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Women in Leadership: A Narrative Study on the Elements that Manifest
Barriers and Opportunities

A dissertation

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

East Tennessee State University

in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

Misty M. Sweat

May 2020

Dr. Virginia Foley, Chair

Dr. John Boyd

Dr. Jason Horne

Dr. Pamela Scott

Women, Leadership, Barriers, Opportunities, Work-life Balance, Work-life Integration

ABSTRACT

Women in Leadership: A Narrative Study on the Elements that Manifest

Barriers and Opportunities

by

Misty Sweat

The purpose of this narrative inquiry study is to explore the barriers and opportunities women in K-12 leadership face, particularly with how they navigate conflicts in their work-life balance and in what ways they have been afforded opportunities. Work-life balance will be generally defined as the reconciliation of the conflicting demands and obligations between a women's professional requirements and her personal life. Opportunities will be defined as events that lead to a woman's career advancements and accomplishments. The study was designed to identify perceived barriers and opportunities during both the ascension to and experience of holding a public K-12 educational leadership position in order to explore successful strategies and factors future female leaders might use to address career ascendancy and leadership development challenges. For this study, a narrative research design was used to explore, examine, and understand the female K-12 public educational leaders' personal reflections of events and experiences, and the meaning that was extracted from those experiences. Using a categorical content analysis, themes were inductively identified within the narrative. Although the public education workforce has historically been dominated by women, evidence remains that there is a disproportionate number of women in senior leadership positions. As suggested by the review of literature, it is necessary to investigate the journey of women's leadership development to identify how to best develop future female leaders in public K-12 education.

DEDICATION

To my parents, Tommy Martin, Mary, and Tim Badgett, who instilled in me the value of education, hard work, and dedication and for always believing in me. You always knew what I was capable of, and you have always been clear about that belief.

To my husband and best friend, Chris. Thank you for your unwavering support and patience as I finished this long, difficult journey. I know it has not been easy, and you have made many sacrifices for me to pursue my goals. As my biggest cheerleader and a bottomless well of encouragement when I faced challenges, you never had any doubts in me. I am blessed to have you by my side. This accomplishment is shared between us both. Thank you for making this journey as easy as you could for me.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As gender diversity in the workplace increases, the complexities surrounding the challenges faced by organizations, men, women, and their families also continues to evolve. In recent years this shift has women entering the workforce in record numbers allowing them the opportunity to have successful careers and expand their professional influences, particularly with respect to leadership (International Labour Office, 2015; Schock, Gruber, Scherndl, & Ortner, 2018). Additionally, female adolescents and young adults have been preparing for and investing in their future careers, making women the largest gender group that have received university degrees (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 2016). This evidence of equal access to educational opportunity and qualifications for both genders has erased many of the disadvantages that women once faced in pursuing leadership opportunities (United Nations, 2015). Currently, leadership roles in politics and the workforce held by women are the highest seen in history, both in the United States (Pew Research Center Social and Demographic Trends, 2016) and in the world (World Economic Forum, 2014). However, as opportunities for women have continued to increase, pay and leadership positions continue to lag behind those of men (Kiser, 2015). Furthermore, women have different complications than men when career-planning, having to consider family commitments and expectations more so than their male counterparts with equal educational levels and qualifications (Ussher, Roche, & Cable, 2015). These “social identity contingencies,” defined as possible stereotypes and judgements experienced due to one’s social identity in a given setting, can create burdens on women in the domain of leadership and can contribute to their underrepresentation (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016, p. 388). Therefore, this narrative inquiry into the factors that impact the success and perception of

female leaders is much more than promoting the availability of equal opportunity for female leaders; it has been established that equal opportunities are now available to all genders. Instead, the goal of this investigation is to gather data on how some women in leadership positions have navigated the complexities specific to their gender when pursuing leadership roles. Hoyt and Murphy (2016) reported that promoting opportunity and expectations for participation by women in leadership roles is important in maintaining a prosperous and civil society and Eagley, Gartzia, and Carlie (2014) indicated that most women adopt leadership styles that are particularly well suited for successfully leading in the complexities of modern organizations, which in turn yields overall enhanced institutional effectiveness. Additional research found that pay gaps between genders is smaller when organizations contain higher percentages of females in leadership roles and when women and men have similar work and hiring experiences (Tate & Yang, 2015). Therefore, giving women the tools they need to successfully pursue leadership positions has benefits that extend beyond the personal agendas of those women, but additionally benefit their organizations and society, help close pay gaps, and normalize the idea of women as successful leaders.

Research Topic and Background

Identifying and studying what makes a leader great has been of interest for centuries. The definition of leadership has long been a scholarly quest, but a general definition has yet to be agreed upon (AAUW, 2016). Leadership studies began in the late 19th century studying men in history who were considered to have created the opportunity and led the charge to accomplish what the general public hoped to do or obtain. Carlyle (1840) suggested that the qualities to achieve such greatness were a divine gift and a birthright given to “Great Men.” These theories, operating under the belief that leadership was a male quality, suggested that one’s capacity for

leadership was inborn (Cherry, 2018). Spencer (1898) implied, in contrast to the suggestions of Carlyle (1840), that leaders were a product of their environment rather than their birthright. According to Spencer (1898), the creation of a great man depends on the long series of complex influences which has produced the race in which he appears. Before he can influence his society, his society must influence him. Spencer's theories can explain the rise of women into leadership. Although women have been in leadership positions for centuries in rare instances, the long series of complex influences which have produced our current societal norms have finally created a culture in which women in leadership positions are a reasonable and obtainable goal. The women's rights movement first granted women a say in choosing their own leaders with the right to vote, followed by the ability to become an elected leader themselves (Belle, 2017).

Men have long dominated in maintaining elite roles of authority and power (Belle, 2017). Therefore, gender and leadership was not studied until the 1970s when dramatic changes in American society gave way to an increasing number of women seeking leadership positions. This ushered in a scholarly interest into gender, leadership, and how the two are correlated. The interest began by questioning if females are capable of leading in any capacity. This question is now moot among academics, but stereotypes still exist that both hold women back from striving for these positions and present barriers for them attaining them (AAUW, 2016; Arvate, Galilea, & Todescat, 2018; Crites, Dickson, & Lorenz, 2015; Derks, Van Laar, Ellemers, and DeGroot 2011; Heilman, 2012; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011; Zheng, Kark, & Meister, 2018).

Throughout history, women have occasionally debuted in leadership positions, from the Queens of England to the Pharaohs of Egypt, yet females are still historically underrepresented (AAUW, 2016). Women have long belonged to a social group that has barriers, sometimes

placed by other women, when occupying positions that were traditionally held by men (Arvate et al., 2018). There have been both cultural customs and laws banning women from leadership positions. Additionally, both customs and laws of this type can be found in every major religion; some of which still exist today (Christ, 2014). The implicit gender bias has been unconsciously woven into the fabric of our culture and society based on the outdated stereotypes of the particular roles that both men and women are expected to play (Eagly & Carli, 2007). The impact of this implicit bias has had a considerable influence on corporate growth, the direction of innovation, long-term sustainability, and financial stability (Belle, 2017). Despite hardships for women in obtaining leadership roles, society has now seen a multitude of highly effective women leaders such as former Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher (UK) and Indira Gandhi (India), PepsiCo's CEO Indra Nooyi, Four-Star General Ann E. Dunwoody, and Supreme Court Justices Sandra Day O'Connor and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. This made way to new research questions such as "Do women and men lead differently?" and "Are men more effective than women as leaders?" Currently, however, the question seems to be "Why are women underrepresented in leadership roles?" (Northouse, 2015).

Statement of the Problem

At little over half, 50.8% of the United States of America's population is female (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). However, women are severely underrepresented in the upper echelons of leadership. In 2015, Standard and Poor's 500 index showed that females made up only 5% of chief executive officers (Miller, 2017). In the non-profit sector, women are more likely to be in leadership positions, but in a 2015 study, only 21 of 151 non-profit organizations had boards with at least 50% representation of women (Boston Club, 2018). The problem also exists in fields that are dominated by women. Educational leadership shows deficits in both opportunities

and desires for women to become leaders, despite making up such a large portion of the field's population (AAUW, 2016). In the U.S. public schools, 75% of teachers are women, yet only 20% of superintendents in those same systems are female (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The 2018 United States Congressional elections showed a significant increase in the number of women elected into the United State Congress, but at 24%, females still only represent less than a quarter of its total members (Center for American Women and Politics, 2019). Of further concern, top leaders have the ability to shape and influence outcomes for large numbers of people, therefore this existing gender imbalance in leadership creates further distortions in the overall distribution of wealth, power, and well-being (Miller, 2017). Not only do leaders have power, but they are also paid well (AAUW, 2016). Women only comprise 27% of all of the U. S. citizens that make more than \$100,000 per year (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). According to Catalyst (2018) in a study on annual median pay, women earn approximately 80% of what men earn for the same full-time positions in a similar cohort.

