of public and community colleges as well as the state department of education, to initiate long-range planning, to submit plans and set policy goals to the governor and legislature, as well as set and enforce governing standards for education (Haberman, 1999). Additional reform efforts recommended the appointment of the state superintendent and not election by popular vote. These were also rejected. The California Department of Education did undergo some restructuring; however, the legislature did not implement the recommendations and maintained a bifurcated system of K-12 governance.

Universities in California were largely impacted by student reactions to the Vietnam War and the military draft, and the K-12 system was addressing the large population growth in both urban and rural settings. The election of Max Rafferty as state superintendent of public instruction began the shift toward phonics-based instruction taught in California public schools (Hendrick, 1980). His conservative focus and basic educational message cited lack of discipline, poor financial support to districts, integration and busing of minority students, along with poor curriculum standards as the reasons for the decline in public education during this period.

California legislature reorganized curriculum and specified subjects for instruction. With the passing of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, local school systems focused on academic assistance and community services for low-income families (Neill, 2016).

The state of California was committed to implementation of federal initiatives geared toward disenfranchised populations such as low-income, recent immigrants, Vietnam Veterans, and the disabled (Kucera et al., 2015). However, the California public unfavorably received high levels of taxation to support mandated programs. Proposition 13 was overwhelmingly approved by the electorate and amended the state constitution to limit taxation on property to 1% of the fair market value (Raferty, 1992). Funding for schools relied on state support.

The issue of racial segregation overshadowed the financing issues of the 1960s and 1970s (Neill, 2016; Schneider & Hutt, 2014). Historical legislation in California frequently addressed the Asian population; however, since the passing of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, school desegregation was a topic of much discussion and slow implementation (Hendrick, 1980; Kuscera et al., 2015; McCormick & Ayala, 2007). Previous legislation such as the Federal Vocational Education Act was amended in 1976 and made training benefits available to groups not previously included, especially minority and low-income residents. Even textbooks submitted for state adoption in California needed to reflect the history of several groups previously unrepresented in text. Desegregation was encouraged but proved to be a slow process across the state, especially in large cities such as San Diego, San Francisco, and Los Angeles (Hendrick, 1980; Kuscera et al., 2015).

**Contemporary issues.** More recent educational issues that have impacted California public schools include the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The law reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act of 1965 and superceded the Bilingual



Education Act of 1968 (Neill, 2016; Sass, 2011). School accountability for student achievement levels, introduction of high-stakes student testing, and penalties for schools failing to make adequate yearly progress created a statewide concern for providing quality instruction while still meeting federally mandated educational objectives. California students participated in the State Testing and Reporting System completing multiple-choice assessments in the subject areas of language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies, along with a writing component (Neill, 2016). As the pressures built to show adequate process and avoid local takeover of school districts by state authorities, many schools moved toward teaching to the test. Additionally, the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act of 2004 provided a new framework to special education educators, students, and their families on the procedures districts must follow to determine special education eligibility (Sass, 2011).

No Child Left Behind became a subject for reexamination as a by-product of the 2008 Presidential election (Neill, 2016). The American Reinvestment and Recovery Act of 2009 introduced the Race to the Top initiative in which local school districts could apply for federal funding to support educational reforms (Sass, 2011). Concurrently, the Common Core Standards Initiative was created as a response to prepare present-day students for the college and career demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The Common Core State Standards included a tiered progression of learning expectations and outcomes in English-Language Arts and Math designed to prepare K-12 students to be career and college ready (Neuman & Roskos, 2013). The standards attempt to communicate what is expected by the end of an academic year by students at each grade level across the nation with the notion that regardless of student geography within the United States, they will be held responsible and accountable to the same learning expectations. On August 2, 2010, the California State Board of Education adopted the K-12 California Common Core

Standards based on the recommendations of the California Academic Content Standards Commission (Orange County Office of Education, 2011).

With the help of Students Matter, an advocacy group based in Silicon Valley, nine California public school children filed a statewide lawsuit, *Vergara v. California*, against the State of California in May 2012 to challenge the laws surrounding seniority rights, teacher tenure, and protections surrounding teacher dismissal (Students Matter Media Properties, 2016). In May 2013, the state's two largest teachers unions, the California Teachers Association along with California Federation of Teachers intervened to defend upholding these statutes in favor of the state. In 2014, the Superior Court of the State of California ruled in the case of *Vergara v. California* that rights surrounding teacher tenure are unconstitutional (Sass, 2011). The decision was appealed by the California Federation of Teachers, California Teachers Association, and the State of California in 2015 and started oral arguments in the Appeals Court in February 2016 (Students Matter Media Properties, 2016).

Additionally, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act as the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015 allowed for more discretionary control by states to determine the quality of their public schools. California presently provided public school education to more than 6 million students ranging from preschool through Grade 12 and more than 3 million of these students identify as Hispanic or Latino (California Department of Education, 2015). As Hendrick (1980) noted, the romantic image of California has persisted to make it the most populated state in the Union and the home of more newcomers each year than came during the first 300 years following the discovery by Europeans.

## The Superintendency

**Historical progression.** The Tenth Amendment of the United States Constitution provides a reserve clause from which the legal responsibility for public education is distributed to each state (Bjork et al., 2014). As each state in the union drafted its inaugural state constitutions, each established boards of education and superintendents of instruction that governed educational policy from the state capitol. However, as migration increased and settlements took shape in the form of urban cities and rural towns, local district leadership was necessary to enforce the guidelines set forth on the state level. The roles of state and local district superintendents were created out of the need for the common school reform movement and preservation of the concept of local control (Bjork et al., 2014; Kowalski, 2006).

At the local level, district superintendents had the expectation of communicating elements of a shared curriculum and providing supervision to ensure its sustainability. Literature notes that as early as 1820, school boards maintained a school clerk to support each school district's day-to-day operations. This school clerk evolved into the role of school superintendent. The first official superintendent was appointed in Buffalo, New York, in 1837 (Kowalski, 2006).

The evolution of the role into a supervisory capacity was oftentimes challenged by community members who wanted to retain influence and authority governing local school districts. Turnover in the superintendent role was highest in the 1870s (Cuban, 1985). The role became increasingly political in nature and largely influenced by relationships with the community. Raftery (1992) noted that few superintendents at the time were previously educators and came from roles such as merchants, lawyers, doctors, and preachers. This began to change in the early 1900s, as the Industrial Revolution warranted organizational leaders with skills to standardize educational practice and achieve results.

By the 1920s, progressive school reformers conferred the status of expert on district superintendents and drew from their educational backgrounds. The reformers considered these leaders to be the engineers who would design successful educational blueprints (Cuban, 1985). Kowalski (2006) noted that three new role conceptualizations of superintendents emerged in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: first as an effective organizational manager, second as a democratic statesman or politician, and last, as an applied social scientist. Additionally, other roles such as teacher-scholar and communicator emerged later as additional aspects for school district leadership (Sullivan & Shulman, 2005). Americanization and the movement toward compulsory education for children from Kindergarten through high school was an educational goal (Baker, 2004; Garrison, 2007). A few large urban cities, such as Los Angeles, employed females as superintendents of schools, as they brought their experience and expertise from the classroom into the leadership role (Falk, 1968). Fulfilling the role of democratic politician, Superintendent Susan Miller Dorsey established partnerships with prominent clubs and social organizations in Los Angeles with influence on local education (Raferty, 1992). This strategic move not only secured economic resources for the rapidly growing district, it created ownership by community members of developing educational reforms.

In the 1940s, the American Association of School Administrators began an effort to professionalize the role of school administration (Kowalski, 2006). The position of superintendent was becoming increasingly political in nature. School districts, universities, and colleges joined this effort with support from private, nonprofit foundations. Additional reforms to promote professionalism in the school leadership field came largely from the National Policy Board of Educational Administration and the University Council of Educational Administration (Cooper & Fusarelli, 2002). The document for educational reform released by Ronald Reagan, in

1983, titled *A Nation at Risk*, increased awareness of public school accountability, and nationally influenced the role for superintendents (Bjork et al., 2014; Giaquinto, 2011). The early 1980s brought greater focus on educational reform as well as the accompanying responsibilities of leader of reforms, professional advisor to the board, manager of resources, and educational information communicator to the public. The superintendent was viewed as the chief executive officer of a school district.

In 1993, the California Commission on Professional Standards, a branch of the American Association of School Administrators, developed eight professional standards for the superintendency. These included policy and governance, leadership and district culture, organizational management, communication and community relations, institutional management, curriculum planning and development, human resources management, and values and ethics of leadership (Cunningham & Cordiero, 2006; Kowalski, 2006). John Hoyle, chairman of the American Association of School Administrators at the time of the standards adoption, declared that they served as benchmarks for improving the selection, preparation, and development of superintendent (Kowalski, 2006). There was noted absence of the standards for holding accountability for teaching improvement, site leadership performance, and academic student performance.

**The role of superintendent.** Scholars and practitioners agreed that the role of superintendent requires highly developed skills and political acumen to work effectively with district stakeholders (Kowalski, 2006; Maxwell et al., 2014). Contemporary superintendents argued that the task of administering a school district is harder than earlier times largely because of state and local governments, parents and interested citizens, due process, prayer in schools, and equity in school finance (Cuban, 1985). Public school leadership and management in local

school districts are organized into a hierarchy of roles, beginning from the classroom teacher and classified personnel at the bottom of the framework ascending toward the superintendent as the chief executive officer. The superintendent serves as both a manager and a leader (Sullivan & Shulman, 2005). The managerial skills include making and enforcing rules and guidelines, controlling materials and human resources, striving for objectivity and rationality, and pursuing efficiency. The leadership skills include embodiment of philosophy, purpose, and the continuous goal of school district improvement (Kowalski, 2006; Sullivan & Shulman, 2005).

At times, the superintendent of small rural districts jointly serves as a school principal, human resources administrator, and/or chief financial officer (Kowalski, 2006). These superintendents remain generalists in comparison to larger districts with directors or high-level managers serving in each department. Through administrative attention, the leader makes a contribution to the tone and climate of the organization and communicates the priorities (Sergiovanni, 1982; Sullivan & Shulman, 2005). Superintendents of large school districts are at the helm of complex bureaucratic organizations with a recommendation by Cuban (1985) for extensive training in management and politics. The role varies greatly in comparison with school site administrators. Principals have a network of professional peers and can seek out clarification on district policy as well as seek out moral support. Site administrators spend a large majority of their focus on internal systems to ensure best practice by teachers, support, and custodial staffs. In contrast, superintendents do not have district peers and must devote a large amount of time and energy toward the cultivation of community partnerships (Kersten, 2012; Sullivan & Shulman, 2005).

The professional preparation and licensing criteria to become a district superintendent varies from state to state. In the 1990s, there was a declining interest in school administration

programs offered at colleges and universities. This prompted the institutions to reevaluate their programs and create a culture of competitiveness (Kowalski, 2006). As noted earlier, the eight professional standards were introduced by the American Association of School Administrators and the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium introduced six standards to be upheld by school administrators. There has been a noted increase in the numbers of district superintendents with doctoral degrees, largely in districts with at least 25,000 students enrolled.

At the time of this study, there was not a national curriculum for superintendent preparation. Some professional organizations such as the ACSA have offered a mentorship program for new school leaders (ACSA, 2016b). Their purpose was to serve in the role of providing new leaders with a person they can communicate with as they move through their first and second year in a new leadership position. Mentors committed to having regular conversations with protégés and receive coaching. It was a much more intense and focused program than informal partnerships.

Many superintendents moved through the hierarchy of a professional school-based career with beginnings as a certificated teacher, coach, or support person (Sullivan & Shulman, 2005). Professional movement could have included site leadership, a directorship, service as an executive director or assistant superintendent with an emphasis in curriculum and instruction, human resource management, or fiscal services.

Kersten (2012) recommended that each candidate conduct an active search to determine most optimal district placement. If an applicant is applying within his or her current school district, he or she was advised to educate himself or herself on the roles and responsibilities of other departments and job classes. Some districts utilized search firms to conduct the screening interviews and recommend finalists to the school boards for consideration. Candidates must have

prepared themselves for a series of multiple interviews with district office members, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders. If an offer of employment was extended, both parties conducted a negotiation regarding salary, additional benefits, and terms of service. Several literature sources noted that superintendents served at the pleasure or whim of the school board (Cooper & Fusarelli, 2002; Kersten, 2012; Kowalski, 2006;).

**The superintendent and the school board.** The emergence of school boards began after World War I, as corporations formed across the nation. The goal was to replicate a board of directors, similar in form and function to those who served in a business setting (Bjork et al., 2014). Powers vested in school boards were specified in state constitutions. Some of the responsibilities issued from this power base included expenditure of public funds and evaluation and entrance into legal contracts. The primary responsibilities identified by Kowalski (2006) included assurance that state rules, laws, and regulations are upheld; establishment of policy in the areas not governed by the state; and to have employed a superintendent.

The size of a school board varies from district to district. Almost always, the number of board members is odd in an attempt to prevent recurring tie votes (Kowalski, 2006). Board members can be either elected or appointed, depending on the reason for the vacancy. If there is an unexpected term of a board member that becomes vacant by choice or other unpreventable circumstance, a board may appoint a new member for the duration of the term. Board members must reside within the boundaries of the school district and are members of the community.

The superintendent oftentimes serves as the secretary of the school board and manages the school board meetings. Frequently, district superintendents must uphold the Ralph M. Brown Act, known as California's Open Meeting Law (Orange County Department of



Education, 2014). The Brown Act states (as cited in Orange County Department of Education, 2014):

It is the intent of the law that actions of public legislative bodies be taken openly and that their deliberations be conducted openly. Therefore, all aspects of school board meetings, including discussion, debate, and the acquisition of information must be conducted in public and subject to public scrutiny. (p. 3)

California Education Code also requires properly noticed meetings open to the public (Orange County Department of Education, 2014). The meeting agenda must be posted at least 72 hours in advance and informational materials provided to the school board must be available to the public within the 72-hour guideline. Record of meeting minutes are mandatory for all meetings and all actions taken by the governing board must be recorded in the minutes and made readily accessible to the public within a set amount of time once the meeting is concluded. The role places the superintendent as responsible for the behavioral governance of the very people who determine the longevity of their employment.

According to Wertz (2003), generally, superintendents find their school boards of education to be very supportive. However, adversity can exist when a superintendent disagrees with the recommendations of the school board (Garcia et al., 2012). Board members have set terms determined by board policy and must participate in an election process. When new school board members do not share the pedagogical or philosophical ideals of the superintendent, conflict can occur. According to Pashiardis (2009), educational leaders tackle the dual-dimensionality of leadership, whereas, a leader cautiously balances between achieving the goals of the organization and achieving those goals while maintaining a state of good relations among the various organizational participants.

Lutz (1996) discussed a paranoia felt by superintendents that is a learned behavior based on real experiences. The political climate exists not only between districts and community

partners, but at times, also internally among its leadership team. Kowalski (2006) noted that almost every problem making its way to the superintendent level affects the community, the school district, students, and employees and, at times, the best interests of each party can conflict with the others. The role is demanding and requires a high level of transparency to garner trust over time.

**The superintendent as leader.** Robbins and Judge (2013) defined transformational leaders as those who inspire their followers to transcend their self-interests for the greater good of an organization or belief system. They have an extraordinary and influential impact on their followers. They communicate the expectations of the organization and promote careful problem solving. Superintendents are described as transformational leaders as they bear the responsibility of introducing educational reform to their districts and encouraging stakeholders to see beyond their scope toward the benefits for students (Sullivan & Shulman, 2005). Transformational leadership is considered to be one of the most effective leadership models (Zacher & Johnson, 2015). They support internal and external organizational changes and reform is promoted as a total organizational phenomenon (Kowalski, 2006).

Three core transformational leadership attributes have been identified for educators, including helping staff develop and maintain a collaborative culture, fostering effective staff development, and helping members of the organization solve problems effectively through a collaborative process (Leithwood, 1992; Mitchell, 1998; Zacher & Johnson, 2015).

Superintendents who succeeded in motivating their stakeholders to invest in a decision with shared responsibility are viewed as upholding a moral imperative of doing what is best for students (Sullivan & Shulman, 2005).

Attribute studies have found a positive correlation between individuals who demonstrate a high level of hardiness and their success as leaders (Bird, 2013). Personalities who remain positive have egos resilient enough to accept a contentious political environment, while their negative counterparts may be overburdened by being subject to frequent criticism (Boyer, Hudson, & Butler, 2013). As an overarching self-competency trait, resilience has been linked to other characteristics described in strong leadership such as resourceful, emotionally balanced, hardy, stable, and realistically optimistic (Bird, 2013). It also has a behavioral component in which leaders manage activities and lifestyle choices that reduce stress and facilitate effective recovery. Leaders must show tenacity, strong coping mechanisms, and timely recovery when faced with adversity and struggle. Since leadership sheds influence and creates culture within an organization, there is need for a balance between the demands of a leadership role and the maintenance of a grounded personal life (Maier, 2007).

School superintendents are a group consisting of the most resilient professionals in the educational community. The position can be isolating as the head of a school district, large or small, urban or rural. The position requires strong coping skills, positive self-esteem, self-perseverance, self-efficacy, hardiness, low fear of failure, a sense of coherence, optimism, adaptability, risk-taking, determination, strong social resources, and a high tolerance for uncertainty (Ledesma, 2014). Individuals serving in the role of superintendent face increasing demands from stakeholders, including district school boards, the student and parent communities they serve, as well as multiple levels of certificated and classified staff. In addition, they are required to uphold ever-changing mandates brought forth from the California Department of Education. Their decisions are subject to scrutiny and are openly challenged or supported

through various media outlets. The position serves at the whim of an elected school board, which can change representation or philosophy on best practices from election to election.

Patterson and Kelleher (2005) identified six strengths of school leaders. These include: (a) Accurate assessment of past and current reality, (b) Positive outlook about future possibilities, (c) Clarity about what matters most in the hierarchy of values, (d) Maintenance of a strong sense of personal efficacy, (e) Wise investment of personal energy, and (f) Acting on the courage of personal convictions. All of the noted strengths indicate an importance on self-reflection and self-management. Each interviewee in the Patterson and Kelleher study noted that their deep-rooted notions of self-acceptance allowed a personal recognition that at times, they may not be able to live up to their own ideals. When this conflict with self-imposed standards presented itself, the interviewees also noted the presence of self-compassion as a necessary tool to reframe their thinking and move forward.

District superintendents live within the field of change management. Their resilience can be perceived as an ability to demonstrate both flexibility and strength throughout a process involving change (Conner, 1993). The resiliency of district leaders is crucial for their survival, adaptation, and success (Ledesma, 2014). Superintendents require high levels of career resilience, which refers to a resistance to career disruption in a less than optimal environment and the ability to handle poor working conditions while one is aware that these conditions exist (O'Leary, 1998). One significant challenge superintendents are presented with is managing the relentless and unwavering responsibility of moving a school district forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in the face of adversity (Ledesma, 2014). Nishikawa (2006) noted there exists the constant threat of crippling leaders due to prolonged contact with stress and challenges surrounding adverse situations. Therefore, it is essential for superintendents to balance the commitment of

maintaining their own well-being concurrent with fostering resiliency of the organization as a whole. According to Wagner (2010):

Balancing the business of the district with the personal life of a leader is all part of the job. Get used to the reality of missed little league games and Girl Scout meetings, late dinners with your spouse, weekend phone calls, middle-of-the-night emergencies, and public scrutiny. (p. 3)

### **Theoretical Framework of This Study**

The theoretical framework for this study is based on Duckworth's (2016b) theory of grit. Her research has focused on the positive relationship between achievement and components of grit. Duckworth interviewed leaders in various career fields. Duckworth noted:

The highly successful had a kind of ferocious determination that played out in two ways. First, these exemplars were unusually resilient and hardworking. Second, they knew in a very, very deep way what it was they wanted. They not only had determination, they had direction. (p. 8)

She defined grit as a psychological construct combining commitment to a task or a passion over time with perseverance toward long-term goals (Duckworth & Gross, 2014).

Others have contributed to identifying the relationship between grit and achievement. Historically, Socrates taught us that happiness is the ability of reason to overcome our wants and needs and to be able to control our feelings and emotions (as cited in Pashiardis, 2009). Emerging findings of individuals with high levels of grit are characterized as having an orientation toward purpose and meaning in an attempt to achieve happiness in life in contrast to individuals in search of pleasure (Von Culin et al., 2014). The research provided by Duckworth has indicated that high-achieving individuals are not necessarily the most innately talented but rather possess the ability to overcome setbacks and preserve interest despite the discomfort to attain goals (Stokas, 2015). The characteristics of grit based on the model Duckworth developed include five attributes described as the demonstration of courage, the embodiment of

conscientiousness, maintaining endurance toward long-term goal achievement, sustaining an attitude of optimism and resilience, as well as active pursuit of excellence over perfection (Perlis, 2013).

**Courage.** Duckworth (2016b) summarized that courage is the ability to keep going after failure. Writings by Plato and Aristotle were recorded as the primary references on the classical views of courage (as cited in Zavaliy & Aristidou, 2014). According to Aristotle, courage is defined as a moral virtue and a person demonstrating courage will uphold what he or she believes is morally right as evidenced by his or her actions (as cited in Curtis, 2014). The word courage stems from *coeur*, the French word for heart (DeYoung, 2013). Courage reflects the embodiment of overcoming the fear of significant harm in order to commit to a worthy cause (Zavaliy & Aristidou, 2014). Courage calls for individuals to “show up and be seen” (Brown, 2015, p. 210). The word evokes thoughts of nobility and heroism in the midst of conflict. Across the globe, various communities and different cultures relish in retelling and rewriting accounts of heroes of today and yesteryear. These heroes are those few ordinary individuals who are called to employ new levels of fearlessness as compared to their contemporaries. They survive great hardships and loss and despite numerous challenges seasoned with despairing moments arise as victorious (Gruber, 2011). Heroes face adverse circumstances that might overwhelm the fainthearted. However, instead of surrendering, they draw from their internal resources and spheres of control to find the necessary courage to move forward.

Historical and contemporary literature, ranging from mythology to modern-day storytelling, is laden with great recounts of heroism highlighting those protagonists who succeed in the emotional appeal to the young and the old, the empowered and the disenfranchised. One such example is the fierce Katniss Everdeen, the young adult protagonist from *The Hunger*

Games series, written in a futuristic, science fiction setting. She is an example of a member of a disenfranchised community who must make a series of choices placing her in extraordinary circumstances. As the story evolves, she is charged either to surrender or to employ courage to ensure her survival (Collins, 2008; Pharr & Clark, 2012). Readers of the series witness the protagonist, with some natural abilities of self-defense and common sense, evolve into a mature and strategic symbol of courageousness for the community at-large. Meeting challenges while cultivating the strength needed for survival is directly linked to the emotional capacity of demonstrating courage.

Research discussions surrounding the definition of courage attempt to incorporate the classical interpretations of a mythical past with the contemporary views involving courageous acts on an everyday basis (Curtis, 2014; Day, 2014; Gruber, 2011; Schweitzer, 2013; Zavalij & Aristidou, 2014). Courage is described as a necessary attribute to determine individual ideas about the world around us while striving for independence (Gruber, 2011). Milton (2012) discusses the need for creativity and courage to face difficulties in order to find ways to engage with these difficulties and to create the possibility of overcoming obstacles to feel some respite or possible joy.

In May's (1975) book, *The Courage to Create*, courage was combined with creativity, independence, and autonomous thought. In current research, courage is related to demonstration of personal boundaries and risks to grow creatively (Brown, 2015; Zavalij & Aristidou, 2014). Cashman (2008) discussed courage as the ability to see, acknowledge, and embrace both the positive and the negative aspects of the self and shed light on dark regions previously unexplored. Historically, courage has been associated with overt bravery; however, recent research has shown that it is more aligned with vulnerability and transparency (Brown, 2015).

Courage can be viewed as the ability to handle or confront fears and carry on with dignity and purpose (Curtis, 2014; DeYoung, 2013). Evolving from courage is the concept of a growth mindset which allows people to remain constant in their pursuit of an idea or goal completion in the face of difficulty (Duckworth, 2016a; Dweck, 2006).

The ability to demonstrate everyday courage is more widely noted in current writings, than in the previously romanticized frameworks, mythology, and dramatizations. Courage can be simply demonstrated by assuming personal responsibility for mistakes and not assigning blame or making excuses (Dweck, 2006). Kouzes and Posner (2010) surveyed thousands of international business employees on what characteristics note an admired leader in their industries. The results of their published study noted that 21% of the respondents found courageousness as a necessary leader attribute. White (2015) noted that individuals in personal and professional lives demonstrate moral courage by focusing on prevention of dishonesty, exploitation, deception, unfair balance of power, discrimination, harassment, and violations of human dignity. Courage is seen not only as the outward demonstration of bravery but also as the tendency to follow one's own moral convictions despite social pressure to follow what is popular (Sonnentag & Barnett, 2016).

**Conscientious.** An overview of conscientiousness by Duckworth (2016a) discussed the dedication of effort to increase skill and strategically make skill productive. It includes the energy and self-disciplinary practices to sustain skill acquisition over time. It is listed as one of the big five personality traits measured by rating scales and inventories (Fleming et al., 2016; Ivcevic & Brackett, 2014; Nakaya, Oshio, & Kaneko, 2006; Soto, 2015). It is defined and characterized as the ability to follow socially prescribed norms in regard to impulse control (Ivcevic & Brackett, 2014; Luo & Roberts, 2015). Nakaya et al. (2006) defined the



conscientiousness dimension as indicating strong convictions and self-control and can be considered related to the power of mental recuperation. In a research study, Nakaya et al. administered a personality scale to adolescents to determine various levels of control to environmental stimuli when proposed with a challenge. The data reflected that conscientious individuals possess a stronger sense of self-awareness of their strengths and limitations, and will actively seek out support when faced with challenge. Duckworth (2016b) suggested higher levels of self-awareness or conscientiousness show a positive correlation with deliberate practice, or the commitment to mastering a skill or task over time.

Conscientiousness is a multifaceted supertrait with connection to aspects of at least nine personality domains, including task planning, procrastination, industriousness, perfectionism, control, perseverance, refrainment, cautiousness, and tidiness (Ivcevic & Brackett, 2014; MacCann et al., 2009; Rikoon et al., 2016). In a study across four countries, conscientiousness has been noted as a predictor of cognitive empathy and openness to experience (Melchers et al., 2016). Results suggested that conscientiousness correlated positively with agreeableness. Additional research indicates that a conscientious person encompasses reliability, self-discipline, a sense of duty, delayed gratification, goal orientation, achievement motivation, and adherence to moral principles (Arora & Rangnekar, 2016; Gartland, O'Connor, Lawton, & Ferguson, 2014). It is suggested that there is a relationship between conscientiousness and executive functioning abilities in the area of mental set shifting, which is defined as the ability to divert attention from one task to another as well as to adapt rapidly when faced with varied situations (Fleming et al., 2016; Ravizza & Carter, 2008). The ability to focus and adapt are skills required for survival and sustainable success during and after a change process (Conner, 1993; Kotter, 2012).

Studies have shown a relationship between levels of conscientiousness and both physical and emotional health. Individuals with high levels of conscientiousness might assign high value to social contacts. By doing so, they may be less likely to cancel appointments, break social contracts and promises, and show strong self-control (Hill, Payne, Jackson, Stine-Morrow, Roberts, 2013). Soto (2015) suggested that conscientiousness leads to greater emotional stability and satisfaction with life. Individuals with high levels of conscientiousness may also live healthier lives by their greater tendencies to avoid negative behaviors while catalyzing positive ones (Hill, Nickel, & Roberts, 2013). There may be a greater propensity for stress management and adherence to a medical regimen, as this indicates compliance with rules as well as exercise of positive health choices and the reduction in negative ones, such as smoking, drinking excessive amounts of alcohol, and engaging in risky social behaviors (Gartland et al., 2014; Hill, Nickel et al., 2013; Ivcevic & Brackett, 2014).

Other researchers noted the positive correlation between conscientiousness and academic and career success. Rikoon et al. (2016) found that the relationship between academic honors and conscientiousness was more than six times stronger with the industrious facet than for tidiness. High levels of conscientiousness also support emotional regulation, which involves monitoring and modifying emotional reactions in order to reach a goal (Ivcevic & Brackett, 2014). Employing emotional regulation when encountering a stressful or distressing situation in an academic situation may positively impact the outcome. High levels of conscientiousness indicate strong discipline and the ability to demonstrate mental recuperative power (Nakaya et al., 2006). Arora and Rangnekar (2016) suggested mentors desire high levels of conscientiousness in protégés. Such individuals may show achievement-orientation tendencies and better performance behaviors. A heightened sensitivity for conscientiousness may also lead to a commitment to an

organizational framework or corporate responsibility, as well as greater job satisfaction (Woodley, Bourdage, Ogunfowora, & Nguyen, 2016). The research on the relationship between personality composite and overall physical and emotional well-being continued to influence studies on academic and career success.

**Endurance and long-term goals.** Attributes that contributed to the research on endurance and long-term goal setting included adaptation, hardiness, and establishment of a clear vision. Duckworth et al. (2007) defined endurance as setting a long-term objective and not swerving from it, even in the absence of positive feedback. Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000) define resilience as a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity. Adaptation is a process of deliberate change in anticipation of or in reaction to external stimuli and stress (Nelson et al., 2007). Adaptation involves a continuous stream of actions, activities, decisions, and attitudes that inform decisions about all aspects of life as well as reflect social norms and processes.

Adaptation and endurance take form in nature as animals and other organisms determine how to survive in a new physical environment or thrive in a different ecosystem. Longevity in life is the long-term goal. For human beings, adaptation and endurance also contribute to the emotional component of readjustment after a significant change, crisis, or trauma. The change can be positive or negative. Long-term goal setting and endurance in working toward such goals requires emotional flexibility and commitment to change. Adaptability is part of long-term goal setting and acquisition, as it represents the capacity to adjust responses to internal processes and changing external drivers, thereby allowing for development along the current trajectory (Folke et al., 2010). Cashman (2008) also used the term agility as a synonym for adaptability.

Hardiness is an additional personality attribute mentioned in the literature surrounding long-term goals and endurance. Bonnano (2005) defined three dimensions of hardiness, including the belief that one can influence surroundings and outcomes of life events, seeking and identifying purpose in life, and the ability to learn and grow from any life experience. In her research, Kobasa (1979) described hardiness as the ability to withstand stress over time and prevent internalization of stress to the level that it impairs the physical state of the body. Hardiness includes components supporting long-term goal setting, including control, commitment, and challenge (Kobasa, 1979).

Control is exemplified by the individual who is willing to accept stressors as part of the process of living. This individual actively seeks to minimize the feelings of powerlessness over his or her life and refute the internalization of stress that can cause physical sickness to the human body. Exercising this level of control prevents a person from seeing the world through a victim's lens (Just, 1999).

Commitment means an active involvement in relationships with others and a sense of connectivity to the environment. Commitment is active and provides the drive for completion of tasks. The individual embodying hardiness makes a long-term commitment to assume ownership when conflict occurs. The individual strives toward sustainable solutions and removal of obstacles. Challenge is exemplified when individuals view change over time as a normal process of life (Just, 1999). It is perceived as an opportunity for long-term growth over stagnation. Similar to control, individuals embracing challenge do not internalize the high levels of stress that lead to physical illness. Kobasa (1979) hypothesized that these three factors would play a significant part in maintaining emotional and physical health over long periods of time in the face of adversity.

Movement toward achieving a long-term goal also involves establishing a clear vision. A vision is a hopeful image of the future and can guide behavior allowing individuals or groups to visualize positive outcomes and build self-esteem and confidence (Boleman & Deal, 2008; Posner, 2010; Robbins & Judge, 2013). In anecdotal data collected from international leaders, a clear vision allows for change that makes sense to the stakeholders, it can be communicated repeatedly, and it can be accompanied by a blueprint to make this vision come to fruition (Osland, 2013). Bolman and Deal (2008) noted that vision is particularly important in times of crisis or uncertainty. It fosters a sense of meaning and hope, which aligns with the research presented by Duckworth et al., (2007).

**Optimism and resilience.** Duckworth (2016b) noted that grit depends on a hopefulness or optimism that individual efforts can improve individual futures. Resiliency is a characteristic of grit that is not dependent on external factors such as luck but instead on the notion of getting up again. Ungar (2008) furnished a focused definition:

In the context of exposure to significant adversity, whether psychological, environmental, or both, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources, including opportunities to experience feelings of well-being, and a condition of the individual family, community and culture to provide these health resources and experiences in culturally meaningful ways. (p. 225)

General dictionary definitions note that the noun resilience is a derivative of the adjective resilient, which has applications: (a) ability to recoil or spring back into shape after bending, stretching, or being compressed; and (b) recovering quickly and easily from misfortune or illness (Windle, 2011). The term resilience was initially referenced by Holling (1973) as a concept to explain the capacity of ecosystems with alternate attractors persisting in their original state when subject to anything in the environment causing trouble, disruption, or disorder (Folke et al., 2010). Additionally, the American Psychological Association (2009) defined resilience as the

process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress, such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors. It is commonly used to describe the human capacity for positive adaptation when facing something new or unknown (Watson & Neria, 2013).