The leadership gap is an issue worldwide. In 2018, women held 24% of senior roles globally, a drop from 25% in 2017. Additionally, one quarter, or 25%, of global businesses have no women present in any senior management roles. Some women are still facing a “glass ceiling.” The term “glass ceiling” was dubbed by two Wall Street Journal reporters in 1986 to describe an invisible barrier that presents an obstacle for females attempting to ascend into higher leadership positions (Hymowitz & Schellehardt, 1986). Some explanations for this invisible barrier include assumed differences between women and men and prejudice and discrimination against female leaders. Furthermore, according to role contingency theory, the expected characteristics believed necessary in an effective leadership role are conflicting with the primary qualities stereotypically associated with women (Zheng, Zhang, & Darko, 2018).

Therefore, in a leadership role, female leaders are met with opposing expectations and are considered “too manly” or “not feminine enough” if they exhibit the classic characteristics of that of a great leader. Even after significant advancements made in recent times, elite power positions at national and global levels can seem elusive to the talented pool of females in the workforce (Belle, 2017). Overall, research suggested that leadership is an extremely complex subject with numerous factors that play a role in the perceived success or failure of a particular leader (AAUW, 2016; Arvate et al., 2018; Belle, 2017; Catalyst, 2018; Cherry, 2018; Crites et al., 2015; Folkman, 2015; Hoyt & Murphy, 2016; Koenig et al., Miller, 2017; Ratcliff, Vescio, & Dahl, 2015). The group being led, the leader in power, and the ever-changing resources and situations all merge to determine the type of leadership that a specific group or organization needs to be effective (Cherry, 2018).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this narrative inquiry study is to explore the barriers and opportunities women in K-12 leadership face, particularly with how they navigate conflicts in their work-life balance and in what ways they have been afforded opportunities. Work-life balance will be generally defined as the reconciliation of the conflicting demands and obligations between a women’s professional requirements and her personal life. Opportunities will be defined as events that lead to a woman’s career advancements and accomplishments.

Eagly and Carli (2007) suggested that modern organizations do not have glass ceilings blocking women from opportunity; opportunities are available to women. Eagly and Carli suggested a more appropriate metaphor for the barriers women face ascending into leadership is a labyrinth. It is a process of navigating the barriers to find the right path. Using a paradox lens (Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016; Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith, 2016) this research

investigated the challenges that are specific to women in leadership roles or females pursuing leadership roles. Tensions that cannot be reconciled arise from dual commands experienced by women as a result of societal expectations. Previous studies placed more focus on these conflicts (Cuddy et al., 2004; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010; Rudman & Glick, 1999), painting women as victims in the process of pursuing leadership roles.

According to the American Association of University Women (2016), our society should continue to strive to have a number of women and men in leadership positions that is proportional to the number of men and women in our communities. Organizations that meet this goal reap rewards beyond making political statements. Zenger Folkman, Inc. (2015) showed that women consistently outperformed men in the top ranked competencies of senior leadership and also had overwhelmingly leading scores on overall leadership effectiveness. Credit Suisse (2012) found that companies with women on their board had a higher return on investment than companies without women on their board. Furthermore, having more women in the workplace leading others influences the stringency with which people view gender roles, therefore underscoring the contradictions that women have to play a certain role according to societal norms (Zheng, Kark, & Meister, 2018). It is suggested that these stereotypical expectations that women are not meant to be leaders are directly linked to the shortage of females not pursuing leadership roles for which they would be a good fit (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016). Finally, successful women sharing their experiences and journeys, in both their pursuit and execution of their leadership role, can provide a source for women to obtain ideas for leadership development and strategies for success in order to better navigate the labyrinth in which they find themselves getting lost (Parks, 2018).

The overarching question of this research study is “What circumstances do females encounter as they aspire to and obtain leadership positions in K-12 public education?” The focus questions to guide this research are as follows:

1. What barriers do females report when aspiring to leadership positions in K-12 public education?
2. What opportunities do females report assisted them when aspiring to leadership positions in K-12 public education?
3. What barriers do females who have attained leadership positions in K-12 public education report that hinders them in their leadership role?
4. What opportunities do females who have attained leadership positions in K-12 public education report that assists them in their leadership role?

Significance and Rationale

Understanding women leaders and women’s experiences may help those working in education leadership know what changes to current practices and structures would help more women decide to pursue and find success in leadership roles. This understanding, yielded from increased equity, could lead to more women moving into and pursuing these leadership roles; a more equitable percentage of women represented in leadership; positive effects on students, faculty, staff, and education as a whole; and a positive shift in societal norms for women. An increase in the number of women leaders and a better understanding of the work-life balance would be symbolically important to higher education as they create models and structures to prepare and inform our future leaders, both men and women.

Organization of the Dissertation Chapters

Chapter 1 contains the purpose and context of this study. In order to understand the findings from the research questions, gender related stereotypes, work-life balance, and mentors, are critical concepts to explore and study. Therefore, an investigation of the research questions requires a preliminary understanding and a review of existing literature which will be detailed in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology for this qualitative, narrative inquiry-based study. Chapter 4 presents research findings thematically, and Chapter 5 concludes with interpretations and recommendations based on the themes and findings from Chapter 4. Appendices include the interview template (Appendix A), and sample outreach email (Appendix B).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many researchers investigated and reported the characteristics and attitudes necessary for women to be successful as leaders (Baecher-Lind, 2012; Dario, 2013; Diko, 2014; Hill, Miller, Benson, & Handley, 2016; Kemp, Madsen, & Davis, 2015; Latu, Ioana, Mast, Marianne, Schmid, Lammers, Joris, & Bombari, 2013; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Zheng et al., 2016). Although it is important for female leaders to be aware of and reflect upon what characteristics and attitudes are perceived to be necessary for success, it is also important to understand why researchers have come to these conclusions. Gender identity guides decision making, and females make many of their professional decisions in the context of cultural expectations and gender socialization (AAUW, 2016). The components of what some would define as worthy of leadership stem from the deeply embedded roots of cultural norms, some of which place barriers in front of women who could and would like to be leaders in their field. The inequalities women face start at the beginning of a woman's career and, overtime, can compound more barriers blocking their advancement opportunities (Parks, 2018). Gender identity mirrors one's understanding of self in terms of how that individual's culture defines female and male. It can be stereotypical, self-ascribed personal traits that are socially assigned to men and women, or it can be the importance of how closely one is associated with these traits that categorize one as female or male (Wood & Eagly, 2015). An analysis of literature on a wide variety of peer-reviewed journal articles was conducted. This analysis focused on characteristics of successful female leaders, stereotypes of women and men in their culture, the work-life balance which women face, and opportunities that are available to female leaders. This review of literature revealed that

while women in leadership positions are on the rise, the elements that impact success and perception of these women vary greatly depending on multiple factors.

Barriers

Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes, cognitive shortcuts that classify people based on their identified gender, lead to many gender perceptions and assumed generalizations (Northouse, 2015). Despite social norms becoming increasingly egalitarian, female leadership experiences continue to be plagued with gender-related obstacles (Hill, Miller, Benson, & Handley, 2016). Many studies have been conducted focused on stereotypes associated with leaders, women, and leaders who are women within their cultures (Baecher-Lind, 2012; Dario, 2013; Diko, 2014; Kemp, Madsen, & Davis, 2015; Latu, Ioana, Mast, Marianne, Schmid, Lammers, Joris, & Bombari, 2013; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Zheng et al., 2016). The examinations into these stereotypes included the challenges that female leaders face, the factors associated with those challenges, the experiences it creates for these women leaders, as well as how these stereotypes are posited to circumvent women from both striving for and obtaining leadership positions within their respective fields (Latu et al., 2013).

An example of such studies took place in South Africa, a patriarchal society whose government is trying to level the playing field for women in leadership by mandating requirements to increase the percentages of women in leadership (Diko, 2014; Gouws, 2008). Diko (2014) found that despite the government interference, women were still considered too emotional to be leaders. The authority of those females placed in leadership faced constant public undermining in both, separate studies, and furthermore, how deeply these stereotypes

were rooted due to the fact that even women going to the poles did not want to vote other women into power (Diko, 2014; Gouws, 2008).

Kemp, Madsen, and Davis (2015) collected data on the percentage of women in the workforce in the Arab Gulf States and investigated how stereotypes affected the low participation of women striving to obtain business leadership roles. The data collected included positions that women held within various organizations and analyzed and compared these by country, business classification, company size, and ownership and offered a statistical analysis to identify the influences that women experienced in pursuing and obtaining business leadership positions. The influences that were identified included the survival of patriarchal values, local or biased interpretations of Islam, public sector employment favoring women, women perceived as costly in terms of benefits required, women seen as more likely to be short-term employees, and local political and ethnic particularism. They concluded that the steep increase in the number of women graduates would lead to more women entering management positions in these countries, but these identified influences could have an effect on these graduates reaching a management level.

Kemp et al.'s (2015) findings supported Baecher-Lind's (2012) theory that suggested past stereotypes and the current percentage of women in leadership positions affects the perceptions of women not in leadership positions and deters them from attempting to obtain them. Female leaders in male-dominant occupations versus females in education, considered to be a women's field, who take on leadership roles faced additional challenges to those women in education. This study investigated if the percentage of women leaders in obstetrics and gynecology was proportional to the percentage of women who were entering into the field of obstetrics and gynecology in that same year (Baecher-Lind, 2012). They concluded that women are highly

under-represented as leaders in the field of obstetrics and gynecology compared to the number of women entering obstetrics and gynecology.

The same holds true for women in education in key leadership positions such as superintendent. While 76% of women make-up the American workforce as teachers in education, a disproportionate number of females can be found in the role of superintendent which is comprised of only 23% females. (American Association of School Administrators, 2016). Yates (2005) cited mentoring, peer coaching, and providing time for directors to network, collaborate, and receive quality professional development as practices that are essential to retaining these female leaders once they do reach their leadership position as superintendents. These are practices that are not mentioned in the studies where women hold leadership positions in male-dominant fields. Naholi (2008) investigated how female faculty leaders are perceived among their peers and administration as well as how they perceived their own roles in leadership and cited stereotypical thinking in the community, lower salaries than equal male counterparts, sexual discrimination, and lack of role models as barriers to their upward mobility and success.

Gray (1992) has shown perceptions of effectiveness in how men and women are viewed as leaders is disjointed and affected by societal stereotypes that continue to perpetuate themselves. Gray suggested that men and women have difficulty communicating and working together because they have needs, desires and behaviors that are specific to their gender, and therefore, need to understand each other in order to be able to work effectively together. Although there is something to be said about knowing and understanding the differences between genders in order to successfully communicate with one another, this shows how distinctly different many of psychologists claim that men and women are from one another and can explain the stereotypes and hardships that women then face as they are trying to lead others.

Many studies identified differences in the leadership styles of women and men due to the behavioral predisposition of their gender (Cryer, 2012; Latu et al., 2013; Naholi, 2008; Yates, 2005). A woman with a strong gender identity, from a trait perspective, is more likely to exhibit communal attributes (Wood & Eagly, 2012; Zheng, Kark, & Mesiter, 2018). Yates (2005) suggested knowing these characteristics is important for women to be able to attain key leadership roles in the workplace. Other studies referenced the fact that women as a gender tend to exhibit more transformational leadership behaviors rather than transactional leadership behaviors than men due to gender and also discussed why this is a positive leadership attribute to have in 21st century leadership (Cryer, 2012; Naholi, 2008). Yates (2005) posited that women do tend to have transformational leadership styles, but additionally that transformational leadership is necessary for women to be successful as leaders.

The concept of leadership in American society is associated with the image of white males and their attributes: aggressive, decisive, willing to engage in conflict, assertive, etc. (AAUW, 2016). Therefore, men are widely viewed as default leaders, confirming the stereotype that women take care and men take charge (Catalyst, 2018). While female leaders make up 54% of principals across the nation, 68% of elementary school principals are female while only 32% high school principals are women (Taie & Goldring, 2017). Women, while it seems have equal footing in the highest leading position in a school, are leading in positions overseeing young and developing students, who require more care and nurture, while men are overwhelmingly leading older, high school students who require more guidance and discipline.

Men are socialized to be confident, assertive, and self-promoting (Enloe, 2004) while culturally it is still considered inappropriate for women to have these characteristics (AAUW, 2016). In a meta-analysis of 69 studies on leadership and stereotypes, Koenig et al. (2011) found

that stereotypes associated with leadership are decidedly masculine, and Crites et al. (2015), defined stereotypical male characteristics as independent, aggressive, competitive, rational, dominant, and objective, all of which are considered traits of leaders. With respect to their gender cultural expectations, it is considered conventional for women to display more communal characteristics in such ways as being helpful, affectionate, sympathetic, kind, sensitive, gentle, and nurturing (Zheng et al., 2018). On the other hand, men are expected to display those stereotypical male characteristics that are also aligned with those of the cultural, deep-rooted societal stereotypes of leadership (Kark at al., 2012) because of the assumption that leadership is meant for men (Koenig et al., 2011).

Women who strive to possess leadership positions are then expected to echo these stereotypical leader characteristics by demonstrating more agency (Zheg et al., 2018). However, women in leadership positions are expected to demonstrate communion simultaneously in order to fulfill their societal gender role expectations. Failure for women leaders to demonstrate these gender expectations of communion while also showing agency usually result in adverse reactions from both subordinates and supervisors which male leaders do not experience (Williams & Tiedens, 2016; Zheng et al., 2018). These expectations of both communion and agency from female leaders can propagate tension and anxiety, because acts of communion and agency can often be inconsistent and contradictory. Conceptually, agency and communion are two modalities with fundamental differences in the existence of living forms (Zheng et al., 2018). While agency has an individual focus with self-interest, such as self-advancement and achievement, communion, on the contrary, has self-transcendence, nurturing others, and interdependence at its core (Frimer, Walker, Dunlop, Lee, & Riches, 2011).

Females who identify strongly with their gender are more likely to have gender role attitudes that align with stereotypical social norms for females and subscribe to more traditional gender roles (Abrams, Thomas, & Hogg, 2011; Cadinu & Galdi, 2012). The amount to which a female subscribes to her societal gender identity has been found to be positively correlated to the amount of tension she experiences from the clashing expectations of being both a leader with agency and a communal female (Karellaia & Guillén, 2014). Tensions are elevated due to the conflicting feeling of who she is personally as a female against who she is expected to be at work as a leader. This dissonance can also generate other negative affects, such as anxiety, uncertainty, and ambiguity, making conflicted female leaders feel frustrated, threatened, and defensive (Kark et al., 2016). Another point of frustration for female leaders, those who do not have a strong gender identity and subscribe to communal norms as expected as a female, experience a different form of backlash for lacking communal behaviors and displaying those of agency. Zheng et al. (2018), found that perceived agency can lead to the assumption of an absence of communion for women, but those same assumptions do not apply to men. This leads to a potential trade-off for women in leadership positions; ambitious women may have to choose between being liked but not respected, displaying communal attributes, or being respected and not liked, displaying agentic qualities, a dilemma not faced by men (Rudman & Phelan, 2008).

Women's societal gender expectations can extend beyond their own internal conflicts and their perceived likeability. The stereotype of women as nurturers can backfire when supervisors or peers expect women to take certain positions or responsibilities associated with caregiving, which is discriminatory and derogatory (Heilman, 2012). Williams (2004) and Budig (2004) found that these stereotypes of women playing mother can negatively affect women pursuing leadership roles beyond being a perceived caregiver when the female in question is an actual

mother. Williams (2004) found that having children can negatively affect women pursuing leadership roles by causing employers to make negative assumptions about the mother's commitment and competence referred to as a "maternal wall" of bias that is a magnitude greater than other biases women experience. These employers believe the mother's responsibilities as a caregiver for her children make her an inappropriate choice for a demanding leadership position. Likewise, Budig (2004) determined that women see an average 4% decrease in earnings for each child that they have, while men see a 6% increase for each even after controlling the factors such as number of hours that they worked and their marital status. The findings by Williams (2004) and Budig (2004) suggested there exists a deep-rooted, cultural bias that men can have children and acquire leadership positions without question, while women face judgement and hardships for having aspirations for simultaneously having children and leading in their field.

With such heightened focus on how women lead according to their gender related style, Cryer (2012) conducted interviews with female leaders to determine how they felt about their leadership abilities and characteristics. These female leaders perceived themselves as humanitarian and relational. These female leaders also associated themselves with stereotypically female attributes. Some researchers suggested this is a step in the right direction for redefining what an effective leader looks like (Cryer, 2012; Flanagan, 2017; Hayden et al., 2018; Roebuck & Smith, 2013; Sandberg, 2013; Saxon, 2017). Flanagan (2017) stated in a blog calling for more female leaders, that the feminine ethos is the core of what is best for humanity. She argued that it is ok to view women as nurturers and bearers of life. This should not be perceived as negative, derogatory, or weak for leaders to have these feminine qualities, because these qualities are tough in their own ways. Flanagan claimed instead, that ignoring or purposefully sidelining the skills and talents women can bring to all aspects of leadership skew

organizations and society in damaging ways. The answer is not to make women conform to the ideal that society holds for leadership, but rather to have more examples of female leaders and the different ways in which they can be effective.