Additionally, resilience includes a capability to experience challenge and maintain or reestablish a life rich with meaning. Individuals demonstrate the ability to respond positively or adapt successfully when presented with difficulties that might otherwise lead to emotional withdrawal, feelings of depression or anxiety, painful physical symptoms, or demonstration of poor achievement (Harvey, 2007). Bonnano (2005) defined adult resilience as, “an individual’s capacity to resist maladaptation in the face of risky experiences and to maintain a stable equilibrium” (p. 265). Business studies identify optimism as a core trait of the most successful executives. Social science has shown optimistic leaders possess a big advantage (Brooks, 2015; van Wyk, 2014).

The presence of this attribute may provide an optimistic base from which individuals can more efficiently recover from physical and emotional stress as well as some forms of trauma. Human beings occasionally struggle with recovery and to maintain a sense of positivity and hopefulness. There is value in implementation of the emotional tools and skills necessary for timely recovery after a traumatic experience. Research supports acquisition of practical skills to respond to constant change and identifies strong leaders with the ability to reframe an issue into something positive (Wertz, 2003). Harvey (2007) suggested that a more optimistic approach or habit developed by individuals toward recovery will further the ability to weather other adversities presented in everyday life.

Researchers across various disciplines of study focusing on human behavior across the many stages of human life have identified similar traits exemplified by resilient individuals. The identified individuals have experienced adversity and trauma and demonstrate similar attributes or subscribe to similar beliefs that have supported positive recovery in a timely manner. One combination of resilient attributes includes the embodiment of high levels of emotional positivity, hand-in-hand with an optimistic outlook on life, along with an unwavering sense of hopefulness. Highly resilient people are not adverse to trauma or stress; however, their emotional outlook lends itself to a more valuable sense of meaning or life purpose (Peres, Moreira-Almeida, Nasello, & Koenig, 2007). By viewing the traumatic event in isolation as compared to the overall quality of life, resilient individuals can reframe their thinking and restore balance more quickly than peers mired in despair. Dweck (2006) referred to this as a growth versus fixed mind-set.

Emotional health also relates to fostering a positive attitude and maintaining personal perspective, especially in the midst of adversity. Optimistic individuals battling everyday stressors have a healthy emotional composite and are able to see the traumas in their life as the natural challenges associated with a meaningful life. They are able to learn and grow from adversity and develop a sense of grace and dignity (Watson & Neria, 2013). Spiritual groundedness provides a cognitive framework to decrease suffering while concurrently reinforcing a sense of meaning and life's purpose (Peres et al., 2007). Humor furnishes an additional outlet for managing emotional stress; it provides internal regulation while promoting optimism. Humor provides the opportunity for cultivation and regulation of positive interpersonal and work relationships. Besser, Luyten, and Mayes (2012) suggested that humor can be implemented to reduce interpersonal conflict. Frequent and honest levels of

communication are recommended along with the creation of positive alliances to promote a culture of collaboration and high levels of emotional energy (Lugg, 1993).

Frankl (1956), the internationally acclaimed psychologist, detailed his choice and determination to reframe his perspective, reestablish positivity, and cultivate meaning through a life devoted service after his personal survival of the inhumane atrocities experienced as a concentration camp inmate in Auschwitz, Poland, during World War II. He presented his personal account in *Man's Search for Meaning* detailing on his own suffering along with his choice in response to it. He commented about the basic human right of choice when reacting to any situation or experience, whether positive or negative. He noted that the reaction of humankind,

...may remain brave, dignified and unselfish, or in the bitter fight for self-preservation, he may forget his human dignity and become no more than an animal...but even one such example is proof that man's inner strength may raise him above his outward fate. (p. X)

His writings highlight that regardless of exposure to experiences beyond individual control, the potential for hope and optimism will not subside so long as the ability to choose remains steadfast in the mind. He did not try to explain why tragedy takes shape; however, he focused on the response when challenges present themselves (Frankl, 1956).

Trauma and stress present themselves in many aspects of human life, including but not limited to families, communities, countries, workplaces, and school systems. The ability to seek out or be receptive to emotional support in an attempt to foster resilience begins first with the establishment of strong emotional balance and healthy boundaries. The attributes of optimism, self-efficacy, fostering and preservation of autonomy, relationship building, establishment of healthy boundaries, and sustaining personal purpose remain as cornerstones for fostering resiliency. Frankl (1956) reminded his readers of his personal and professional mantra until his



death, “A positive attitude enables a person to endure suffering and disappointment as well as enhance enjoyment and satisfaction. A negative attitude intensifies pain and increases disappointments; it undermines and diminishes pleasure, happiness, and satisfaction” (p. 160). He did not suggest this choice as available for some and not for others. For those individuals not inherently gritty by nature, the potential still exists to create a life filled with value and meaning over time.

**Excellence versus perfection.** Another attribute exemplifying grit as defined by Duckworth (2016b) explained the human drive to persevere and cultivate high-levels of self-efficacy alongside the pursuit of excellence over perfection. Margolis and McCabe (2006) referred to self-efficacy as the internalized belief in personal capabilities to positively satisfy outcomes or achieve goals. Their explanation has grounding in the belief that quitting is the least desirable and that opportunity is created when the desire exists to succeed. Duckworth (2016b) noted that highly accomplished individuals demonstrate exemplary levels of perseverance. Their passion is unwavering and there is the constant drive to improve. Self-efficacy is an instinctual motivator in some individuals; however, for others it can be cultivated over time. It requires an investment of time and energy toward self-reflection and personal inquiry. More than 2,000 years ago, Socrates prescribed a self-reflective stance to promote individuals in his community to cultivate personal ethical, political and existential choices. He called this a reflective ethos or the examined life, known as “Socratic elenchus” (as cited in Pashiardis, 2009, p. 6).

Litner and Mann-Feder (2009) created a study involving school-aged youth identified as struggling with Attention Deficit Disorder. A group of students were guided through direct instruction on how to develop an acute awareness on their personal modality for learning as well as the knowledge of when to apply strategies toward overcoming situational failures. Students

began to identify the frequency with which they felt humiliation, isolation, or emotional suffering experienced in school settings. Additionally, through the direct instruction, students were taught how to recognize the emotional triggers to indicate when to implement the positive strategies taught through the directed counseling sessions. The participants learned to identify their own internal triggers and made personal agreements to respond to adversity in ways that would generate more positive outcomes. Litner and Mann-Feder noted:

They [the students] exhibited a common resolve to focus on positives and avoid quitting, a powerful drive to persevere, prove their self worth and succeed, and an inner assuredness of their own competence despite the academic difficulties they continued to encounter, even now in university. (p. 37)

In other research, Shellman (2011) described the sense of confidence and self-efficacy developed by school-aged students participating in an educationally structured outdoor survival experience. Their ability to demonstrate personal accomplishment and perseverance during challenging situations in one supportive setting extended self-efficacy and the desire to obtain achievement in other environments. Shellman noted that it was not uncommon to hear the participants realize accomplishment was not isolated. The students extended their cultivation of self-efficacy to other daily challenges presented at home or at school. Promoting the opportunities for self-reflection and strategic ways to move through trauma, helped students discover their own self-efficacy and the desire to seek excellence over perfection.

Another trait evidenced by individuals seeking excellence over perfection is the cultivation and sustainability of supportive relationships. These relationships serve instrumental roles when trauma or crisis arises. The presence and availability of a team member, mental health professional, or mentor to listen and offer a collection of information from others supports the promotion of self-efficacy (Kotter, 2012; Siqueira & Diaz, 2004; Von Culin et al., 2014). Individuals facing any trauma are encouraged to seek out supports to establish a safe

communication resource that may meet needs outside the familial structure. This behavior is strategic and reflective of the goal to achieve personal excellence in the midst of conflict.

For individuals facing adversity, the cultivation of a support team promotes a healthy interdependence on others. Independence fosters resilience for some individuals while, for others the appropriate development of healthy interdependence enhances personal survival (Kotter, 2012). This choice exemplifies excellence in behavior over perfection. Johnston, Bailey, and Wilson (2014) suggested that choice promotes the implementation of a reflective awareness and establishment of an open and transparent communication style. Additionally, it supports openness to a new mental framework that will sustain individuals in times of trauma or personal crisis. Genuine support and shared trust in others can be fostered through consistency in meaningful dialogue, in how support is demonstrated by actions and is exchanged between trusting individuals, as well as how the manifestation into a sustainable positive exchange develops for both participants.

Research supporting the promotion of seeking excellence over perfection considers both the emotional and physical facets of personal health. Dog (2012) along with Watson and Neria (2013) emphasized the lasting need for balanced nutrition and sustained physical fitness. Food choices and the emotions and behaviors surrounding food consumption should contribute to the homeostasis and preservation of core balance in the physical body. Exercise is noted as an effective stress reliever as well as an emotional support by the release of endorphins. Dog (2012) noted evidence showing the relationship between greater levels of physical activity and higher levels of resilience at a cellular level. Developing nutritional monitoring and exercise plans as well as strategic minigoal setting support an increase in focus and measurable tangible results or individuals who respond more positively to structure and consistency toward excellence over

perfection. The opportunity to foster resiliency and promote excellent behaviors can increase with the documentation and execution of specific and measurable goals and objectives (Curry, 2012).

Establishing excellence over perfection along with building self-efficacy supports emotional health. The maintenance of healthy, positive relationships and cultivating mentorship models are important strategies for children and adults. Conversely, establishing healthy boundaries with family or friends is also a contributor to strong emotional health. Management or minimalization of toxic relationships can present challenges. Skill modules along with direct instruction with individuals or in small groups offered by trained professionals can provide skills on the identification and resolution of difficult relationships (Saulsberry et al., 2013).

Additionally, the researchers recommend the promotion of programs to teach community members including young students the skills to identify, address and respond positively towards debilitating and damaging thoughts (Saulsberry et al., 2013). Those newly attempting to create excellence for themselves can learn basic problem-solving and conflict-resolution skills along with the planning of how to respond when conflict arises. Watson and Neria (2013) suggested finding a mentor or seeking help by utilizing professional counseling-based services for problem solving. Each of these strategies is part of the implementation of social supports geared toward the promotion of seeking excellence and building resilient individuals.

Table 1 illustrates several authors and researchers supporting the five attributes of the grit model identified by Duckworth. Their articles, books, and published works spanned search topics including psychology, social work, organizational leadership, business, and physical and mental health.

Table 1

*Authors Supporting the Five Attributes of the Theoretical Framework*

Courage	Conscientious	Long-Term Goals-Endurance	Optimism	Excellence vs. Perfection
Aristotle, B.C. (as cited in Zavalij & Aristidou, 2014)	Arora & Rangnekar, 2016	Boleman & Deal, 2008	Besser et al., 2012	Curry, 2012
Brown, 2015	Duckworth, 2016a	Bonnano, 2005	Dog, 2012	Dog, 2012
Cashman, 2008	Duckworth, 2016b	Cashman, 2008	Duckworth, 2016b	Duckworth, 2016b
K. Curtis, 2014	Fleming et al., 2016	Folke et al., 2010	Folke et al., 2010	Litner & Mann-Feder, 2009
Day, 2014	Gartland et al., 2014	Duckworth, 2016b	Frankl, 1956	Kotter, 2012
DeYoung, 2013	Ivcevic & Brackett, 2014	Kobasa, 1979	Harvey, 2007	Margolis & McCabe, 2006
Duckworth, 2016a	Luo & Roberts, 2015	Just, 1999	Holling, 1973	Saulsbury et al., 2013
Duckworth, 2016b	MacCann et al., 2009	Luthar et al., 2000	Lugg, 1993	Shellman, 2011
Dweck, 2006	Nakaya et al., 2006	Nelson et al., 2007	Peres et al., 2007	Siqueira & Diaz, 2004
Gruber, 2011	Rikoon et al., 2016	Osland, 2013	Watson & Neria, 2013	Socrates, B.C. (as cited in Pashiardis, 2009)
Kouzes & Posner, 2010	Soto, 2015	Posner, 2010	Windle, 2011	Von Culin et al., 2014
May, 1975		Robbins & Judge, 2013		Watson & Neria, 2013
Milton, 2012				
Plato, B.C. (as cited in Zavalij & Aristidou, 2014)				
Schweitzer, 2013				
White, 2015				
Zavalij & Aristidou, 2014				

This table summarized the researchers and authors who have contributed to supporting the five attributes identified in the Duckworth model on grit. The range of literature dates back more than 2,000 years to the works of great philosophers Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates to current information as recent as 2016. The research-based interest on how human beings succeed and overcome adversity is plentiful and profound.

## Summary

The role of the public-school superintendent in California has evolved since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, requiring a high level of commitment and sustainability in the face of conflict, politics, and limited funding (Cuban, 1985, 2008). Sergiovanni (1982) described the extraordinary amount of time and energy required to lead a school district. Superintendents serve as the chief executive officers of a school district and work alongside an elected trustee board to find resources and opportunities grounded in continuous educational improvement for the students residing within the district boundaries (Bjork et al., 2014). Additionally, the role of superintendent demands positive self-esteem, strong coping skills, a sense of coherence, self-efficacy, adaptability, optimism, risk-taking, hardiness, strong social resources, determination, a high tolerance for uncertainty, self-perseverance, and low fear of failure with an overarching goal of maintaining district fiscal solvency (Ledesma, 2014; Maxwell et al., 2014; Wertz, 2003).

In her research, Duckworth (2016b) identified grit as the quality that enables individuals to work hard and pursue goals with sustained zeal. Duckworth's findings highlighted five attributes embedded in her grit model. These are described as the demonstration of courage, the embodiment of conscientiousness, maintaining endurance toward long-term goal achievement, sustaining an attitude of optimism and resilience, as well as active pursuit of excellence over perfection (Perlis, 2013). In her book, *Grit*, Duckworth (2016b) reflects on her own childhood with her father's constant rhetoric that neither she nor her siblings possessed levels of genius. However, in 2014, after receipt of the MacArthur Fellowship known as the genius grant, she notes her scientific evidence spanning 14 years of research proves that, "...grit is mutable, not fixed, and may matter more than talent in the long run" (Duckworth, 2016b, p. xv).

### **Chapter 3: Methods**

School superintendents serve as district leaders working alongside various stakeholders to increase the likelihood that students receive the education necessary to thrive in the 21st century college and career environments. Urban superintendents run districts often with large minority populations and limited budgets with the challenge to raise student test scores, increase graduation rates, and increase the number of students heading to college (Cuban, 2008). These challenges require commitment, demonstration of grit, and the ability to persevere over time. Interest in the theory of grit has steadily increased in recent years with the determination that accomplishment and success in personal and professional ventures may depend more on passion and perseverance than raw talent (Duckworth, 2016b). The role of the superintendent is viewed as pivotal for guiding district management and leading policy implementation efforts (Bjork et al., 2014). The purpose of this study is to explore grit attributes demonstrated by California urban superintendents.

#### **Chapter Structure**

In this chapter, readers became familiar with the methods used to conduct the study. A description of the qualitative research design was discussed. The purpose and research questions were presented as well as the sampling methods. Chapter 3 described the selection criteria, issues related to the researcher, data collection strategies, and the validity and reliability of the study. The chapter continued with a discussion of the data analysis techniques, including the coding process, data display, and the limitations of the study. It concluded with a chapter summary.

#### **Nature of the Study**

This study used a qualitative approach to study the five attributes of grit demonstrated by California urban school superintendents. Creswell (2013) described qualitative research as,

“inquiry...and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes” (p. 45). Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) defined qualitative research as, “Research that involved analysis and interpretation of texts...in order to discover meaningful patterns describing a particular phenomenon” (p. 3). The final written document includes the problem, purpose, research questions, a thorough review of the literature and resultant theoretical framework, methods, the analysis of publicly available text, the results, and implications.

Qualitative studies allow for a thorough understanding of an issue. Creswell (2013) noted that qualitative research is used, “because a problem or issue needs to be explored” (p. 47). Data are collected using one or more sources such as a review of documents. In qualitative studies, the researcher plays a central role in generating and interpreting the data (Xu & Storr, 2012). As further described by Jacob and Furgerson (2012), at the center of qualitative research is the desire and interest to expose the human part of a story.