The Queen Bee Phenomenon (QBP) refers to the situation in which women who succeed in male-dominated settings play a negative role in the development and advancement of other females within her organization (Arvate et al., 2018). The premise is that a colony of bees can only have one queen bee at a time. The queen bee staves off her competition by not allowing any other female bees to gain any power. There are currently studies that claim the QBP is still alive and harming female employees while others that claim it is a myth (Derks et al., 2011; Faniko, Ellemers, Derks, & Lorenizi-Cioldi, 2017; Gabriel, Butts, Yuan, Rosen, & Sliter, 2018; Kaiser & Spaulding, 2015; Zheng, 2018). Research in support of the theory suggested that senior women or women in leadership positions are more likely to discriminate against other women (Moss-Racusin, Dovidio, Brescoll, Graham, & Handelsmann, 2012), hold negative stereotypes about their female students (Gabriel et al., 2018), and block promotions from other women (Johnson & Mathur-Helm, 2011). Arvate et al. (2018), claimed that what was holding women back from advancing was not other women, as suggested by the QBP, but rather the importance of influence through “the Role Model Effect.” While some studies reported that females have the predisposition that only men are suitable for management roles, because they demonstrate more confidence and have a better performance, Arvate et al. (2018) investigated their hypothesis that there must be other factors that invoke this reaction from women. What they found is that there was a pro-female casual effect of female leadership in public organizations when more female leaders were a part of the organization. Their conclusion was that the more female individuals that are seen in positions of power, the less the stereotype that leadership is male-oriented,

therefore, changing what is considered the norm and encouraging more women to seek leadership positions. This would occur through increased self-esteem in women in these previously male-oriented environments, and by allowing female leaders the opportunity to provide additional influence and inspiration as a role model. Zheng et al. (2018) reported similar findings, stating that when people are exposed to more leadership roles occupied by females, their leader role expectations become more associated with women and communion. This new association with leadership, women, and communion will then reduce the incongruity between the perception of what constitutes a leader role and the female gender role.

Koenig et al. (2011) found that leadership positions with more female representation in female dominated fields, or in fields in which have majority women subordinates, have leader role expectations that are more associated with female attributes and females, such as communion, whereas, leadership positions in more male dominated fields, or in fields in which have majority men subordinates, leader role expectations are more commonly associated with men and agency. Ely (1995) found that in gender balanced organizations, women were more comfortable integrating masculine expressions and attributes with their expressions of femininity, and they experienced less anxiety, ambivalence, and tension about feeling required to act more masculine in their leadership roles at work. Carroll (1994) also found that when the number of women in political leadership roles rose, beliefs about the appropriateness for women in politics was transformed, and simultaneously, increased women's interest in political issues. Arvate et al. (2018) stated that the presence of female candidates in politics has a positive effect on women's political engagement, resulting in a broader political discussion, showing higher engagement with younger females in politics, and has a greater impact on whole family participation and discussion about politics.

Implicit Bias

Social psychologists Greenwald and Banajo (1995) originally introduced the concept of implicit bias which suggests that individual's actions are not always under their conscious control. Banajo and Greenwald expanded this research in 2016, claiming that implicit bias often expresses itself through in-group favoritism, which is not easy to detect. Gladwell (2005) claimed that we all have implicit bias to some degree. Gladwell was not implying that all people act in a derogatory or inappropriate manner, but he did imply that we have been preprogrammed, through previous experiences, to initially interpret information in a biased way. Gladwell also claimed that implicit bias is critical to informed decision making to acknowledge and understand these implicit responses, particularly when those decisions need to embody fairness and justice. Bigelow, Lundmark, Parks, and Wuebker (2014) designed and conducted a study investigating implicit bias. The researchers recorded responses to a simulated initial public offering (IPO) based on a real, successful one. After manipulating the gender demographics of the IPO's top management team, participants viewed female CEOs as less competent than the male CEOs, despite showing identical firm finances and qualifications. Ratcliff, Vescio, and Dahl (2015) found that participants in hypothetical leadership roles were more likely to relinquish power to male-coworkers, and they were more likely to view men as more capable than women. Buchanan, Warning, and Tett (2012) stated that female workers show particular implicit bias against female bosses. Results showed a negative correlation between the number of jobs a woman has held and her preference for a female superior. Buchanan et al., did not find similar results for male participants. Similar findings were reported that female reactions to women's non-traditional behavioral roles were more negative than to that of men. Research has shown that female subordinates were harder on their female superiors than on their male superiors, showed

more gender bias when choosing work colleagues, and consistently chose more assertive men over women even though candidates from both genders were both equally and highly qualified (Rhee & Sigler, 2015). The American Association for University Women (AAUW) agreed with studies reporting that women preferring male superiors but suggested this a direct result of the role incongruity that women face when they are in leadership positions. Women often experience resistance or backlash if their leadership approach conflicts with gender expectations. Men do not experience this reaction, because these traits are consistent with masculine norms. This lack of resistance experienced by men in comparison to women makes men more comfortable actively pursuing more leadership positions without the same fear of backlash.

Work-Life Balance

Balancing family and professional responsibilities is one of the most challenging obstacles for women seeking leadership positions (Sandberg, 2013). Work-life balance is a term for describing the policies and practices of the home and workplace that acknowledges the conflicting demands between the two worlds with the intention of achieving balance between the them (Jyothi & Jyothi, 2012). Eighty-nine percent of American workers reported that work-life balance is a problem (Roebuck & Smith, 2013). Having a demanding career as a woman requires sacrifices, personal decisions, and societal judgments that are different than those faced by men in demanding leadership roles (Parks, 2018). Women can feel profoundly conflicted, more so than men, about leaving their children when they go to work. Female leaders experiencing work-life issues reported that all of their balance issues had to do with caregiving (Roebuck & Smith, 2013). Deciding between paid employment and staying at home can feel like a choice for many women between devoting time to their family and leaving their career versus staying with their career while they have momentum and opportunity and leaving their children to be raised by

someone else (AAUW, 2016). Female leaders who face incongruities between their gender role expectations and their leader role expectations are expected to display more communal characteristics such as being a nurturer and caregiver and are socially expected to turn more attention to their family when they are mothers (Zheng & Surgevil, 2016). Because of this expectation, women are more likely to work part-time (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016), work irregular hours, spend time out of the workforce, become the primary caregiver parent during their peak years in the workforce (Rose & Hartmann, 2008), and take more time off for family commitments than men (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Roebuck and Smith (2013) found that 90% of women leaving the workforce cited that they were the spouse solely responsible for domestic responsibilities and childcare in their family, and most women tended to sacrifice demands at work to meet the needs of their families. If traditional roles are the social norm at home and work, this increases the difficulty for women to rise into the highest levels of leadership. Sandberg (2013) suggested that women may not be pursuing leadership roles for which they are qualified because they accept more than half of the domestic and childcare responsibilities. Another study reported the main reason for women not pursuing leadership positions was the conflicting demands of family responsibilities with the demanding obligations of leadership positions (Roebuck & Smith, 2013). Women without access to paid leave are significantly more likely not to return to their position after having children than those whose employers offer family-friendly policies (Laughlin, 2011). Furthermore, when employers do provide access to family friendly benefits, females are reluctant to use them out of fear that their work commitment will be questioned (Klerman et al., 2012). Another study found that men are less likely to cite work-life balance as a reason for leaving their career and less likely to leave their current position to follow their partner (Sprunt et al., 2013).

McGinn, Castro, and Lingo (2018) investigated the difference in outcomes of children raised by stay at home moms versus working moms. McGinn et al. (2018) found that daughters of employed mothers are more likely to be employed, become leaders, work more hours, earn higher wages, and spend less time on housework than adult daughters of women whose mothers were at home full-time. For sons of working mothers, there were no significant outcomes on labor market effects, but these adult sons were more likely to spend time caring for family members than men whose mothers who stayed at home. Therefore, concluding there are no direct benefits to the adult outcomes for children whose mothers leave their careers to focus on raising their children. However, there still exists a deeply embedded set of societal expectations and conflicting demands of the female gender role with communion and that of the leader role with agency (Zheng et al. 2018).

Career and Family Planning

The time in a woman's career in which she is establishing herself and picking up momentum generally coincides with the time in which she is mostly likely to be having children, leaving women with decisions about their career that men do not generally face. The career path of a female is understood to be more complex than that of a man, as the decisions to leave room for accommodations for her family are a societal expectation (Ussher et al., 2015). Nowak, Naude, and Thomas (2013) reported that women in the workforce acknowledge the existence of these complexities which, in turn, reduced the opportunity for advancements, restricted training and growth, and resulted in numerous career constraints due to the decision to have a family. Studying childless women at the beginning stages of their careers and how they make career decisions with the consideration of having a family in the future is worthy of research. Ussher, Roche, & Cable (2015) defined career commitment as an individual's commitment to their

career, their efforts and commitment towards the development of their individual professional goals, their professional advancement, and their persistence in their efforts to achieve these personally developed goals. Sandberg (2013) pointed out that women get the necessary education and entry positions needed for career commitment, but in the early stages of their career often hold themselves back by making decisions for a family that does not yet exist. She suggested that planning too far in advance could close doors of opportunity rather than open them, further adding to the gender leadership gap. This happens as a result of making a lot of small decisions along the way, rather than one decision to leave the workforce, that serve as sacrifices and accommodations believed to be a requirement for having a family. Therefore, preemptively planning to accommodate for a family that does not yet exist stunts the growth of a woman's career planning, engagement, development, and subsequently, her opportunity for leadership roles. Schueller-Weidekamm and Kautzky-Willer (2012) had similar findings and reported that long term career planning is hindered by family planning. Furthermore, loss of long term career planning negatively affects career development (Ussher et al., 2015).

The phenomenon of "women leaving before they leave" was developed by Sandberg (2013, p.93) and is defined as the hesitation a women experiences to accept career opportunities, challenges, and advancement based on the expectation that she needs to make preparations and accommodation for a family that she does not yet have. Additional research by Ganginis Del Pino, O'Brien, Mereish, and Miller (2013) further supported the idea that a woman's career commitment is influenced by her future plans to have children. This suggests that women turn down leadership opportunities due to anticipating future children and the fear that work commitment will hinder her ability to raise children. Overall, research supports that a woman's commitment to the advancement and growth of her career can be negatively affected by her

resistance towards career development based on the perception that a career can be too demanding to allow for future child rearing. Therefore, the trajectory of a woman's career can be plotted based on what she defines as most important to her life, whether that is to have a family, not have children, compromise her career to have a family, or integrate a family with a career.

Maternal Gatekeeping

One solution to the proposed work-life balance issue that women face when trying to achieve harmony between work commitments and family obligations is having a partner who supports her efforts for advancement and also agrees to split household chores that were originally socially assigned to females in the family (Gupton, 2009). Sandberg (2013), suggested that if women are fighting for more opportunity at work, they have to also acknowledge that men will, in turn, need to be more empowered at home. She explained that women often complain about having to carry the burden of all the chores in the home, but then unconsciously block their partners from doing their fair share by being too controlling or critical. This act of inadvertent impediment is referred to as Maternal Gatekeeping. Maternal gatekeeping describes the ways in which mothers circumvent or support father involvement with children and housework (Puhlman & Kay, 2017; Radcliffe & Cassell, 2014). Gaunt and Pinho (2018), investigated the outcomes of this type of behavior and found that mothers who had maternal gatekeeping tendencies had a greater investment of time into childcare and a greater share of childcare tasks relative to the father. Gaunt and Pinho concluded that the gatekeeper mindset was a mechanism through which sexist ideologies were being perpetuated by women and translating into daily behavior patterns for both parents. Gaunt and Pinho suggested that this mechanism should be investigated further as a tool to inform parents through interventions with the intention of increasing collaborative partner work and childcare participation of fathers. While studies find gatekeeping behaviors

have a negative effect on father participation and the father-child relationship, other studies have found similar effects with the mother-adolescent relationships. Holmes, Dunn, Harper, Dyer, and Day (2013), found that inhibitory gatekeeping negatively influences the relationships between mothers and their adolescents. Sandberg (2013) acknowledged that women having trouble letting go of the control of childrearing can start by delegating tasks to their partner, but warns that this behavior is also counterproductive to the overall goal of empowering the partner to have an equal parenting role. The end goal should be for each partner to be in charge of something specific, so that partners are doing their part rather than doing the maternal gatekeeper a favor when participating in childcare or household chores.

Many female leaders stress the importance of sharing what were typically considered women's responsibilities with their spouses. Sandberg (2013) stated that with absolutely no exceptions has she seen a woman in a leadership position whose life partner was not fully supportive of her goals and career. She further acknowledged that 26 of the 28 women who have served as CEOs of Fortune 500 companies were married and admitted their success was made possible through the support of their husbands with children, household chores, and being willing to move. Gupton (2009) found when interviewing successful women leaders on how they managed work responsibilities against family obligations that the most frequent response was that support for their efforts was necessary both professionally and personally, and that an essential piece of their success was due in part to their support from family or close personal relationships. When Harvard Business School professor Kanter (2010) was asked at a conference what men could do to help women's leadership, she quipped, "The laundry." Parks (2018) had high-level executives discuss how they have attempted to achieve a work-life balance. One of those executives, Lukosevicius, a senior manager of a public accounting firm, supported the

approach of female leaders sharing responsibilities with their partner. Lukosevicius pointed in Parks (2018) report that every woman's family will have unique needs, and therefore there is no one size fits all approach to successfully achieving a good balance of both work and personal lives. However, Lukosevicius also stated that every successful recipe contains women in leadership roles surrounding herself with people who support and believe in what she is doing professionally and the need to communicate and collaborate with those people whom support her (Parks, 2018). McDonald, an account director for IBM, echoed that there is no one approach to achieving the perfect balance (Parks, 2018). Her advice is to control where one spends her time and energy, but not on a day to day basis. McDonald instead sets long term goals and objectives that span months or, sometimes years. If she feels she has lost control, she will then reevaluate priorities for both work and her personal life, see where time is going, and be disciplined about meeting her newly set objectives. Van Berne, the CFO of Amsterdam-based RIPE Network Coordination Center, said not to worry about trivial things, delegate what you can, always place spending time with people that are important to you at the top of your priority list, and make sure to share and manage household responsibilities with the right partner (Parks, 2018).

Paradox-Dilemma Mindset

Crum, Salovey, and Achor (2013) researched on the mindset of women facing these paradoxical decisions and found that the mindset, or the lens through which employed women viewed these conflicting scenarios, is a mental frame that selectively organizes and encodes information, thereby creating a unique way of understanding their own experience individually. Consequently, when faced with the perils of the agency-communion tensions experienced by working women, women leaders will naturally interpret their experiences as a result of their own mindset, which will have different outcomes depending on the lens through which they are

looking at the issue. Zheng, Kark, and Meister (2018) conducted further research to scaffold onto the findings of Crum et al. (2013). Acknowledging that these tensions exist for women leaders, a paradox lens was used to develop a theory whose aim was to explain how female leaders experience and respond to these pervasive and contradictory demands of agency and communion. Using a paradox lens (Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016; Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith, 2016), research was focused on the dual agencies and communal demands which seem to be the central challenge faced by women in leadership positions. Where previous works zoned in on the conflicts women leaders face (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010; Rudman & Glick, 1999), this research explored possible interrelations and synergies that exist between the two characteristics. Zheng et al. (2018) postulated that a paradox mindset strengthens gender-leader identity coexistence, whereas a dilemma mindset fosters a gender-leader identity separation. A cognitive mechanism, activating a paradox mindset (Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith, & Lewis, 2017) is the solution to diffusing these tensions that exist between the agency and communion expectations experienced by female leaders, which in turn will strengthen the women leaders' resilience, gender identity and leader identity synchronicity, and her overall leadership effectiveness. Using a paradox perspective can allow women to go beyond a single lens of agency and communion of societal expectations viewed as mutually exclusive, and explore a variety of options in which female leaders could respond to both their conflicts and interrelations (Zheng et al., 2018). The paradox mindset is one in which simultaneous existence of the competing forces of agency and communions are mental templates that can be melded together in a way that these contradictory pulls can be recognized and accepted (Smith & Tushman, 2005). Within this mindset, former contradictions can be seen as potentially complementary, inherent, and mutually reinforcing (Smith & Lewis, 2011). This

approach to mindset can generate new meanings, combinations, and solutions when women leaders are faced with contradictory elements, therefore, highlighting more possibilities (Lewis, 2000). Dissimilarly, women could also adopt a dilemma mindset, where the female leader does see the realms of agency and communion as two competing characteristics that are mutually exclusive, opposing poles. In response, she will attempt to solve problems by giving priority to one pole over the other (Smith, 2014).

Further research (Imhoff & Koch, 2017) revealed both interrelations and tradeoffs between agency and communion. Some women can be considered high in both agency and communion (Kark et al., 2012; Roche, Pincus, Hyde, Conroy, & Ram, 2013), however, perceptions of a female's agency can affect her perceived communion, and inversely, perceptions of a female's communion can affect her perceived agency (Cuddy et al., 2004). Imhoff and Koch (2017) found that across groups and individuals the relationship between agency and communion is curvilinear. When an individual's agency is measured as below average, there exists a positive correlation between agency and communion. However, when the individual's agency is perceived to be above average, this has a negative relationship between agency and communions. Because most females in leadership roles are seen as high in agency, women leaders are sometimes forced to make a trade-off between agency and communion.

In a study of the paradox mindset, Miron-Spektor et al. (2017), validated a new instrument on which to test this mindset using data from eight samples in four countries. They reported that a paradox mindset can assist individuals with leveraging tensions to improve performance and innovation. Earlier research (Miron-Spektor, Gino, & Argote, 2011) concluded that a paradox mindset can be groomed and primed and has a positive influence on creativity. Therefore, a paradox mindset can allow female leaders the opportunity to embrace the

coexistence of agency and communion in their repertoire, rather than see them as roles that stand in opposition of one another. This gives women leaders the power to engage in paradox management strategies that are designed to explore coexistence between their two seemingly opposite expectations, giving rise to ampler possibilities and creativity in problem solving. A successful example of this paradox mindset includes the integrator profile in Ely's (1995) involving professional women working in law firms. In the women's descriptions of what they believed to enhance their ability to be successful in their environment, the female professionals drew on both agency and communion in their self-descriptions.