The role of superintendent in an urban setting requires leaders who are comfortable with visibility, accountability, conflict, and collaboration (Wagner, 2010). Duckworth’s theory of grit supports success through passion and perseverance as evidenced in five attributes. Using a qualitative approach in the study provided the opportunity to collect data from publicly available texts regarding California urban superintendents working in contemporary, educational urban settings. The intent was to discover information related to the grit attributes noted by Duckworth (2016b) that demonstrated courage, conscientiousness, endurance toward long-term goals, optimism and resilience, and excellence. Jacob and Furgerson (2012) noted that qualitative researchers work to understand experiences through information.

An additional reason for using a qualitative approach was the scant amount of research related to grit theory and the role of California school superintendents who lead in an urban



setting. The research from this study identified the relationship between theory and application. Additionally, the qualitative approach added to the existing body of literature relative to school leadership.

The qualitative methodology was implemented for this research. The methods applied in this study were aimed at collecting information and analyzing the data gathered from publicly available and accessible text (Creswell, 2013). This method may have provided a description of both the experiences and the themes that emerge. The themes were reviewed for alignment to the five attributes identified by Duckworth in her theory of grit (Duckworth, 2016b; Duckworth et al., 2007).

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to explore grit practices demonstrated by California urban superintendents. Understanding how the five attributes of grit reflect in urban school district leaders provided information that can assist leaders and others in education.

A review of the literature resulted in the theoretical framework supported by Duckworth (2016b). Grit is identified as the passion and perseverance for accomplishment that is not directly related to innate talent (Duckworth, 2016b; Perlis, 2013). Grit has five attributes, including courage, conscientiousness, endurance toward long-term goals, optimism and resilience, and excellence over perfection. Courage is the ability to persevere after failure (Brown, 2012; DeYoung, 2013; Duckworth, 2016b; Garfat & Van Bockern, 2010). Conscientiousness is the dedication of effort to build skill and make skill productive (Arora & Rangnekar, 2016; Duckworth, 2016b; Fleming, Heintzelman, & Bartholow, 2016; Ivcevic & Brackett, 2014; MacCann et al., 2009). Endurance toward long-term goals is an individual or group setting a long-term objective and without deviation, even in the absence of positive feedback (Beattie,

1992; Duckworth et al., 2007; Taormina, 2015). Remaining optimistic involves appraisal of situations without distortion; to reflect on setbacks of challenges as temporary and specific versus assumption of permanent and pervasive causes of blame (Duckworth, 2016b; Mayberry et al., 2010; van Wyk, 2014). Excellence is the process of making and sustaining progress as a priority over achievement of perfection (R. Hill, 2010; Perlis, 2013; Stoeber & Crombie, 2010). These five attributes constituted the theoretical framework for this study leading to the following research questions:

1. How do superintendents demonstrate courage?
2. How do superintendents demonstrate conscientiousness?
3. How do superintendents demonstrate endurance toward long-term goals?
4. How do superintendents demonstrate optimism and resilience?
5. How do superintendents demonstrate excellence?

### **Data Sources**

The sources acquired for this study include text that was publicly available and accessible. Examples of publicly available and accessible data used in this study include published books and articles, news articles, Web sites, data collected from previous studies, and government documents.

A sample of seven California school districts that met the criteria as urban school districts were selected in order to study and compare to the publicly available data. Urban schools are schools located in urbanized areas. An urbanized area consists of densely developed territory that contains 50,000 or more people. The Census Bureau identifies two types of urban areas: Urban areas of 50,000 or more people and Urban Clusters of at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people (United States Census Bureau, 2010).

Publicly available and accessible text from books, articles, and Web sites were analyzed regarding the superintendents. The superintendents were publicly elected or appointed and serve in the seven urban settings located in the state of California. Urban schools are often presented with challenges that differ from schools located in areas with higher socioeconomic status and community resources. Previous research has suggested that students from schools with high concentrations of low income students and students from urban schools would be expected to have less successful educational outcomes, less supportive home environments, and less positive school experiences than students from other schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

Creswell (2013) noted that in a narrative study, one method with which researchers gain information is through documents. Researchers may gather available documents as data sources. This study used a purposeful criterion sampling approach to align publicly available data. Purposeful, criterion-based sampling increased the likelihood for relevant information that produces an understanding of the study problem and illuminates the phenomenon associated with the research (Creswell, 2013).

For the purposes of this study, school districts aligned with the corresponding publicly available text met the following criteria: (a) a public school district in the state of California with a publicly elected or appointed superintendent, (b) there is publicly available district information, and (c) publicly available text from multiple sources exists that correspond to the district superintendent.

### **Protection of Research Subjects**

In 1974, the National Research Act was signed into law, creating the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. The

group identified basic principles of research conduct and suggested ways to support the following of those principles (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). The Institutional Review Board (IRB) was created to review and approve all research involving interaction with human beings. The purpose of the IRB is to enforce and regulate that all human subject research is conducted in accordance with all institutional, ethical, and federal guidelines (American Public University System, 2016; Creswell, 2013).

The Pepperdine University IRB handbook noted, “If your research does not involve the participation of human subjects and you are not using/collecting any data that has been obtained from individual participants, your research is not subject to IRB review and approval” (Pepperdine University Graduate & Professional Schools IRB, 2016, p. 4). All data for this study was gathered from publicly available and accessible texts. There was no participation or interaction with human subjects in this study and, therefore, this study qualified as nonhuman subjects research and IRB approval is not required. The researcher maintained the ethical considerations at all times.

### **Issues Related to the Researcher**

The researcher had almost 20 years of experience working in the California public school system in different socioeconomic settings. The researcher held various positions, including teacher, language arts specialist, and vice principal. Every effort was made to allay any biases by implementing the process of reflexivity (Creswell, 2013).

Reflexivity is a process for being aware of mitigating biases and paying attention to values and experiences that the researcher brings to a study (Creswell, 2013). In her study on reflexivity, Probst (2015) identified the benefits of reflexivity to include ethics, clarity,

accountability, richness, trustworthiness, support, and personal growth. Creswell (2013)

explained reflexivity as having two parts:

The researcher first talks about their experiences with the phenomenon being explored. This involves relaying past experiences through work, schooling, family dynamics, and so forth. The second part is to discuss how these past experiences shape the researcher's interpretation of the phenomenon. (p. 216)

One recommendation to manage reflexivity is to report research perspectives, positions, values, and beliefs in manuscripts and other publications (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Schön (1983) discussed reflective practice as a way to internalize the best practices of successful professionals in their fields of study. The practice of inquiry with an intention of reshaping professional behavior can improve practice. The writings of Schön (1983, 1987) supported the argument that learning through reflection and redirection in the application of skill is a valuable outcome of study similar to the acquisition of scientific knowledge. "The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings" (Schön, 1983, p. 68). For this study, the researcher took notes in a journal for review and reflection. According to Probst (2015), this was one way accountability and management of researcher bias and reactivity was applied. It was important to see what one might be unable to see in one's own work because of proximity of the situation, and also to maintain trustworthiness and transparency.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through a qualitative research design with content analysis of texts that are publicly available and correspond to California urban districts that meet the study criteria. Examples of publicly available and accessible data included information from books, journal articles, news articles, Web sites, data collected from previous studies, and government documents. The approach to access publicly available and accessible data included Internet

searches. The researcher obtained the name of California urban districts from the school district Web site available to the public. Corresponding text from the above mentioned data sources were reviewed and compared with the grit attributes in the theoretical framework in order to code for themes.

### **Validity and Reliability**

**Validity.** Determining validity in qualitative research was an integral part of the entire study. Validity is determined in two ways: both as face validity and content validity (Trochim, 2006). The face validity of this study was grounded in a thorough review of the literature and resultant theoretical framework that provided the foundation for the research questions.

Content validity determines the validity based on a deeper relationship between the content and the questions. Content validity is first initiated by an extensive review of the literature and then can be strengthened by expert resources in the field of study (Creswell, 2014). In an effort to maintain content validity for this study, the research questions were reviewed by a panel of experts. The panel consisted of three persons with doctoral-level research experience. The panel determined that the research questions would yield data that would inform the study. An expert panel review form and process was created to increase validity (see APPENDIX C).

**Reliability.** The researcher used a second reviewer for the process of interreviewer reliability in this qualitative study.

Hyatt (2016) introduced 10 steps to preserve interreviewer reliability:

1. The primary researcher analyzes the data and then meets with the reviewer(s) to review the coding process for identifying themes.
2. The primary researcher selects data for the purpose of familiarizing the reviewer(s) with the coding process.

3. The researcher maintains the highlighted-analyzed version.
4. The reviewer(s) is provided with a clean copy of the data.
5. Prior to analysis, the researcher and reviewer(s) will each read the data to a) familiarize the reviewer(s) with the data; and b) to further the reviewer(s) consideration of the information and to answer any questions.
6. The researcher assists the reviewer(s) in completing the analysis of the selected data by bracketing for reduction, horizontalization, and synthesis of the text for structural descriptions and conclusions.
7. Meaning units are entered in the left margin. Structural descriptions and conclusions are entered into the right margin. This completes analysis of the selected data.
8. The additional reviewer(s) applies the same process to the remaining data independent of the primary researcher. If there are multiple reviewers, each works independently.
9. After completion of the process for all data, the primary researcher and reviewer(s) reconvene. The primary researcher and the reviewer(s) review their identified findings, discuss differences, and come to a consensus on the conclusions. An analysis categorizing form may be created to identify the agreed-upon themes.
10. Generally, criteria for major themes are met when a majority (51%) of the data sources reveal supportive data for the theme(s). (p. 2)

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

Data analysis provides an opportunity for the researcher to code and represent collected information in figures, tables, or discussions (Creswell, 2013). The researcher must maintain an

open mind throughout the research process. For this study, a qualitative method was used to gather and analyze information from the publicly available and accessible documents.

The researcher conducted data collection using texts that are publicly available regarding California urban school districts and the superintendents to explore the demonstration of grit attributes.

### **Coding**

Saldaña (2013) defined a code as, “most often a word or phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 3). Creswell (2013) explained that coding involves, “aggregating data into small categories of information, seeking evidence for the code from different databases being used in a study, and then assigning a label to the code” (p. 184). Creswell’s (2012) five-step coding process was applied in this study:

1. Initially read though the text data.
2. Divide the text into segments of information.
3. Label the segments of information with codes.
4. Reduce the overlap and redundancy of codes.
5. Collapse codes into themes. (p. 244)

Questions posed by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) were useful to begin the coding process. These include, “Does it relate to your research concern? Does it clarify your thinking? Does it simply seem important to you, even if you can’t say why?” (p. 48). Creswell (2014) suggested thinking about codes as falling into three categories, including codes on topics that readers would expect to find based on past literature, codes that are surprising and not anticipated, and codes that are unusual and of conceptual interest to readers. In preparation for



the coding process, Saldaña (2013) identified personal attributes that qualitative researchers will find helpful. These included organization, perseverance, the ability to deal with ambiguity, flexibility, creativity, to remain rigorously ethical, and to apply an extensive vocabulary. The researcher kept these questions and personal attributes in mind when reviewing the publicly available documents.

### **Data Display**

Researchers need some way of saying that this event over here has some relationship to that event over there (Meyer & Avery, 2009). Data displays can take a number of forms in qualitative research, including matrices, charts, graphs, or networks (Williamson & Long, 2005). Data displays are created to allow a condensed representation of large amounts of data. A matrix display represents the summarization of data that aligned into themes. The visual impact of a matrix display can draw the reader's attention to overall trends or points of emphasis across categories as he or she reads the supporting explanation (Averill, 2002).

Additionally, the use of matrix analysis is a valuable way of displaying, interpreting, evaluating, and disseminating study findings (Averill, 2002; Williamson & Long, 2005). A matrix is defined as "a set of numbers or terms arranged in rows and columns; that within which, or within and from which, something originates, takes form, or develops" (Agnes, 2000, p. 887). Use of matrices allows the researcher to display categorized data in individual cells, in observance of what themes may appear (Averill, 2002). A matrix was designed for each research question along with identifying themes. Data for each California urban school district were grouped with an alphabetical pair of letters to ensure anonymity. Text and graphics such as tables were presented to illustrate the findings. As indicated above, major themes are met when a majority (51%) of the data sources reveal supportive data for the theme(s; Hyatt, 2016).

Following the matrix with the data representation, quotes from the publicly accessible texts regarding California urban superintendents show an anecdotal representation of grit attributes as defined in the theoretical framework.

### **Limitations**

This study reviewed only publicly available and accessible documents and there was no participation of human subjects. Future research might conduct surveys and or interviews with participants that meet the criteria that may offer additional information. A small sample size limited the generalizability. However, the results will add to the general knowledge of educational leadership, grit theory, district leadership, and leadership in general. The research was limited to text that corresponded with California urban school district superintendents. Urban schools are defined as schools located in areas consisting of densely developed territory that contain 50,000 or more people (United States Census Bureau, 2010). Rural school districts may offer different information. This study was limited geographically to one state. Publicly available documents related to school leaders in other states or in a nonurban setting may have produced different results. The qualitative method of data collection and analysis using publicly available documents were used in this study. Conducting a study using a quantitative approach could have generated additional and or different results.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to explore grit attributes demonstrated by California urban school district superintendents. Understanding how the five attributes of grit reflect in urban school district leaders will provide information that can assist leaders and others in education. This study used a qualitative approach. Chapter 3 addressed the nature of the study, the design of

the study, the purpose and research questions, the data sources, data collection, data analysis, and data display methods.

Collecting data from publicly available text sources informed this study. A coding process discussed by Creswell (2012) was applied. A second reviewer provided increased reliability through an interreviewer process. The interreviewer reliability process described by Hyatt (2016) increased research consistency. Issues related to the researcher included the process of research reflexivity, as well as, data analysis and data display.

## **Chapter 4: Analysis of Findings**

Grit theory serves as this study's theoretical framework. Grit is identified as the passion and perseverance for accomplishment that is not directly related to innate talent (Duckworth, 2016b; Perlis, 2013). Grit has five attributes, including courage, conscientiousness, endurance toward long-term goals, optimism and resilience, and excellence over perfection. Grit predicts achievement in challenging domains over and beyond talent measures (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). Demonstrating grit makes goal accomplishment possible for school leaders guiding stakeholders through constant, systemic change. Much of the prior research's focus on grit has been to identify its five attributes and distinguish between natural talent and persistent effort as a determinant for personal and career success (Duckworth, 2016b). Less frequent were studies of grit practices school leaders embody. Therefore, this research study aimed at contributing to the body of knowledge surrounding superintendents and grit practices demonstrated specifically by California school superintendents working in urban settings.

Data were collected through qualitative research using texts that were publicly available associated with seven California urban school districts. The data were coded and a second rater was utilized for consistency. The primary researcher and the reviewer discussed their identified findings, discussed differences, and came to a consensus on the conclusions. The criteria for major themes were met when a majority (51%) of data sources provided supportive data for the themes (Hyatt, 2016).

### **Chapter Structure**

Chapter 4 provided an analysis of this study's findings, including a brief overview of how the data were collected, a restatement of the purpose, and the research questions. Additionally, Chapter 4 recap the steps followed to collect data and conduct analysis, including the procedures

used for validity and reliability. The section presenting the data display included the research questions. The collected data identified emerging themes. Last, the chapter concluded with a summary.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

**The purpose of the study.** The purpose of this study was to explore grit practices demonstrated by California urban school superintendents. Understanding how grit's five attributes reflect in urban school district leaders' daily practices provided information about how they demonstrate grit attributes that could also benefit other leaders.

**Research questions.** Exploring grit practices of California urban school superintendents began with a thorough literature review. Multiple authors supported each of Duckworth's (2016b) five grit components and each contributes to the theoretical framework for this study.

The research questions for this study were:

1. How do superintendents demonstrate courage?
2. How do superintendents demonstrate conscientiousness?
3. How do superintendents demonstrate endurance toward long-term goals?
4. How do superintendents demonstrate optimism and resilience?
5. How do superintendents demonstrate excellence?

### **Overview of Methods**

Research was conducted employing qualitative methodology. Creswell (2013) noted that this methodology allows for the collection of information and data analysis from publicly available and accessible texts. Creswell (2014) noted that utilization of public documents enables researchers to obtain the language and words from and/or about the subjects of study. The process of analyzing data allowed for patterns and themes to emerge. A pattern could be

characterized by similarity, difference, frequency, sequence, correspondence, and causation (Saldaña, 2013). Themes emerged from patterns of similarity, repeated ideas, and theoretical issues suggested by data (Creswell, 2014; Saldaña, 2013). The themes of this study were aligned to the five attributes identified by Duckworth in her theory of grit (Duckworth, 2016b; Duckworth et al., 2007).

### **Data Collection**

A content analysis of texts provided data acquisition through a qualitative research design. The texts were publicly available and correspond to California urban districts meeting the study criteria. Text examples included information from books, journal articles, news articles, Web sites, data collected from previous studies, and government documents. An Internet search approach was utilized to access publicly available and accessible data. Public access for the seven California school urban districts was gained first from the state school district Web site followed by the associated district Web site. Corresponding district Web sites, books, articles, and journalism such as newspapers provided the text that was reviewed and coded into themes reflecting each grit attribute as noted in the theoretical framework.

The seven California districts in this study met the qualifications of urban districts described as providing public school access in an urbanized area consisting of densely developed territory containing 50,000 or more people. The United States Census Bureau (2010) identified two types of urban areas: (a) urban areas of 50,000 or more people, and (b) urban clusters of at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people. All seven school districts in this study included student populations meeting the criteria that met the definition as noted by the U.S. Census Bureau.

The urban school districts researched for this study are all located in California. Each urban school district employed a school superintendent with more than three years' experience.

Three counties are represented by the seven urban school districts. All seven school districts served students in multiple grade levels. The seven districts combined to represent educational levels ranging from Transitional Kindergarten through Grade 12 as well as classes supporting adult education. The majority of the urban school districts in this study had student populations that exceed the California state average of 24.5% English Language Learners as defined by the Migration Policy Institute (2013).

For all seven California urban school districts, the researcher identified at least three different sources of publicly available and accessible text. The sources of data included school district Web sites, published books, journal articles, publications from national and international organizations, and newspaper articles. In an effort to find the most current information, the dates of the data collected for this study ranges from 2009 to 2017. Data collected for each district was assigned an alphabetical code to protect anonymity. The multiple sources for each district offered triangulation, which increases research validity and trustworthiness.

Researchers identified triangulation of data as an effective strategy to develop the resulting themes (Richardson, Kalvaitis & Delparte, 2014). Creswell (2014) noted that triangulation of different qualitative data sources is a validity strategy in which evidence is examined to build a coherent justification for themes. He added, “When qualitative researchers locate evidence to document a code or theme in different sources of data, they are triangulating information and providing validity to their findings” (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). Other researchers described triangulation as an integration of different approaches to create a complete picture and provide a theme in which the whole is a compilation of many parts (Tonkin-Crine et al., 2016).

In another qualitative study, three observations were made by the research team about the data derived through a triangulation process: (a) comparing the data led to an iterative process

whereby themes were explored more deeply, (b) the combined data led to an enhanced understanding of the context of the theme, and (c) convergence of the data enhanced trustworthiness of findings (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014). Triangulation supported the gaining, viewing, and questioning of knowledge (Vikström, 2010). “If themes are established based on converging several sources of data or perspectives, then this process can be claimed as adding to the validity of the study” (Creswell, 2014, p. 201).

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis provided an opportunity for the researcher to code and represent collected information in figures, tables, or discussions (Creswell, 2013). The researcher remained objective during the entire process of the study. Saldaña (2013) noted seven personal characteristics all qualitative researchers should possess during the coding process: (a) organization, (b) perseverance, (c) deal with ambiguity, (d) flexibility, (e) creativity, (f) rigorously ethical, and (g) possession of an extensive vocabulary. While applying Saldaña’s characteristics listed above, the researcher analyzed data from publicly available text about California urban school districts to explore how school leaders demonstrate grit attributes.

### **Validity and Reliability**

**Validity.** Face validity and content validity are the two indicators of the credibility of a study (Trochim, 2006). The face validity of this study was grounded in a thorough review of the literature and resultant theoretical framework that provided the foundation for the research questions.

Creswell (2013) discussed consensual validation through the perspectives of others. A source of validity for this study was established through a process in which a panel of experts reviewed the research questions to establish alignment with the study. Three persons with



doctoral-level research experience constituted the panel. Upon review, the panel came to consensus that the research questions would yield data to inform the study. An expert panel review form and process was created (see APPENDIX C).

**Reliability.** The researcher used a second reviewer through the process of interreviewer reliability in this qualitative study.

Hyatt (2016) introduced 10 steps to preserve interreviewer reliability:

1. The primary researcher analyzes the data and then meets with the reviewer(s) to review the coding process for identifying themes.
2. The primary researcher selects data for the purpose of familiarizing the reviewer(s) with the coding process.
3. The researcher maintains the highlighted-analyzed version.
4. The reviewer(s) is provided with a clean copy of the data.
5. Prior to analysis, the researcher and reviewer(s) will each read the data to a) familiarize the reviewer(s) with the data; and b) to further the reviewer(s) consideration of the information and to answer any questions.
6. The researcher assists the reviewer(s) in completing the analysis of the selected data by bracketing for reduction, horizontalization, and synthesis of the text for structural descriptions and conclusions.
7. Meaning units are entered in the left margin. Structural descriptions and conclusions are entered into the right margin. This completes analysis of the selected data.
8. The additional reviewer(s) applies the same process to the remaining data independent of the primary researcher. If there are multiple reviewers, each works independently.

9. After completion of the process for all data, the primary researcher and reviewer(s) reconvene. The primary researcher and the reviewer(s) review their identified findings, discuss differences, and come to a consensus on the conclusions. An analysis categorizing form may be created to identify the agreed-upon themes.
10. Generally, criteria for major themes are met when a majority (51%) of the data sources reveal supportive data for the theme(s). (p. 2)

Creswell (2014) noted that qualitative researchers build themes and patterns as the data are organized into units of information. The common themes were identified as supportive data from the text sources met a majority of 51% (Hyatt, 2016). Alphabetical codes were assigned for each district superintendent in this study. Findings were displayed using text and tables.

## Research Findings

**Research question 1.** Research Question 1 asked: How do superintendents demonstrate courage? Courage is the first attribute of grit theory presented in the research surrounding this qualitative study. Courage is the ability to persevere after failure (Brown, 2012; DeYoung, 2013; Duckworth, 2016b; Garfat & Van Bockern, 2010).

The major themes identified by a majority (51%) of data sources emerged as follows: (1a) willingness to meet challenges, and (1b) seeks opportunities. Table 2 shows the primary themes.

Table 2

### *Primary Themes Identified for Research Question 1*

Theme	SA	SB	SC	SD	SE	SF	SG
1a. Willingness to meet challenges	X		X	X	X	X	X
1b. Seeks opportunities	X	X		X		X	X

***Theme 1a: Willingness to meet challenges.*** This theme emerged in six of seven data sources (85%). The following passages from the data revealed the theme:

As other districts were laying off teachers, this district's union agreed to a pay cut and a five-year salary freeze. The union and district leaders agreed that the additional supplementary cash provided through the state funding overhaul would be put into student services rather than salaries or benefits (Heitin, 2015).

The work of the superintendent, both the highlights and the difficult times, will be featured regularly in the paper. He must be accustomed to this type of regular public scrutiny. As a superintendent, he will doubtlessly face adversity, and he must be prepared to embrace it ("Leading Instruction," 2010).

The district's search for her as their new leader entailed an extensive five-month process during which the district solicited input from more than 100 stakeholders, including parents, students, teachers, staff and community representatives (California School News, 2015).

She will take the helm as school districts across the state are struggling with Sacramento cuts to education funding (Pamer, 2009).

She recently made headlines after agreeing to change the way the district holds school board elections (Long Beach Press Telegram, 2013).

Many said the willingness to try new things has paid dividends and that he would bring the same alacrity to his new job (Naqvi, 2010).

***Theme 1b: Seeks opportunities.*** This theme emerged in five of seven data sources (70%).

The following passages from the data revealed the theme:

His principals visit each other's schools or send teachers to visit schools with certain effective practices (Broad Foundation, 2016).

In an effort to help teachers, parents, and administrators better understand students' point of view, the committee has organized days in which adults are paired 1-1 with a student whom they follow the entire school day ("Superintendent's Corner," 2017).

After only three days on the job, she met with the members of the staff and answered a wide range of questions about herself and her new job (Motander, 2009).

He speaks at a press conference joining superintendents from Southern California Friday to urge Californians to prevent further education cuts by voting (Long Beach Press Telegram, 2013).

Although some parents have criticized his initiative, he has received only positive feedback from staff and students (Ball, 2009).

**Research question 2.** Research Question 2 asked: How do superintendents demonstrate conscientiousness? Conscientiousness is the second attribute of grit theory presented in the research surrounding this qualitative study. Conscientiousness is the dedication of effort to build skill and make skill productive (Arora & Rangnekar, 2016; Duckworth, 2016b; Fleming et al., 2016; Ivcevic & Brackett, 2014; MacCann et al., 2009).

The major themes identified by a majority (51%) of data sources emerged as follows: (2a) collaborative leadership, (2b) strong communication skills, and (2c) sensitivity to diversity. Table 3 shows data sources that identified the primary themes.

Table 3

*Primary Themes Identified for Research Question 2*

Theme	SA	SB	SC	SD	SE	SF	SG
2a. Collaborative leadership	X		X	X		X	X
2b. Strong communication skills	X	X	X				X
2c. Sensitivity to diversity	X	X	X	X	X	X	

**Theme 2a: Collaborative leadership.** This theme emerged in five of seven data sources (70%). The following passages from the data revealed the theme:

He works collaboratively with community resources to reduce the incidence and impact of bullying (Broad Foundation, 2016).

To excel in the position involves both leading and following. He can make a significant difference for students, but he must do so while working within the constraints that come with boards composed of a small group of community members (“Leading Instruction,” 2010).

She is a strong collaborative leader who is committed to open communication and helping us continue the mission of offering a high-quality education that helps students reach their college and career goals (California School News, 2015).

Strong collaborative partnerships with our employee organizations, local businesses, PTA, (the district) Education Foundation, colleges, and civic groups help to advance the district's mission ("Superintendent's Corner," 2017).

When he goes in and talks with the teaching staff, they're going to say they recognize him, because he is always in the classrooms. He knows what good instruction is and what it isn't because he's done it before (Naqvi, 2010).

**Theme 2b: Strong communication skills.** This theme emerged in four of seven data sources (60%). The following passages from the data revealed the theme:

He is adept at studying a problem—typically with plenty of stakeholder input (Broad Foundation, 2016).

The Board listened and will have a chance to discuss the issue and vote on a decision ("Superintendent's Corner," 2017).

He will be listening to suggestions from constituents, and attempting to develop a plan ("Leading Instruction," 2010).

His ability to communicate well will perhaps be most crucial in his dealings with parents. He has an ease about him that makes anybody feel comfortable (Naqvi, 2010).

**Theme 2c: Sensitivity to diversity.** This theme emerged in six of seven data sources (85%). The following passages from the data revealed the theme:

The percentage of African American elementary and middle school students performing at the advanced level in reading and math ranked in the top 20% compared to the proportion of African American students performing at the advanced level in all districts across the state (Broad Foundation, 2016).

The district is a strong and caring organization. All are here because all are eager to do everything to help each child succeed. All look forward to doing exactly that as children are welcomed back to school ("Superintendent's Corner," 2017).

He is proud of the well-rounded education the district provides students. Programs integrating technology, engineering, robotics, mathematics and critical thinking are preparing students for college and careers (Nguyen, 2015).

She is passionate about increasing the numbers of underrepresented students having access to Advanced Placement courses to be successful in college and beyond (California School News, 2015).

The moral imperative is to focus on students; and deep commitment to raising the bar and closing the learning gaps for all students (Daily Breeze, 2016).

One of the major highlights of this year was to see two schools comprised of high poverty students meet the State's academic targets of 800 or above. This demonstrates that demographics do not determine destiny (Long Beach Press Telegram, 2013).

**Research question 3.** Research Question 3 asked: How do superintendents demonstrate endurance toward long-term goals? Endurance toward long-term goals is the third attribute of grit theory presented in the research of this qualitative study. Endurance toward long-term goals is an individual or group setting a long-term objective and achieving it without deviation, even in the absence of positive feedback (Beattie, 1992; Duckworth et al., 2007; Taormina, 2015).

The major themes identified by a majority (51%) of data sources emerged as follows: (3a) shared goals, (3b) implementation of research-based practices, (3c) systems reform, (3d) unwavering commitment to stakeholders, and (3e) innovative approach. Table 4 shows data sources that identified the primary themes.

Table 4

*Primary Themes Identified for Research Question 3*

Theme	SA	SB	SC	SD	SE	SF	SG
3a. Shared goals	X	X			X		X
3b. Implementation of research-based practices	X	X	X	X	X	X	
3c. Systems reform	X	X	X	X	X	X	
3d. Unwavering commitment to stakeholders	X		X		X		X
3e. Innovative approach	X	X	X		X		X

**Theme 3a: Shared goals.** This theme emerged in four of seven data sources (60%). The following passages from the data revealed the theme:

These leaders found great opportunities to achieve ambitious goals despite changing policy and budget environments and ever-increasing demands for better performance from teachers and students (Lewis, 2015).

These are the District Goals: 1) Improve student achievement through teachers further implementing research-based personalized learning strategies. 2) Maintaining a sound budget and plan for long-term infrastructure needs. 3) Creating a culture of inclusion that supports and engages all students, staff, stakeholders and community partners. 4) Providing professional development and developing leadership and talent at all levels and cross-pollinate best practices districtwide (“Superintendent’s Corner,” 2017).

The goal was to build resource capacity in the district—both human and financial—to sustain a comprehensive fine arts program for every child in the district (P.S. Arts, 2016).

Other district leaders are interested in creating similar programs because of the opportunity it affords them for collecting data on their students (Ball, 2009).

**Theme 3b: Implementation of research-based practices.** This theme emerged in six of seven data sources (85%). The following passages from the data revealed the theme:

There’s still work to be done. She would like to focus on improving the curricula for the leadership seminars and possibly provide stipends for personnel who advance their skills through the district’s initiatives. She wants to avoid complacency, despite the progress the district has made at retaining teachers and closing achievement gaps (Heitin, 2015).

In the last five years, he has focused on improving reading, writing, and math teaching and learning. The next big change is coming in science, specifically implementing the Next Generation Science Standards (“Superintendent’s Corner,” 2017).

Ultimately, district leaders and music educators know what they want: a standards-based music program with qualified teachers, designated classrooms, and a built-in funding that’s for all students. There’s no doubt we want to press forward. It’s just the pace (Heitin, 2015).

Through implementation of research-based best practices, high quality professional development, distributive leadership and ongoing monitoring, significant progress was made in student achievement at all secondary schools under her supervision as evidenced by state and national assessment results (California School News, 2015).

She has worked collaboratively to implement a rigorous standards-based curriculum to prepare students for the 21st century (Sieu, 2016).

District leaders have been working on transitioning to the Common Core since 2010. They have kept our parents involved by working closely with the PTA and the community through Parent Nights, Community Forums and Parent Leadership Conferences where Common Core is discussed. The district has also posted resources for the parents to access (Long Beach Press Telegram, 2013).

***Theme 3c: Systems reform.*** This theme emerged in six of seven data sources (85%). The following passages from the data revealed the theme:

It's important to be sure that whatever good work has taken place is not personally driven and that people to say that his staff have put systems in place so that the work can continue (Heitin, 2015).

She is continuing the wonderful traditions already in place, and finding ways to enrich and enhance new student experiences ("Superintendent's Corner," 2017).

The role of superintendent has almost everything to do with what is and can be, and very little to do with what was. Effective instructional leaders envision the future, build teams, and act as agents for positive change. Effective leaders think and speak with an orientation to the future ("Leading Instruction," 2010).

Some examples of systems reform that she initiated include devising a concise and deliberate secondary master plan through data-driven decision making, and developing an infrastructure to support and monitor the Program Improvement (PI) schools through monthly meetings, implementation of common instructional strategies, research-based best practices, and data-analysis (University of Southern California, 2011).

The district continues to embrace the digital age and harness the power of technology for innovations in education while maintaining the tradition of fiscal stability (Sieu, 2016).

High-quality teacher-administrator partnerships predicted "denser" school-level collaboration around (a) student performance data, (b) curriculum development, (c) sharing, advising, or learning about instructional practices and (d) giving or receiving mentoring led to large and significant gains in student performance and improvement (American Federation of Teachers, 2015).