With a paradox mindset, rather than a dilemma mindset, accepting and embracing the pressures between the opposing poles augments one's ability to see an opportunity rather than a threat (Kark et al., 2012). Acceptance allows one to become more comfortable with the tension and unease these conflicting expectations provoke in women (Ingram, Lewis, Andriopoulos, & Gotines, 2008). Meaning, a person with a paradox mindset has the benefit of approaching a problem, that could have been stressful, instead as a valuable learning experience. Psychological research points out the habit of embracing contradictions as an instrument for handling life's challenges is important (Lomranz & Benyamini, 2016). This approach to problem solving has been shown to result in improved health and well-being. Therefore, women who engage in a paradox mindset when experiencing conflictual pulls between agency and communion can better accept their conflicts, use their challenges as growth opportunities in their leadership abilities, raise their level of resilience in the face of problems, and improve their overall well-being (Zheng et al., 2018).

Work-Life Integration

The paradox mindset versus the dilemma mindset sheds light onto the fact that work and life are not best approached as two entities that are meant to be kept compartmentalized. Jyothi and Jyothi (2012) found that a practical work-life balance should not be seen as a proportionate amount of work and personal activities, but instead should involve ample achievement and enjoyment in both. Slaughter (2012) suggested that seeking balance is not just a women's issue, but a problem plaguing both men and women in leadership. Roebuck and Smith (2013) theorized that the answer to the work-life balance is not balancing, but rather integration. However, women are more likely than men to seek part-time work, child care availability, and work flexibility in order to improve the balance between their work and personal life. Roebuck and Smith (2013) stated a man and a woman who both hold top leadership positions and share a home life together have three possible options for achieving a home-life balance:

- Double career model: Attempting to lead two symmetrical careers at once; both putting in long hours at work to show commitment to the career.
- Alternate model: Managing the two careers alternatively, with an understanding that the woman is more likely to accept a temporary disruption to her career for the benefit of the husband's career.
- Family-oriented model: One partner, usually the woman, making sacrifices to her career in order to reconcile the imbalance between work and family.

Emslie and Hunt (2009) stated that how a family responds to managing the work-life balance depends on the socioeconomic status and cultural norms of the family. Those with limited resources have fewer options and flexibility than middle class women. Slaughter (2012) had similar findings, stating that many women are not worried about having it all, but instead, they

are worried about maintaining what they already have. Slaughter further posited that the true gender gap is not in the difference in pay, although that is an issue, but rather the measure of well-being between men and women.

Technology

Advancements in technology are blurring the lines between work and home, allowing for further integration (Roebuck & Smith, 2013). What was once considered two distinct realms are now on a continuum (Currie & Eveline, 2011). While technology offers flexibility with work hours and locations, it can also invade personal time at a cost to the family (Sarker, Sarker, & Ahuja, 2012). Thurston (2012) suggested that technology is a threat rather than a benefit to work-life balance, not allowing for any escape from the demands of work. However, Roebuck and Smith (2013) stated that technology assists with the work-life balance, allowing employees to carry out family responsibilities during work, but also allowing work to be completed while with the family. Sonier (2012) found that many employees value efficiency over face-time, and they enjoy the flexibility that technology offers for the balancing of work and family life.

Opportunities

Opportunity for women pursuing and attaining leadership positions is at a historical, all-time high. Currently, 127 women hold the 535 possible seats in the United States Congress, making up almost 24% of its members. Of those 127 women, exactly one quarter serve in the U.S. Senate, 15 of whom were either newly elected or re-elected in the 2018 election cycle. The remaining 102 females serve in the U.S. House of Representatives, embodying 23% of those members (Center for American Women and Politics, 2019). As women continue to gain momentum in representation that mirrors the ratio of females contained within in our population, and while there are barriers that can act as roadblocks or speedbumps for women in pursuit of

these roles, females need to be aware of and prepared to take advantage of all the opportunities that are available to them. The Center for American Women and Politics pointed out where opportunities seem to be gaining the most support from the public. The center reports that California delegates have sent more women to Congress than any other state with 43 to date, while New York State comes in second with 29 total women. Only Vermont has yet to elect a woman to either the House or the Senate. While different regions and social norms hold different opportunities for females, women should educate themselves on where those opportunities lie and be open to placing themselves in favorable circumstances. With increasing momentum for female representation in leadership roles, women need to take advantage of all of the opportunities available to them to grow and gain the knowledge needed to be an effective leader. Researchers have uncovered opportunities that include volunteering to gain experience, networking to expand professional relationships and scope of influence, and having a mentor and role model to help guide decision making and professional growth, and these findings are sprinkled with advice that successful women leaders have shared with other females that aspire to also step into leadership roles.

Volunteering

Although formal leadership positions have not always been available to women, headway to where we are today has been made by the important institutions and monumental movements that women have led through volunteer leadership. These opportunities, in turn, led to pathways for women's leadership opportunities in the paid sector (AAUW, 2016). In Gupton's (2009) interview of successful female leaders, women often mentioned the importance of taking the initiative and volunteering for the job that would challenge and grow their skillset, show their willingness and initiative, and enhance their resumes. These women pointed out that these

voluntary leadership experiences demonstrated the most powerful evidence of their abilities when it came time to communicate to prospective employers what they have to offer as a young or emerging administrative candidate.

Saxon (2017), the senior director of professional strategy for Bausch + Lomb, accredits one of her most important and pivotal leadership experiences by making her own opportunities through volunteering to lead a new initiative when she saw a void in what was available to both men and women at her University. She was aware that other optometry schools offered externship opportunities at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center (WRNMMC), one of the America's biggest and most acclaimed medical centers. As a student at State University of New York College of Optometry (SUNY) this opportunity was not available to her or other students at her university. After taking the initiative to get the externship program added at SUNY, she suddenly found herself collaborating with both the president of the university and the United States military to make the externship an opportunity available to all SUNY students. This opened many doors for Saxon as well as advance her skillset. Within 6 months, she happily joined WRNMMC as the first SUNY student in their newly successfully qualified externship program, and she did so with new networks, contacts, and qualifications. Saxon encouraged females to pursue something in their career that may have not been attempted before or may even seem impossible by embracing change, even if it involves risk, and by having the courage to create your own opportunities where it seems like none may exist. She firmly posited that female leadership careers are made by seeking out voluntary pathways that are both visible and non-visible.

Hudoba (2014) agreed that volunteering is a great way to sharpen leadership skills and set yourself apart from your peers by cultivating professional skills that may not be achievable in a non-professional setting and provides experiences that are imperative for ambitious leaders.

Volunteering as a leader outside of your workplace allows the aspiring leader to practice leading others and provide a safe place to make mistakes, as new leaders often do. Furthermore, Hudoba pointed out, that respect, goodwill, and altruism are all necessary qualities for successful leaders, and can be honed over time in volunteer positions. While the U.S. Department of Labor Statistics (2015) reported that volunteerism in the United States has been in decline since 2002, with the rate dropping for women, in particular, from 28.3% to 27.8% from 2014 to 2015, this shows a viable avenue for which women to set themselves apart from their peers while gaining and honing new skills.

Carlton's (2015) argument that individuals who are traditionally marginalized by society, refugees in this case, can further their opportunities, personal well-being, belonging, and leadership skills through volunteering. She conducted a study of refugee youth in which she investigated two youth created and driven initiatives that immediately assisted residents with immediate post-disaster relief and clean-up following each of the major earthquakes in Canterbury. Carlton found that the act of volunteering allowed participants to both contribute to the betterment of their local community while also giving these refugees the opportunity to help develop their sense of self as leaders, and she particularly noted that the context of their newly found leadership skills centered around helping others. Rothwell and Charleston (2013), studied 406 respondents in three different countries completing international volunteering expeditions and found that individuals whose engagement with international volunteering was for reasons such as building their resume will most likely lead to failure and negative experiences as

opposed to individuals with altruistic motives and engagement were more likely to experience significant development in their leadership skills. Through these research findings one can assume that volunteering, where true passion lies and positive changes are to be made, creates new opportunities for early leaders and hone important leadership skills that, otherwise, one may not get a chance to practice.

Networking

Access to influential networks is integral to growing one's professional skillset and moving up in the leadership hierarchy. Some researchers have found that social capital gained from networking with top leaders is even more important for advancement than job performance (AAUW, 2016; Arvate et al., 2018; Catalyst, 2011; Kark et al., 2012; Sandberg, 2013; Zheng et al., 2018). Networking can sometimes be difficult for women for a number of reasons. According to the AAUW, women with significant family responsibilities may not have the time to build social networks or meet work colleagues after work hours. Furthermore, if a woman does have additional time for outings, the meetings outside of work can sometimes revolve around activities that are considered masculine such as golf, hunting, or playing cards. According to Parks (2018), women need to get involved in something that interests or is important to them. It offers the opportunity to stand out, expand your circle of contacts, and develop relationships with people both inside and outside of their organization. She suggested the best way to network is by researching, asking questions, volunteering, seeking feedback, and connecting with people both inside and outside of your organization.