***Theme 3d: Unwavering commitment to stakeholders.*** This theme emerged in four of seven data sources (60%). The following passages from the data revealed the theme:

This district used a crisis to rally stakeholders around a kids-first focus. By keeping student interests at the fore, the district was able to negotiate a nearly 5% pay cut and then freeze salaries for 5 years for teachers and classified staff—all of whom overwhelmingly voted in favor of the reduction (Broad Foundation, 2016).



He set out to bring music instruction to every child in his elementary school district (Barack, 2015).

He challenges all to become more involved in the community so that together, all can continue fighting for students' voices to be heard and keep providing them with the best possible education (Sieu, 2016).

He defended himself against some criticism that he made the wrong call. Unless you are the person making this decision that impacts 21,000 students from 3 years old to their late teens, it is difficult for anyone to understand how all-consuming the decision can be (Bregy, 2012).

**Theme 3e: Innovative approach.** This theme emerged in five of seven data sources (70%). The following passages from the data revealed the theme:

He uses innovative strategies to improve curriculum and instruction, address management challenges, stretch resources, engage parents and communities, utilize new technologies effectively, and create optimal learning environments that prepare all students for success beyond their K-12 years (Lewis, 2015).

Her district has partnered with Challenge Success, a Stanford-based organization that recognizes that the current fast-paced, high-pressure culture works against much of what is known about healthy child development and effective education (“Superintendent’s Corner,” 2017).

Districts need to be a bit creative in gathering support from city councils, parents, school boards and others in the community (Barack, 2015).

Their early and on-going experiences are inspiring other unions and districts—from as far away as South Africa—to create a new way of working together (American Federation of Teachers, 2012).

How his school district finally got to the negotiating is a study in grass-roots organizing, blending the theatrics of the Occupy Wall Street movement with cutting-edge political strategies, from email blasts to YouTube videos (Chicago Tribune, 2011).

**Research question 4.** Research Question 4 asked: How do superintendents demonstrate optimism and resilience? Optimism and resilience are components of the fourth attribute of grit theory presented in the research surrounding this qualitative study. Remaining optimistic involves appraisal of situations without distortion; to reflect on setbacks of challenges as

temporary and specific versus assumption of permanent and pervasive causes of blame (Duckworth, 2016b; Mayberry et al., 2010; van Wyk, 2014).

The major themes identified by a majority (51%) of data sources emerged as follows: (4a) exemplifies a sense of gratitude, (4b) possesses a growth mind-set, and (4c) demonstrates empathy. Table 5 showed data sources that identified the primary themes.

Table 5

*Primary Themes Identified for Research Question 4*

Theme	SA	SB	SC	SD	SE	SF	SG
4a. Exemplifies a sense of gratitude	X	X	X		X	X	
4b. Possesses a growth mind-set	X	X	X	X	X	X	
4c. Demonstrates empathy	X	X			X		X

***Theme 4a: Exemplifies a sense of gratitude.*** This theme emerged in five of seven data sources (70%). The following passages from the data revealed the theme:

He credits the district focus on building its talent to its stable, productive relationship with the Teachers Association (Sawchuk, 2015).

She is grateful for every single student teacher, parent, employee, and caregiver whose support of each other and the community helps create the outstanding, compassionate, young people who matriculate at our schools every day (“Superintendent’s Corner,” 2017).

The one thing that had struck her was the overwhelming number of individuals and groups, which were volunteering to assist the district and had already established working relationships with the schools (Motander, 2009).

Serving and working for the community has been one of the most wonderful, fulfilling experiences of his life. He is grateful for every day of the past 9 years that this community has entrusted him to build an educational institution that fosters and develops local youth (“Superintendent’s Corner,” 2017).

He expressed great honor and privilege to serve as the Superintendent of the Unified School District (Long Beach Press Telegram, 2013).

**Theme 4b: Possesses a growth mind-set.** This theme emerged in six of seven data sources (85%). The following passages from the data revealed the theme:

Whether you want to call it grit or sacrifice, there was this belief that there's hope for tomorrow, there's light at the end of the tunnel (The Press Enterprise, 2015).

Thank you in advance for the work it will take to learn these new systems. She is confident that these upgrades and consolidations will make it more usable for all ("Superintendent's Corner," 2017).

Top superintendents ensure their legacy by making it a priority to illuminate their passionate vision of the school or district's future to a core set of administrators in the district. As an instructional leader mentors others, their desire to make a positive difference for students will iterate throughout the district ("Leading Instruction," 2010).

It will be a privilege for him to serve as the Superintendent with such an established culture and tradition of excellence (California School News, 2015).

He believes that change begins on a small scale; people shouldn't have to worry about changing the entire world but rather to making contributions that can change the world around them (Sieu, 2016).

He admires school systems that are always looking to improve, even though they are viewed as being at the top academically (Long Beach Press Telegram, 2013).

**Theme 4c: Demonstrates empathy.** This theme emerged in four of seven data sources (60%). The following passages from the data revealed the theme:

He spent countless hours of free time in the hospital, visiting sick or injured employees and students (The Press Enterprise, 2015).

The district is going to have a theme for the year, something not done before, and that theme is extended family, which includes our students, our families, and our employees. The district will continue to grow and become stronger through the ways staff educate, care for, and support each other ("Superintendent's Corner," 2017).

In this time of uncertainty, anxiety, and fear, he wants to rest assured that schools are safe havens for ALL students and parents (Sieu, 2016).

At the same time, many cited support for sports and other after-school activities as a sign that he values the entire school experience (Naqvi, 2010).

**Research question 5.** Research Question 5 asked: How do superintendents demonstrate excellence? Excellence is the fifth attribute of grit theory presented in the research surrounding this qualitative study. Excellence is the process of making and sustaining progress as a priority over achievement of perfection (R. Hill, 2010; Perlis, 2013; Stoeber & Crombie, 2010).

The major themes identified by a majority (51%) of data sources emerged as follows: (5a) setting high expectations, and (5b) earned industry recognition. Table 6 shows data sources that identified the primary themes.

Table 6

*Primary Themes Identified for Research Question 5*

Theme	SA	SB	SC	SD	SE	SF	SG
5a. Setting high expectations	X	X	X		X	X	X
5b. Earned industry recognition	X	X		X	X	X	X

***Theme 5a: Setting high expectations.*** This theme emerged in six of seven data sources (85%). The following passages from the data revealed the theme:

Instructional leadership development culminates with annual visits so current and aspiring leaders can learn how to apply current leadership lessons to school context (Broad Foundation, 2016).

Helping students to become healthy, balanced, and resilient adults is a topic that the District Board of Trustees has discussed many times over the past few years (“Superintendent’s Corner,” 2017).

He takes steps to ensure that the examples he sets are impeccable. He has fun, but not at the expense of others. A good leader would never risk jeopardizing his career by acting in a way that would reflect poorly on himself or his organization (“Leading Instruction,” 2010).

She worked hard to expand equity within programs that foster academic excellence (California School News, 2015).

Our mission is to create a community of lifelong learners, creative thinkers, and responsible individuals by providing innovative and high quality educational programs in a safe and supportive environment (Sieu, 2016).

She is looking forward to introducing the (professional development model) to new staff. It's unlike any other professional development program out there—it makes a real difference in the lives of teachers and students alike (Bregy, 2014).

***Theme 5b: Earned industry recognition.*** This theme emerged in six of seven data sources (85%). The following passages from the data revealed the theme:

She has won national acclaim, while leading the area's largest district (Heitin, 2015).

Our district has received many accolades over the past year that we should be proud of: our district is #6 school district in the nation and one of our elementary schools was named as one of the nation's first ever Green Ribbon Schools ("Superintendent's Corner," 2017).

She has been recognized as a recipient of the Regional Superintendent of the Year (Daily Breeze, 2016).

There are numerous Blue Ribbon School Awards, Cal Distinguished Schools, CA Gold Ribbon Schools, Schools to Watch/National Model Middle Schools, Golden Bell Awards, and the Grand Prize Magna Award from the National School Boards Assoc. The district maintains a sharp focus on teaching and learning to ensure that every student, in every classroom, every day, is provided with a world-class education (Sieu, 2016).

He is in the first class of district leaders to earn national superintendent certification (American Association of School Administrators, 2015).

## **Summary**

This study involved collecting data from publicly available texts regarding California urban school districts and the superintendents. Examples of data sources accessed included publications such as books, articles, Web sites, and newspapers. Triangulation of data increased validity of the study and the emergence of themes. Data collected on each California urban school district was assigned an alphabetical code in order to increase confidentiality. A second reviewer increased consistency through the interreviewer process. A primary theme was identified when a majority (51%) was displayed. Texts from publicly available sources were

used to display evidence of the themes. The results of the data analysis were displayed in text and graphics such as tables.

## Chapter 5: Findings and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore grit attributes demonstrated by California urban superintendents. This research focused on exploring grit practices of California urban school superintendents. Olivarez (2013) suggested that emerging leaders be identified and prepared for the dramatic changes in school climates. Superintendents working in urban settings face the challenge of shaping the school district culture to create a climate that supports student learning and achievement. Their role faces a myriad of reforms and a complex political environment (Fowler & Cowden, 2015). This study adds to the scholarly literature surrounding the concepts of grit and how it can be directly aligned to individuals working in school leadership roles. Grit theory served as this study's theoretical framework and was identified in literature as the passion and perseverance for accomplishment that is not directly related to innate talent (Duckworth, 2016b; Perlis, 2013). Grit has five attributes, including courage, conscientiousness, endurance toward long-term goals, optimism and resilience, and excellence over perfection.

### Chapter Structure

Chapter 5 began with an overview of the study, a review of the problem, and a theoretical synthesis. Following was a restatement of purpose and research questions. Next included a discussion of the methods summary, including data collection, data analysis, and coding. The conclusions and overview of the results were presented along with the implications of the study. Last, recommendations for further research and a summary concluded the chapter.

### Overview of the Study

**Review of the problem.** Professionals acting as school district leaders face a challenging task, which includes current inadequate funding complexities, managing the regulatory climate, and ensuring each organization member embodies the skills and knowledge to meet student

needs (Asher-Schapiro, 2015; Kowalski, 2013; Wagner, 2010). The need for district leadership is great, according to the *CalEd Facts Report* (California Department of Education, 2015), which noted there are 1,022 public school districts and 10,393 public schools in the state of California with at least 6.2 million students enrolled in Kindergarten through Grade 12. Those in leadership have an opportunity to make an impact on students', staff members', and community members' lives (Wertz, 2003).

Duckworth (2016b) noted, "If you want to be grittier, find a gritty culture and join it. If you're a leader, and you want the people in your organization to be grittier, create a gritty culture" (p. 245). Existing or aspiring superintendents and researchers interested in the relationship between the theory of grit and success in their role may find benefit from additional study of grit and how school leaders display it. This research aimed at contributing to the body of knowledge surrounding school superintendents in California urban settings and grit practices.

At the time of the study, there was scant scholarly research connecting urban school superintendents' practices to the five grit attributes. Previous research had indicated that individuals with grit tend demonstrate a passion and perseverance in order to achieve goals (Duckworth, 2016b; Duckworth et al., 2007). However, the theory of grit was still in its nascent stages and there was a call for more research to provide additional information (Duckworth & Gross, 2014; Perkins-Gough, 2013; Snyder, 2014; Windle, 2011).

### **Theoretical Framework Synthesis**

Grit theory served as the theoretical framework for this study. Grit was identified as the passion and perseverance for accomplishment that is not directly related to innate talent (Duckworth, 2016b; Perlis, 2013). Grit has five attributes, including courage, conscientiousness, endurance toward long-term goals, optimism and resilience, and excellence over perfection.



The focus on grit research in previous studies had been to identify its five attributes and distinguish between natural talent and persistent effort as a determinant for personal and career success (Duckworth, 2016b). Grit predicts achievement in challenging domains over and beyond talent measures (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). There was little research associated with grit practices of California urban district superintendents. An additional body of research on urban school district superintendents and their demonstration of the five attributes of grit could possibly support leaders in becoming transformative (Fowler & Cowden, 2015). Multiple authors supported each of Duckworth's (2016b) five grit components and each contributes to the theoretical framework for this study (see Table 7).

Table 7

*Literature Support for the Theoretical Framework*

Courage	Conscientious	Long-Term Goals-Endurance	Optimism	Excellence Versus Perfection
Aristotle (as cited in Zavaliy & Aristidou, 2014)	Arora & Rangnekar, 2016	Boleman & Deal, 2008	Besser et al., 2012	Curry, 2012
Brown, 2015	Duckworth, 2016a	Bonnano, 2005	Dog, 2012	Duckworth, 2016b
Cashman, 2008	Duckworth, 2016b	Cashman, 2008	Duckworth, 2016b	Kotter, 2012
Curtis, 2014	Fleming et al., 2016	Duckworth, 2016b	Folke et al., 2010	Litner & Mann-Feder, 2009
Day, 2014	Gartland et al., 2014	Folke et al., 2010	Frankl, 1956	Margolis & McCabe, 2006
DeYoung, 2013	Ivcevic & Brackett, 2014	Just, 1999	Harvey, 2007	Saulsberry et al., 2013
Duckworth, 2016a	Luo & Roberts, 2015	Kobasa, 1979	Holling, 1973	Shellman, 2011
Duckworth, 2016b	MacCann et al., 2009	Luthar et al., 2000	Lugg, 1993	Siqueira & Diaz, 2004
Dweck, 2006	Nakaya et al., 2006	Nelson et al., 2007	Peres et al., 2007	Socrates (as cited in Pashiardis, 2009)
Gruber, 2011		Osland, 2013	Watson & Neria, 2013	
Kouzes & Posner, 2010		Posner, 2010	Windle, 2011	
May, 1975		Robbins & Judge, 2013		
Milton, 2012				

(continued)

Courage	Conscientious	Long-Term Goals- Endurance	Optimism	Excellence Versus Perfection
Plato (as cited in Zavaliy & Aristidou, 2014) Schweitzer, 2013 White, 2015 Zavaliy & Aristidou, 2014	Rikoon et al., 2016 Soto, 2015			Von Culin et al., 2014 Watson & Neria, 2013

### Restatement of Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore grit attributes demonstrated by California urban school superintendents. The literature review revealed support of the theoretical framework of grit resulting in the formation of the research questions.

1. How do superintendents demonstrate courage?
2. How do superintendents demonstrate conscientiousness?
3. How do superintendents demonstrate endurance toward long-term goals?
4. How do superintendents demonstrate optimism and resilience?
5. How do superintendents demonstrate excellence?

### Methods Summary

**Data collection.** Data were collected through a qualitative research design with content analysis of texts that are publicly available and aligned with California urban school districts that meet the study criteria. Information was gathered from publicly available and accessible data included on the California Department of Education Web site. The seven California urban school districts in this study also had Web sites that were publicly available. Internet searches were conducted to access the publicly available sources. Corresponding text from these data sources

was reviewed and compared with the grit attributes in the theoretical framework in order to code for themes.

At least three different sources of publicly available and accessible information were applied for each of the seven California urban school districts. The sources of data included school district Web sites, published books, journal articles, publications from national and international associations and organizations, and newspaper articles. The dates of the data collected for this study range from 2009 to 2017 to increase current data's inclusion. There was no interaction with human subjects. An alphabetical code was assigned that corresponded to each school district to increase confidentiality. The multiple sources for each district provided triangulation, which increased research validity and trustworthiness.

**Data analysis.** Analysis, including coding, was represented in tables and matrices (Creswell, 2013). The researcher conducted data collection objectively using publicly available texts on California urban school districts and associated superintendents. Saldaña (2013) noted seven personal attributes all qualitative researchers should possess during the coding process, (a) organization, (b) perseverance, (c) deal with ambiguity, (d) flexibility, (e) creativity, (f) rigorously ethical, and (g) possession of an extensive vocabulary (p. 36). The data analysis aimed to explore the grit attributes that are demonstrated in alignment with the theoretical framework.

**Coding.** The data collected from publicly available sources were reviewed several times to gain understanding and begin to identify themes. The data were then coded and compared to components of the theoretical framework. Saldaña (2013) noted that a theme is an outcome of coding and categorization; it is an extended phrase or sentence that identifies what a unit of data represents. In this study, similar words and phrases were highlighted and aligned with the concepts of the theoretical framework. In an attempt to maintain consistency, Hyatt's (2016) 10-

step process of interviewer reliability was implemented to increase consistency and trustworthiness:

1. The primary researcher analyzes the data and then meets with the reviewer(s) to review the coding process for identifying themes.
2. The primary researcher selects data for the purpose of familiarizing the reviewer(s) with the coding process.
3. The researcher maintains the highlighted-analyzed version.
4. The reviewer(s) is provided with a clean copy of the data.
5. Prior to analysis, the researcher and reviewer(s) will each read the data to a) familiarize the reviewer(s) with the data; and b) to further the reviewer(s) consideration of the information and to answer any questions.
6. The researcher assists the reviewer(s) in completing the analysis of the selected data by bracketing for reduction, horizontalization, and synthesis of the text for structural descriptions and conclusions.
7. Meaning units are entered in the left margin. Structural descriptions and conclusions are entered into the right margin. This completes analysis of the selected data.
8. The additional reviewer(s) applies the same process to the remaining data independent of the primary researcher. If there are multiple reviewers, each works independently.
9. After completion of the process for all data the primary researcher and reviewer(s) reconvene. The primary researcher and the reviewer(s) review their identified findings, discuss differences, and come to a consensus on the conclusions. An analysis categorizing form may be created to identify the agreed-upon themes.

10. Generally, criteria for major themes are met when a majority (51%) of the data sources reveal supportive data for the theme(s). (p. 2)

By utilizing Hyatt's interviewer process, the reliability of the text collected on each superintendent was increased. Common themes determined in a majority (51%) of the data sources on each superintendent were classified as primary themes and grouped together.

## Results and Conclusions

**Findings for research question 1.** How do superintendents demonstrate courage? The major themes that emerged were as follows: (1a) willingness to meet challenges, and (1b) seeks opportunities. Table 8 showed percentages of data sources that identified the major themes.

Table 8

### *Research Question 1 Primary Themes*

Theme	%
1a. Willingness to meet challenges	85%
1b. Seeks opportunities	70%

***Theme 1a: Willingness to meet challenges.*** This theme emerged in six of seven data sources (85%). The following passages are examples of data that revealed the theme:

As other districts were laying off teachers, this district's union agreed to a pay cut and a five-year salary freeze. The union and district leaders agreed that the additional supplementary cash provided through the state funding overhaul would be put into student services rather than salaries or benefits (Heitin, 2015).

She recently made headlines after agreeing to change the way the district holds school board elections (Long Beach Press Telegram, 2013).

Many said the willingness to try new things has paid dividends and that he would bring the same alacrity to his new job (Naqvi, 2010).

Attribute studies have found a positive correlation between individuals who demonstrate a high level of hardiness and their success as leaders (Bird, 2013). The research provided by Duckworth has indicated that high-achieving individuals are not necessarily the most innately talented, but rather possess the ability to overcome setbacks and preserve interest despite the discomfort to attain goals (Stokas, 2015). Courage and resilience develop when there is a cognitive shift in response to a challenge (Ledesma, 2014). School superintendents consist of the most resilient professionals in the educational community (American Association of School Administrators, 2016). Courageous leaders show tenacity, strong coping mechanisms, and timely recovery when faced with adversity and struggle. Superintendents demonstrate courage as willingness to meet challenges when they “show up to be seen” (Brown, 2015, p. 210).

***Theme 1b: Seeks opportunities.*** This theme emerged in five of the seven data sources (70%). The following passages are examples of data that revealed the theme:

He speaks at a press conference joining superintendents from Southern California Friday to urge Californians to prevent further education cuts by voting (Long Beach Press Telegram, 2013).

After only three days on the job, she met with the members of the staff and answered a wide range of questions about herself and her new job (Motander, 2009).

Superintendents must devote a large amount of time and energy toward the cultivation of community partnerships and researching opportunities (Kersten, 2012; Sullivan & Shulman, 2005). Research indicates that successful educational leaders are those who are risk takers and who actively seek out new opportunities, experiences, and challenges for themselves and their organizations (Day, 2014; Wertz, 2003).

Superintendents require high levels of career resilience, which refers to a resistance to career disruption in less than optimal environments and the ability to handle poor working conditions while one is aware that these conditions exist (O’Leary, 1998). Many superintendents

move through the hierarchy of a professional school-based career with beginnings as a certificated teacher, coach, or support person (Sullivan & Shulman, 2005). Superintendents seeking opportunity with or without the presence of adversity demonstrate courage.

**Findings for research question 2.** How do superintendents demonstrate conscientiousness? The major themes that emerged were as follows: (2a) collaborative leadership, (2b) strong communication skills, and (2c) sensitivity to diversity. Table 9 showed percentages of data sources that identified the major themes.

Table 9

*Research Question 2 Primary Themes*

Theme	%
2a. Collaborative leadership	70%
2b. Strong communication skills	60%
2c. Sensitivity to diversity	85%

**Theme 2a: Collaborative leadership.** This theme emerged in five of seven data sources (70%). The following passages are examples of data that reveal the theme:

He works collaboratively with community resources to reduce the incidence and impact of bullying (Broad Foundation, 2016).

She is a strong collaborative leader who is committed to open communication and helping us continue the mission of offering a high-quality education that helps students reach their college and career goals (California School News, 2015).

Three core transformational leadership attributes had been identified for educators, which included helping staff develop and maintain a collaborative culture, fostering effective staff development, and helping members of the organization solve problems effectively through a collaborative process (Leithwood, 1992; Mitchell, 1998; Zacher & Johnson, 2015). Additionally,

the literature pointed out that conscientiousness could include three themes: collaborative leadership, strong communication skills, and sensitivity to diversity. A heightened sensitivity for conscientiousness may also lead to a commitment to an organizational framework or corporate responsibility (Woodley, et al., 2016). The presence and availability of a team member or mentor to listen and offer a collection of information from others supported the promotion of self-efficacy (Kotter, 2012; Siqueira & Diaz, 2004; Von Culin et al., 2014). A heightened sensitivity for conscientiousness may also lead to a commitment to an organizational framework or corporate responsibility (Woodley et al., 2016). Collaborative leadership exemplified by superintendents demonstrates conscientiousness when their support for professional development includes access to trusted peers and colleagues along with transformational development opportunities to create resilient partnerships (Nishikawa, 2006).

***Theme 2b: Strong communication skills.*** This theme emerged in four of seven data sources (60%). The following passages are examples of data that revealed the theme:

He is adept at studying a problem—typically with plenty of stakeholder input (Broad Foundation, 2016).

His ability to communicate well will perhaps be most crucial in his dealings with parents. He has an ease about him that makes anybody feel comfortable even if you're going to talk to him in an uncomfortable situation (Naqvi, 2010).

Robbins and Judge (2013) defined transformational leaders as those who communicate the expectations of the organization and promote careful problem solving. Clear communication and transformational leadership are exemplified as a superintendent commonly serves as the secretary of the school board and manages the school board meetings. The role places the superintendent as responsible for the behavioral governance of the very people who determine the longevity of his or her employment.



Educational reforms have underscored the need for school superintendents to communicate with stakeholders regarding issues surrounding public education (Bjork et al., 2014). The American Association of School Administrators developed eight professional standards for superintendents. Communication and community relations constitute 25% of the standards for superintendents (Cunningham & Cordiero, 2006; Kowalski, 2006; Sergiovanni, 1982). Superintendents demonstrate conscientiousness as transformative leaders when they provide effective and active communication (Van Oord, 2013).

***Theme 2c: Sensitivity to diversity.*** This theme emerged in six of seven data sources (85%). The following passages are examples of data that revealed the theme:

The percentage of African American elementary and middle school students performing at the advanced level in reading and math ranked in the top 20% compared to the proportion of African American students performing at the advanced level in all districts across the state (Broad Foundation, 2016).

She is passionate about increasing the numbers of underrepresented students having access to Advanced Placement courses to be successful in college and beyond (California School News, 2015).

The moral imperative is to focus on students; and deep commitment to raising the bar and closing the learning gaps for all students (Daily Breeze, 2016).

One of the major highlights of this year was to see two schools comprised of high poverty students meet the State's academic targets of 800 or above. This demonstrates that demographics do not determine destiny (Long Beach Press Telegram, 2013).

Oftentimes, urban superintendents run districts with large minority populations, limited budgets, pressure to raise student test scores, increase graduation rates, and increase the number of college-bound students (Cuban, 2008). Superintendents can inherit districts suffering under the weight of bureaucratic resistance to change, managerial incompetence, and chronically low student performance (Bjork et al., 2014; Cuban, 2008). Farmer (2010) listed additional challenges school leaders face, including increasing costs, decreasing revenue streams, unfunded

mandates, increased accountability, increased poverty, changing demographics, teacher morale and retention issues, and aging facilities, to name a few.

Educational leaders serving more disadvantaged schools possess different and more complex sets of skills than those serving more advantaged schools (Cuban, 2008; Maxwell et al., 2014). Superintendents working in urban school districts demonstrated endurance through the sensitivity to diversity and the dedication to disenfranchised populations on the forefront. It was important to examine district conditions because students can be at risk of underachieving in their academic and personal lives (Day, 2014; Kowalski, 2013).

**Findings for research question 3.** How do superintendents demonstrate endurance toward long-term goals? The major themes that emerged were as follows: (3a) shared goals, (3b) implementation of research-based practices, (3c) systems reform, (3d) unwavering commitment to stakeholders, and (3e) innovative approach. Table 10 showed percentages of data sources that identified the major themes.

Table 10

*Research Question 3 Primary Themes*

Theme	%
3a. Shared goals	60%
3b. Implementation of research-based practices	85%
3c. Systems reform	85%
3d. Unwavering commitment to stakeholders	60%
3e. Innovative approach	70%

**Theme 3a: Shared goals.** This theme emerged in four of seven data sources (60%). The following passages are examples of data that revealed the theme:

These leaders found great opportunities to achieve ambitious goals despite changing policy and budget environments and ever-increasing demands for better performance from teachers and students (Lewis, 2015).

The goal was to build resource capacity in the district—both human and financial—to sustain a comprehensive fine arts program for every child in the district (P.S Arts, 2016).

Educational leaders tackle the dual dimensionality of leadership, whereas a leader cautiously balances between achieving the goals of the organization and achieving those goals while maintaining a state of good relations among the various organizational participants (Pashiardis, 2009). Educational leadership involves the constant involvement of others and the establishment of social capital in order to create a culture of improvement for all stakeholders (Maxwell et al., 2014; Sergiovanni, 1991).

A vision is a hopeful image of the future and can guide behavior, allowing individuals or groups to visualize positive outcomes and build self-esteem and confidence (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Posner, 2010; Robbins & Judge, 2013). A clear vision allows for change that makes sense to the stakeholders, it can be communicated repeatedly, and it can be accompanied by a blueprint to make this vision come to fruition (Osland, 2013). Bolman and Deal (2008) noted that vision is particularly important in times of crisis or uncertainty. Superintendents demonstrate endurance through shared goals when revealing their deep, personal, and multifaceted understanding of the vision of the school district in relation to their plan of action (Sullivan & Shulman, 2005).

***Theme 3b: Implementation of research-based practices.*** This theme emerged in six of seven data sources (85%). The following passages are examples of data that reveal the theme:

Ultimately, district leaders and music educators know what they want: a standards-based music program with qualified teachers, designated classrooms, and a built-in funding that's for all students. There's no doubt the goal is to press forward. It's just the pace (Heitin, 2015).

Through implementation of research-based best practices, high quality professional development, distributive leadership, and ongoing monitoring, significant progress was

made in student achievement at all secondary schools under her supervision as evidenced by state and national assessment results (California School News, 2015).

She has worked collaboratively to implement a rigorous standards-based curriculum to prepare students for the 21st century (Sieu, 2016).

Superintendents serve as the chief executive officers of a school district and work alongside an elected trustee board to find resources and opportunities grounded in continuous educational improvement for the students residing within the district boundaries (Bjork et al., 2014). They are required to uphold ever-changing mandates brought forth from the California Department of Education. One significant challenge superintendents are presented with is managing the relentless and unwavering responsibility of moving a school district forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in the face of adversity (Ledesma, 2014). The superintendent leads district management, and certificated and classified staff through policy implementation efforts. Superintendents demonstrate endurance when implementing research-based practices and cultivating a scholastic view of best practices along with constant monitoring of educational initiatives (Farmer, 2010; Olivarez, 2013).

***Theme 3c: Systems reform.*** This theme emerged in six of seven data sources (85%). The following passages are examples of data that revealed the theme:

It's important to be sure that whatever good work has taken place is not personally driven and that people to say that his staff have put systems in place so that the work can continue (Heitin, 2015).

Some examples of systems reform that she initiated include devising a concise and deliberate secondary master plan through data-driven decision making, and developing an infrastructure to support and monitor the Program Improvement (PI) schools through monthly meetings, implementation of common instructional strategies, research-based best practices, and data-analysis (University of Southern California, 2011).

Superintendents are described as transformational leaders, as they bear the responsibility of introducing educational reform to their districts and encouraging stakeholders to see beyond

their scope toward the benefits for students (Sullivan & Shulman, 2005). The role has a greater focus on promoting educational reform as well as the accompanying responsibilities of advisor to the school board, managing limited resources, and communicator to stakeholders (Giaquinto, 2011; Kowalski, 2013). Sullivan and Shulman (2005) noted that the superintendent is at the center of all district reform efforts. Endurance is demonstrated in systems reform when superintendents serve as social and behavioral scientists seeking innovative and sustainable solutions (Bjork et al., 2014; Sergiovanni, 1982).

***Theme 3d: Unwavering commitment to stakeholders.*** This theme emerged in four of seven data sources (60%). The following passages are examples of data that revealed the theme:

This district used a crisis to rally stakeholders around a kids-first focus. By keeping student interests at the fore, the district was able to negotiate a nearly 5% pay cut and then freeze salaries for 5 years for teachers and classified staff—all of whom overwhelmingly voted in favor of the reduction (Broad Foundation, 2016).

He defended himself against some criticism that he made the wrong call. Unless you are the person making this decision that impacts 21,000 students from 3 years old to their late teens, it is difficult for anyone to understand how all-consuming the decision can be (Bregy, 2012).

Superintendents who succeed in motivating their stakeholders to invest in a decision with shared responsibility were viewed as upholding a moral imperative of doing what is best for students. Duckworth et al. (2007) defined endurance as setting a long-term objective and not swerving from it, even in the absence of positive feedback. The processes of educational leadership requires those who are engaged in them to have a resolute everyday persistence and commitment, including the ability to bounce back from adverse circumstances (Cuban, 1985; Day, 2014; Farmer, 2010). Superintendents demonstrated endurance through an unwavering commitment to stakeholders when holding firm to a principle, belief, or practice that aligned their vision of educational success for their stakeholders (Bjork et al., 2014; Lutz 1996).

**Theme 3e: Innovative approach.** This theme emerged in five of seven data sources (70%). The following passages are examples of data that revealed the theme:

He uses innovative strategies to improve curriculum and instruction, address management challenges, stretch resources, engage parents and communities, utilize new technologies effectively, and create optimal learning environments that prepare all students for success beyond their K-12 years (Lewis, 2015).

How his school district finally got to the negotiating is a study in grass-roots organizing, blending the theatrics of the Occupy Wall Street movement with cutting-edge political strategies, from email blasts to YouTube videos (Chicago Tribune, 2011).

In addition to a district leader's day-to-day managerial tasks, superintendents are involved in pivotal activities, such as visioning and goal setting to lead stakeholders through the continuous changes presented from federal, state, and local mandates (Kowalski, 2013).

According to Cuban (2008), those school leaders who have shown tangible accomplishments to their stakeholders, including increased test scores and greater access to innovative instructional practices, are extraordinary individuals. Superintendents demonstrated endurance through an innovative approach when they take risks and negotiate to meet the stakeholders' needs.

**Findings for research question 4.** How do superintendents demonstrate optimism and resilience? The major themes that emerged were as follows: (4a) Exemplifies a sense of gratitude, (4b) possesses a growth mind-set, and (4c) demonstrates empathy. Table 11 showed percentages of data sources that identified the major themes.

Table 11

*Research Question 4 Primary Themes*

Theme	%
4a. Exemplifies a sense of gratitude	70%

(continued)

Theme	%
4b. Possesses a growth mindset	85%
4c. Demonstrates empathy	60%

***Theme 4a. Exemplifies a sense of gratitude.*** This theme emerged in five of seven data sources (70%). The following passages are examples of data that revealed the theme:

The one thing that had struck her was the overwhelming number of individuals and groups, which were volunteering to assist the district and had already established working relationships with the schools (Motander, 2009).

He expressed great honor and privilege to serve as the Superintendent of the Unified School District (Long Beach Press Telegram, 2013).