Mentors and Role Models

Mentorship is vital to growing a career in leadership for both men and women. A mentor is considered a close advisor who has developed a personal interest in investing time and energy

into a person, usually below them in the organizational hierarchy, in order to successfully guide them through one or more stages in their career. The process of mentoring benefits the protégé through socialization which allows the protégé to gain a deeper understanding of the organizational structure, cultures, values and expectations. It also increases motivation and learning; offers protégés more promotional opportunities, higher job satisfaction, and increased retention; introduces the protégé to important member of the organization; and builds more self-confidence (Dow, 2014). According to Ghosh and Reio (2013), being a mentor is defined as discussing career options and dilemmas with their protégés; providing coaching, exposure, visibility, protection, and challenging work assignments; actively nominating protégés for projects and promotions; advocating for their abilities; providing access to information only accessed by higher-levels; sharing their career histories, successes, and mistakes; suggesting specific strategies to achieve career goals, and providing assistance in job-related skills and knowledge. Women with effective mentors are more likely to ask for additional opportunities and pay raises than their counterparts without a mentor (Sandberg, 2013). Saxon (2017) credited many of her achievements as a leader to guidance from a diversified set of mentors in different stages of her career that allowed her to connect and collaborate with other women, cultivate relationships, get answers to questions, share ideas and insights, and seek out opportunities that otherwise may not have been available.

Catalyst (2011) suggested that women and men are both equally likely to have mentors. However, they also suggested that men potentially have greater benefits from this opportunity when looking at outcomes such as salary and promotions. Additionally, Sandberg (2013) noted that men can more easily acquire and maintain mentor- protégé relationships. Nevertheless, women need to position themselves with mentors and role models in order to expand their

knowledge and ensure new experiences with guidance are provided. Searching for a mentor should be done with purpose and strategy. While many females seeking leadership positions are generally assertive women who are willing to go pursue mentors on their own, a mentor- protégé relationship is generally a connection that is acquired on both sides and grows from a real, existing relationship. Finding the right mentor can be difficult according to Sandberg. She likened securing a good mentor to waiting for Prince Charming. A female needing a mentor cannot just wait for one to present itself. Dow (2014) showed that potential protégés are selected by mentors for mentorship based on potential and performance. A potential mentor will be investing a lot of time into the mentor- protégé relationship and will want to be positive the time is worthwhile with a protégé that has shown evidence of desire and potential to grow professionally, is open to feedback, and can provide a return on their investment that will benefit both parties. Therefore, rather than looking for a mentor, a female with aspirations would want to create and maintain relationships with leaders and excel at her current assignments in order to attract and secure effective mentors.

While an aspiring female would more than likely prefer a female mentor that has had similar challenges and experiences, the lopsided number of women to men in leadership positions sometimes make it difficult for women to find this match. In order to ensure all aspiring leaders have a chance to have an effective mentor, senior men need to be willing to mentor, coach and advocate for junior women in their organizations (Sandberg, 2013). A study by the Center for Work-Life Policy and the Harvard Review (2011) found that 64% of men at a level of vice president or higher were reluctant to have a one-on-one meeting with a junior female out of fear of what others might think. Sandberg (2013) pointed out that male mentors will have informal meetings frequently with their male protégés in places like bars or restaurants

after work to discuss projects or debrief on current progress. However, they are hesitant to have the same type of meeting with a female protégé for fear of workplace gossip that could occur. This behavior ends up stalling a female's career when it could be growing. Sandberg insisted that this evasiveness must end and suggested that to move women forward in leadership positions both men and women must be willing to meet each other in informal contexts the same way that two men would, because these meetings lead to more assignments and promotions. Furthermore, all participants of the workplace need to quit assuming that informal interactions between males and females are for sexual purposes. Everyone needs to behave professionally in order for both men and women to feel safe participating in their mentor-protégé relationship.

Mentors also double as role models for protégés as someone to emulate through professional skills, values, work ethic, and ethical integrity (Ghosh & Reio, 2013). According to Morganroth, Ryan, and Peters (2015), role models influence the aspiring leader's achievements, ambitions, and motivations by acting as representations of the possible through behavioral modeling. Zheng et al. (2018) posited that role models, through interactions and observations, model both agency and communion, therefore, helping aspiring female leaders develop their paradox mindset by showcasing that a goal is achievable through learning new skills with new tasks, providing examples of achievable success, and forming rules of behavior that can be remembered and translated into standard procedure for future behavior. They also found that role models do not only help shape and emulate future behaviors, but also help women construct, develop, and come to terms with their identities and craft possible identities for their future selves. Zheng et al. added that when observing role models, people develop a repertoire of possible identities, attitudes, and strategies to assist with their transition into their new leadership role. Arvate et al. (2018) stated that when women with leadership aspirations are exposed to

other female leaders, the perceptions of the effectiveness of female leaders improved, therefore, weakening stereotypes about gender roles in both public and private organizations. Additionally, they found through role modeling that women in power are more likely to provide a nurturing environment for other women's success when that behavior was modeled and afforded for them.

Conclusion

The research shows that while females in leadership positions are on the rise, women's experiences with societal stereotypes, implicit bias, and difficulties with balancing their work and personal life can steer them away from pursuing leadership roles early in their life or career. The research also shows that there are multiple opportunities for growth through volunteering, networking, and finding a mentor that can help guide new or emerging leaders through the barriers that are faced.

Stereotypes teach children early on that men take charge while women take care. This manifests into women who unconsciously block their partners from doing their share of household chores through maternal gatekeeping, a sexist ideology that is perpetuated by women themselves. This material gatekeeping makes it difficult to keep a healthy work-life balance, while for women to successfully lead full careers, they must let go of some of the responsibilities that need to be met at home. This, in turn, allows women to embrace a paradox-dilemma mindset, allowing women to go beyond a single lens of societal expectations in which work and home are viewed as mutually exclusive. Instead women are then able to merge these scenarios, highlighting more possibilities for growth personally and professionally through work-life integration. Finally, women need to embrace the opportunities that are available to them. Volunteering, while on the surface may seem as working for free, is actually a great way to meet people, grow through new challenges, learn new skills, and showcase to others the skills one can

offer as an emerging leader. Meeting new people allows women to expand their network, go their skillset, and move up in the leadership hierarchy. The same can happen when women have a mentor from whom they can learn alongside and gain experience.

This review of existing research laid the foundation on which to understand the narrative inquiry approach that was taken to learn from female leaders as they share their experiences with these barriers and opportunities. The methodology drew on and provided needed insight into how barriers and opportunities factor into the success of women who have made the decision to become leaders.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine the intersectionality of gender and other cultural themes and their connection with barriers and opportunities experienced by female leaders through their lived experiences in their journey to leadership and during the development of their leadership abilities.

The overarching question of this research study is “What circumstances do females encounter as they aspire to and obtain leadership positions in K-12 education?” The focus questions to guide this research are as follows:

1. What barriers do females report when aspiring to leadership positions in K-12 public education?
2. What opportunities do females report assisted them when aspiring to leadership positions in K-12 education?
3. What barriers do females who have attained leadership positions in K-12 education report that hinders them in their leadership role?
4. What opportunities do females who have attained leadership positions in K-12 public education report that assists them in their leadership role?

Qualitative Inquiry

This study was conducted using qualitative research which is meant to investigate, unearth, and describe in narrative reporting the ways in which individuals see, view, approach, and experience certain parts of their world. The understanding of their experiences occurs while searching for the similarities and differences between the individuals’ experiences to explain the specific phenomenon within them (Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016). Conducting qualitative

research allows the researcher the opportunity to be the storyteller of the participants' experiences in a meaningful way by using themes rather than numbers, therefore, allowing the flexibility to create a systematic approach to gather empirical evidence.

Qualitative research allows a multifaceted way of constructing truth and reality. Furthermore, the perception of the meaning found within these truths and realities as reported by the researcher can vary depending on the context, experiences, and history of others and the meaning they construct with respect to the findings. Qualitative research will, instead of trying to capture the truth and make predictions that generalize to a larger population, try to understand how the experiences of the participants constructed their own realities (Watson & Beaverstock, 2014). Therefore, in this study, the research questions, purpose, and methodologies were designed to align meaning making between the researcher and the participant.

In this study, the participants share their experiences as they have risen to and experienced their role as a female leader in their field. Because these women have found success in their positions this study offers a meaningful forum in which they can recount their perceptions of their own experiences while allowing the researcher to make meaning of these experiences through retelling. The reality of the participants' experiences is not separate from their actual experiences, but rather is constructed through repeated social discourses (Watson, 2014). Experience, by its very nature, is an embodied narrative life composition (Clandinin, 2016). However, the steps for constructing these understandings were not linear or discrete. Instead, the process was recursive and included reviewing and revisiting research to help make sense of the findings. As an alternative to the traditional positivist approach to most studies in which the researcher defines the underlying principles or truth that causes experiences to occur (Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016), qualitative research allows for a relationship between the

participant and the researcher that yields meaning as described from the experiences of the participants (Watson, 2014).