Highly resilient people are not averse to trauma or stress; however, their emotional outlook lends itself to a more valuable sense of meaning or life purpose (Peres et al., 2007). Resilient superintendents showed appreciation for others around them, both personally and professionally. Frankl's (1956) focused on resilience reminded his readers of his personal and professional mantra until his death, "A positive attitude enables a person to endure suffering and disappointment as well as enhance enjoyment and satisfaction. A negative attitude intensifies pain and increases disappointments; it undermines and diminishes pleasure, happiness, and satisfaction" (p. 160). Superintendents demonstrated optimism and resilience when maintaining a positive mental outlook and feeling gratitude for family and other supports (Farmer, 2010; Wertz, 2003).

***Theme 4b. Possesses a growth mind-set.*** This theme emerged in six of seven data sources (85%). The following passages are examples of data that revealed the theme:

Whether you want to call it grit or sacrifice, there was this belief that there's hope for tomorrow, there's light at the end of the tunnel (The Press Enterprise, 2015).

He admires school systems that are always looking to improve, even though they are viewed as being at the top academically (Long Beach Press Telegram, 2013).

The concept of a growth mind-set allows people to remain constant in their pursuit of an idea or goal completion in the face of difficulty (Duckworth, 2016a; Dweck, 2006). A positive-growth mind-set holds the power of potential and creates a vision. A vision is a hopeful image of the future guiding behavior and allowing individuals or groups to visualize positive outcomes and build self-esteem and confidence (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Posner, 2010; Robbins & Judge, 2013).

Demonstration of academic optimism is a characteristic common to resilient educational leaders (Day, 2014). The challenge exists to remain steadfast with the goal of fulfilling their vision. Superintendents demonstrated optimism and resilience through a growth mind-set when they possessed strong coping skills, positive self-esteem, self-perseverance, self-efficacy, hardiness, low fear of failure, a sense of coherence, optimism, adaptability, risk-taking, determination, strong social resources, and a high tolerance for uncertainty (Dweck, 2006; Farmer, 2010; Ledesma, 2014; Wertz, 2003).

***Theme 4c. Demonstrates empathy.*** This theme emerged in four of seven data sources (60%). The following passages are examples of data that revealed the theme:

He spent countless hours of free time in the hospital, visiting sick or injured employees and students (The Press Enterprise, 2015).

At the same time, many cited support for sports and other after-school activities as a sign that he values the entire school experience (Naqvi, 2010).

Research supported acquisition of practical skills to respond to constant change and identifies strong leaders with the ability to reframe an issue into something positive (Wertz, 2003). Lugg (1993) recommended frequent and honest levels of communication along with the creation of positive alliances to promote a culture with high levels of emotional energy. The



sensitivity to people is key to success (Sergiovanni, 1982). Superintendents demonstrated optimism and resilience as exemplified through empathy when they serve as models of hope to their stakeholders (Wertz, 2003).

**Findings for Research Question 5.** How do superintendents demonstrate excellence?

The major themes that emerged were as follows: (5a) setting high expectations, and (5b) earned industry recognition. Table 12 showed percentages of data sources that identified the major themes.

Table 12

*Research Question 5 Primary Themes*

Theme	%
5a. Setting high expectations	85%
5b. Earned industry recognition	85%

***Theme 5a. Setting high expectations.*** This theme emerged in six of seven data sources (85%). The following passages are examples of data that revealed the theme:

Instructional leadership development culminates with annual visits so current and aspiring leaders can learn how to apply current leadership lessons to school context (Broad Foundation, 2016).

She worked hard to expand equity within programs that foster academic excellence (California School News, 2015).

Our mission is to create a community of lifelong learners, creative thinkers, and responsible individuals by providing innovative and high quality educational programs in a safe and supportive environment (Sieu, 2016).

The role of the public-school superintendent in California has evolved since the mid-19th century, requiring a high level of commitment and sustainability in the face of conflict, politics, and limited funding (Cuban, 1985, 2008). Superintendents shared in responsibility of upholding

the vision and mission of the district school board and providing supporting data to show students are prepared for the challenges of college and careers in the 21st century (Bjork et al., 2014; Sergiovanni, 1982).

Duckworth (2016b) noted that highly accomplished individuals demonstrate exemplary levels of perseverance. Leaders may show achievement-orientation tendencies and better performance behaviors (Arora & Rangnekar, 2016). Coincidentally, there has been a noted increase in the numbers of district superintendents in pursuit of doctoral degrees, largely in districts with at least 25,000 students enrolled (American Association of School Administrators, 2016). Superintendents demonstrated excellence through setting high expectations while maintaining a focus on purpose (Sullivan & Shulman, 2005; Wertz, 2003).

***Theme 5b. Earned industry recognition.*** This theme emerged in six of seven data sources (85%). The following passages are examples of data that revealed the theme:

She has been recognized as a recipient of the Regional Superintendent of the Year (Daily Breeze, 2016).

There are numerous Blue Ribbon School Awards, Cal Distinguished Schools, CA Gold Ribbon Schools, Schools to Watch/National Model Middle Schools, Golden Bell Awards, and the Grand Prize Magna Award from the National School Boards Assoc. The district maintains a sharp focus on teaching and learning to ensure that every student, in every classroom, every day, is provided with a world-class education (Sieu, 2016).

He is in the first class of district leaders to earn national superintendent certification (American Association of School Administrators, 2015).

Superintendents who showed tangible district accomplishments to their stakeholders, including increased test scores and greater access to innovative instructional practices, are extraordinary individuals (Cuban, 2008). Duckworth (2016b) noted that highly accomplished individuals demonstrate exemplary levels of perseverance and a desire to succeed. Shellman (2011) described the sense of confidence and ability to demonstrate personal accomplishment

and perseverance during challenging situations extends self-efficacy and the desire to obtain achievement in other domains. It was not uncommon to hear participants realize accomplishment was not isolated but generalized to both their personal and professional lives. Superintendents demonstrated excellence through earned industry recognition when they and embody a constant drive to improve.

### **Overview of the Results**

This study explored grit practices demonstrated by California urban superintendents through the theoretical framework based on Duckworth's grit theory and its five attributes (Duckworth, 2016b). Using a qualitative approach in the study provided the opportunity to collect data from publicly available texts regarding seven California urban superintendents working in educational urban settings.

This study resulted in 15 common attributes of grit theory: (a) willingness to meet challenges, (b) seeks opportunities, (c) collaborative leadership, (d) strong communication skills, (e) sensitivity to diversity, (f) shared goals, (g) implementation of research-based practices, (h) systems reform, (i) unwavering commitment to stakeholders, (j) innovative approach (k) exemplifies a sense of gratitude, (l) possesses a growth mind-set, (m) demonstrates empathy, (n) setting high expectations, and (o) earned industry recognition. These attributes demonstrated by California superintendents working in urban settings are relative to supporting district leaders preparing to serve in these roles through the theoretical framework of grit research study: courage, conscientiousness, endurance toward long-term goals, optimism and resilience, and excellence over perfection. The resultant attributes were displayed in Table 13.

Table 13

*Grit Practices Demonstrated by California Urban School Superintendents*

Courage	Conscientiousness	Endurance	Optimism	Excellence
Willingness to meet challenges	Collaborative leadership	Shared goals	Exemplifies a sense of gratitude	Setting high expectations
Seeks opportunities	Strong communication skills	Implementation of research-based practices	Possesses a growth mindset	Earned industry recognition
	Sensitivity to diversity	Systems reform	Demonstrates empathy	
		Unwavering commitment to stakeholders		
		Innovative approach		

**Implications of the Study**

This qualitative study was designed to identify grit attributes demonstrated by California superintendents working in urban settings. At the time of the study, there was scant scholarly research connecting urban school superintendents to the five grit attributes. Previous research indicated that individuals with grit tend to demonstrate a passion and perseverance in order to achieve goals (Duckworth, 2016b; Duckworth et al., 2007). However, the theory of grit was still

in its nascent stages and researchers called for additional information (Duckworth & Gross, 2014; Perkins-Gough, 2013; Snyder, 2014; Windle, 2011).

This research focused on exploring grit attributes demonstrated by California urban school superintendents. The data demonstrated a strong propensity of grit attributed among the superintendents studied. Emerging leaders could be identified and prepared for the dramatic changes and increasing demands in school climates in recent decades. This study added to the scholarly literature surrounding the concepts of grit attributes aligned with school leaders in urban California.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

A literature review identified the theoretical framework used for this study in identifying grit attributes demonstrated by California superintendents working in urban settings. The research methods used produced 15 shared grit attributes identified by seven superintendents. It would have been valuable to conduct the same study using superintendents or other district leaders working in another state. Additional research could be conducted in rural school districts since, at times, the superintendent of small rural districts will also jointly serve as a school principal, human resources administrator, and/or chief financial officer (Kowalski, 2006). These superintendents remain generalists in comparison to larger districts with directors or high-level managers serving in each department.

This research study was specific to district leaders meeting the criteria of: (a) current employment as a superintendent in an urban school setting in California, (b) there exist corresponding publicly available documents, (c) at least one year's experience as a superintendent in an urban school setting in California, and (d) current role as a superintendent in a California urban school district.

Research studies have limitations. A method to address limitations was to conduct additional studies. Further research could compare the grit attributes demonstrated by superintendents in other geographical settings or other grit attributes as demonstrated by other district leaders. A quantitative approach utilizing interviews or surveys could be implemented to reach a larger population sample and possibly yield additional valuable data.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to identify grit practices demonstrated by California urban school district superintendents. Scholars and practitioners agreed that the role of superintendent requires highly developed skills and political acumen to work effectively with district stakeholders (Kowalski, 2006; Maxwell et al., 2014). The results of the study provided information that can assist leaders, persons providing professional development, and policymakers in education. The data in this study supported the relationship of the grit attributes as demonstrated by school superintendents in California urban settings. This research was significant as it adds to the literature regarding the disciplines of educational leadership, organizational leadership, and positive psychology in organizations, including topics related to persistence and resiliency studies. Additionally, the results of this study added to the existing body of literature specifically related to grit theories.

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## APPENDIX A

### Research Questions

1. How do Superintendents demonstrate courage?
2. How do Superintendents demonstrate conscientiousness?
3. How do Superintendents demonstrate endurance towards long-term goals?
4. How do Superintendents demonstrate optimism and resilience?
5. How do Superintendents demonstrate excellence?

## APPENDIX B

## Expert Review Panel Letter

Name and title  
Organization  
Address

Dear Expert:

Thank you for your willingness to participate on a panel of experts validating the research questions I will be using in my dissertation. The purpose of this validation is to ensure that the research questions will allow me to collect data to address the purpose of the study.

The purpose of this study is to explore grit practices demonstrated by Superintendents in urban schools. Understanding how the five attributes of grit reflect in the daily practices of school district leaders is valuable to the industry and the profession. These practices will be explored through qualitative research collection using texts from narratives that are publicly available from Superintendents in California urban school districts with at least one year's experience. The research questions are aligned with the definitions of grit attributes as defined in the theoretical framework.

Based on your expertise, I am requesting that you evaluate the research questions for clarity and for relevance. Enclosed you will find a review form to evaluate the questions. Next to each question is a rating scale where you will rate the questions according to the degree of relevance to the research questions. A rating of "1" means that the question is "relevant" to the grit attribute identified, a rating of "2" indicates that the question is "not relevant" to the grit attribute identified and should be deleted, and a rating of "3" means the question "needs modification." A space is provided for suggested modifications. Additional space is also provided on the review form for any overall comments or suggestions. I look forward to your feedback.

Sincerely,

Andrea E. Arias



## APPENDIX C

## Expert Panel Review Form

Instructions: Please indicate under the rating column whether the questions are (1) relevant to the research, (2) not relevant to the research or (3) should be modified.

1. Research Question: How do Superintendents demonstrate courage?		Rating: (1) Relevant (2) Not Relevant (3) Modify as shown
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Modify as follows

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2. Research Question: How do Superintendents demonstrate conscientiousness?		Rating: (1) Relevant (2) Not Relevant (3) Modify as shown
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Modify as follows

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3. Research Question: How do Superintendents demonstrate endurance towards long-term goals?		Rating: (1) Relevant (2) Not Relevant (3) Modify as shown
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Modify as follows

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4. Research Question: How do Superintendents demonstrate optimism and resilience?		Rating: (1) Relevant (2) Not Relevant (3) Modify as shown
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Modify as follows

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5. Research Question: How do Superintendents demonstrate excellence?		Rating: (1) Relevant (2) Not Relevant (3) Modify as shown
---	--	--

Modify as follows

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Please use the following space to make additional comments concerning this research instrument

## APPENDIX D

## Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative Course Work Requirement

## COLLABORATIVE INSTITUTIONAL TRAINING INITIATIVE (CITI PROGRAM)

COMPLETION REPORT - PART 1 OF 2  
COURSEWORK REQUIREMENTS\*

\* NOTE: Scores on this Requirements Report reflect quiz completions at the time all requirements for the course were met. See list below for details. See separate Transcript Report for more recent quiz scores, including those on optional (supplemental) course elements.

- **Name:** Andrea Arias [REDACTED]
- **Email:** andrea.arias@pepperdine.edu
- **Institution Affiliation:** Pepperdine University (ID: 1729)
- **Institution Unit:** Organizational Leadership
- **Phone:** [REDACTED]
  
- **Curriculum Group:** GSEP Education Division
- **Course Learner Group:** GSEP Education Division - Social-Behavioral-Educational (SBE)
- **Stage:** Stage 1 - Basic Course
  
- **Report ID:** 21441656
- **Completion Date:** 13-Nov-2016
- **Expiration Date:** 12-Nov-2021
- **Minimum Passing:** 80
- **Reported Score\*:** 88

REQUIRED AND ELECTIVE MODULES ONLY	DATE COMPLETED	SCORE
Belmont Report and CITI Course Introduction (ID: 1127)	13-Nov-2016	3/3 (100%)
History and Ethical Principles - SBE (ID: 490)	13-Nov-2016	4/5 (80%)
Defining Research with Human Subjects - SBE (ID: 491)	13-Nov-2016	5/5 (100%)
The Federal Regulations - SBE (ID: 502)	13-Nov-2016	4/5 (80%)
Assessing Risk - SBE (ID: 503)	13-Nov-2016	4/5 (80%)
Informed Consent - SBE (ID: 504)	13-Nov-2016	5/5 (100%)
Privacy and Confidentiality - SBE (ID: 505)	13-Nov-2016	4/5 (80%)

For this Report to be valid, the learner identified above must have had a valid affiliation with the CITI Program subscribing institution identified above or have been a paid Independent Learner.

Verify at: <https://www.citiprogram.org/verify/?9becf94f-ce3f-4a22-8f3b-28f49eee08f8>

CITI Program  
 Email: [support@citiprogram.org](mailto:support@citiprogram.org)  
 Phone: 888-529-5929  
 Web: <https://www.citiprogram.org>

## APPENDIX D

## IRB Letter



Pepperdine University  
24255 Pacific Coast Highway  
Malibu, CA 90263  
TEL: 310-506-4000

**NOTICE OF APPROVAL FOR HUMAN RESEARCH**

Date: March 07, 2017

Protocol Investigator Name: Andrea Arias

Protocol #: 17-01-472

Project Title: Grit Attributes Demonstrated by School Superintendents in California Urban Settings

School: Graduate School of Education and Psychology

Dear Andrea Arias:

Thank you for submitting your application for exempt review to Pepperdine University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). We appreciate the work you have done on your proposal. The IRB has reviewed your submitted IRB application and all ancillary materials. Upon review, the IRB has determined that the above entitled project meets the requirements for exemption under the federal regulations 45 CFR 46.101 that govern the protections of human subjects.

Your research must be conducted according to the proposal that was submitted to the IRB. If changes to the approved protocol occur, a revised protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation. For any proposed changes in your research protocol, please submit an amendment to the IRB. Since your study falls under exemption, there is no requirement for continuing IRB review of your project. Please be aware that changes to your protocol may prevent the research from qualifying for exemption from 45 CFR 46.101 and require submission of a new IRB application or other materials to the IRB.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite the best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the IRB as soon as possible. We will ask for a complete written explanation of the event and your written response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event. Details regarding the timeframe in which adverse events must be reported to the IRB and documenting the adverse event can be found in the *Pepperdine University Protection of Human Participants in Research: Policies and Procedures Manual* at [community.pepperdine.edu/irb](http://community.pepperdine.edu/irb).

Please refer to the protocol number denoted above in all communication or correspondence related to your application and this approval. Should you have additional questions or require clarification of the contents of this letter, please contact the IRB Office. On behalf of the IRB, I wish you success in this scholarly pursuit.

Sincerely,

Judy Ho, Ph.D., IRB Chair