Methodology

This study is represented in a narrative format through narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry research can be defined as a phenomenon that is under study or to the specific methods used in investigating the phenomenon (Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016). It is the mission of the narrative inquiry researcher to study the activities involved in developing and interpreting stories of participants' life experiences by creating methodologies that report in the form of personal narrative and autoethnography (Schwandt, 2015). Narrative research generally includes a focus on one or two individuals that gather data through a collection of participants' reported storied experiences, reporting individual experiences, and ordering the meaning of those experiences chronologically (Creswell, 2013). Narrative research techniques can be used in conjunction with other qualitative approaches (Lichtman, 2017).

Information Needed and Data Sources

The information needed was that which would address the research questions regarding barrier and opportunities women in leadership positions face, particularly how they navigate conflicts in their work-life integration. The unit of analysis is women in leadership positions, principal or higher, in K-12 schools. The goal was to interview 15 women that met the criteria. The intention of purposeful sampling and qualitative research is not to generalize; therefore, sample size is not as important as quantitative research. Rather, the intention is to answer your research questions with a complex and contextual understanding in both a rigorous and ethical way in order to suggest applications to a broader population (Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016). Interview questions were carefully chosen as to align with the research questions and not lead the

participants in any way. The final two questions do not align directly to any of the research questions, but rather allow the participant to share any information about their personal experiences that they felt needed to be added in order give a full account of their personal story. The interview questions were also numbered for easier reference throughout the remainder of this research. These interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

Sampling, Access, and Recruitment

This section outlines the sampling methodology, which includes purposeful and snowball sampling, followed by a discussion of the sample for the selected participants.

Sampling methodology. For participant selection, the researcher used the following methods to identify potential participants. By visiting the websites schools in the researcher's region, a list was compiled of potential participants who are female and serve as principals or higher in schools. Another technique used was collaboration with colleagues in education in order to find additional possible participants. The researcher considered recommendations of women to interview that were outside of researcher's region. Snowball sampling was used to identify future participants. This method of sampling is useful for identifying potential participants who meet the needs of research and otherwise would have not been identified. Snowball sampling is a method in which the researcher begins with one or more relevant and information-rich interviewees and then gains additional contacts through these initial interviews that can provide confirming, or possible different, perspectives. This can create a chain of interviewees based on people who know people who know people who could be possible relevant sources for the focus of inquiry. The researcher recruited all of these new sources for the study (Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016).

Recruitment strategy. Email was the initial point of contact for all possible participants. An example of this email can be seen in Appendix B. This email was used to invite a total of 38 people to participate in this study. If women responded with interest in participating, I replied by thanking them for their willingness to participate and requesting a date, time, and location most convenient for their schedules.

Data Collection Plan and Methods

This section outlines the interview methodology and how all data were collected and stored. Steps in data collection included contacting participants, scheduling interviews, providing informed consent forms, planning interview location and duration, arranging recording devices and data storage, and conducting follow-up that included a researcher's journal and member checking. In order to seek complexity as a form of validity and to account for both macro and micro concerns about equity and representation, design complexity was considered in the design of this study. Design complexity refers to the strategy in which a researcher plans and designs their research approach in order to best answer the study's research questions in the most complex, rigorous, and nuanced ways possible. This approach required data triangulation and methods that are sequenced in order to reach the desired outcomes (Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016).

Contacting participants. A spreadsheet of prospective of women in leadership positions in K-12 education was created before the process of reaching out to prospective participants. This spreadsheet included participant name, participant title, school and department in which the leader served, district in which the leader served, participant contact information including email and phone, administrative assistant's name if available, and a notes sections for any additional information that may need to be mentioned.

Scheduling interviews. With a final interview pool of 12 participants, and with interviews distributed over a one-month period from October through November, the goal was to interview, on average, at least three to four people per week. This schedule allowed time for appropriate follow-up with each participant and for transcribing and coding interviews.

Providing informed consent. Confidentiality of the interviews and information contained within is of immense importance (Josselson, 2013). The discussion of consent and confidentiality happened with participants throughout the interview process. Prospective participants were informed in the first correspondence that it was the intention of the study to preserve the confidentiality of the participants and any information they shared in the interview. If participants agreed to meet, a confirmation email was sent with the agreed upon meeting time and location as well as a blank informed consent form allowing participants to review the form prior to the interview. At the start of the interview, the consent form was discussed and signed by both the interviewer and the participant. Josselson (2013) implied that informed consent after the interview, even if discussed in the beginning, ethically allows participants to consider whether they still give their consent for you to use their material in the study after sharing such personal information. This allows the participant to reconsider anything they have shared during the interview, and allows them to indicate areas they may or may not want written in the final report. Therefore, this process was repeated following all interviews to confirm that participants were comfortable with anything shared to be used as data for analysis and written in the final report.

Planning interview location and duration. All interviews were conducted by the researcher. Ravitch and Mittenfelner (2016) suggested the interview should take place in a quiet, comfortable location free from distractions. It is important for the researcher to consider noise, traffic, and proximity to others who may hear or see the interview. At its foundation, a research

relationship is a special case of a human relationship, therefore researchers must be thoughtful about the relationship dynamics that are created between the researcher and the participants (Josselson, 2013). The content and the relationship have a close interrelation, and both can affect the outcome of the other. For this reason, it was important that interviews were conducted at a location most comfortable and convenient to participants, this was generally individuals' offices, but also included conference rooms and coffee shops. Precautions were put in place minimize interruptions. In order to increase their willingness to participate, it was also important that the interviewer would travel to the participant. Seidman (2013) posited that in an interviewing relationship, equity is directly affected by the social identities that participants and interviewers bring to the interview, because the interviewing relationship itself is fraught with issues of power. To keep the process fair and equitable, the interviewer should schedule times and locations convenient to the participant but also reasonable for the interviewer. Finally, 3 interviews were conducted over the phone due to travel constraints.

Arranging recording devices and data storage. Interviews were recorded on a recording device that was able to plug into a computer through USB and securely transfer all data immediately following the interview. All data held within the recording devices were transferred to a password-protected computer as soon as possible in order to delete information from the recording devices. All electronic data collected as a part of the research process, including voice files, Word, and Excel files, were also kept on a password-protected computer. However, to ensure the security of sensitive information, such as transcripts, researcher's journal information, and spreadsheets containing participant information, password-encrypted files were used. To ensure the overall security of data, all data were backed up onto password-protected drives. Informed consent forms, which include the names of participants, were placed securely in

a locked file. Data will not be destroyed until a minimum of six years has passed, per federal regulations for this type of research (East Tennessee State University Internal Review Board, 2019).

Conducting follow-up. Once transcriptions were completed, a copy of the possible quotes to be used and transcription of the entire interview was sent to all participants for the opportunity to approve, edit, or omit any information they did not want included in the final analysis. All participants also received follow-up information about the study upon publication.

Data Analysis

The following discussion presents the coding procedure and the approach to interpretation and synthesis of data.

Coding procedures. For the qualitative analysis, the interview recordings were transcribed weekly, as the interviews unfolded, using the using Happy Scribe. These transcriptions were then read and checked for errors, and corrections were made when necessary. Quotes were pulled from these transcriptions that could be used to support the reported findings.

Data were then sent through an analytic approach called connecting strategy. This type of strategy allows the researcher to develop the context of the data (Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016). The researcher was able to analyze the data, in the narrative approach, and find relationships that existed by connecting statements and events within context as a coherent whole by looking at the researcher's journal and the transcripts of the interviews holistically. Coding and connecting strategies are more effective in narrative analysis when used in conjunction with one another in order to deliberately look for similarities, differences, and connections in the data (Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016).

Interpretation and synthesis of data. Themes were actively constructed and developed as the researcher continued to engage with the data and analysis of the data. These analytic themes, or categories, represent important concepts in the data that can be generalizable to the data set (Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016). As the researcher was generating themes, a data display was used to organize codes from the coding and connecting strategies. The data display, a matrix of rows and columns, was used to see relationships between codes, helped combine codes, or discard some codes. This data display allowed the researcher to further develop and document the themes that were emerging in the process. In subsequent chapters, the story of these themes were presented. They include data that supports the themes, explain how the themes fit into the broader understanding of the data, and explain the relationships between the research questions of this study and the themes that were identified (Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016). When themes emerged that were not considered in the initial review of literature, additional research was sought in order to explore new ideas that arose from the new findings.

Trustworthiness

Josselson, (2013) defined trustworthiness and authenticity as being balanced, fair, and conscientious in taking account of multiple perspectives, multiple interests, and multiple realities. This study therefore used data triangulation. Triangulation is thought of as having multiple sources or methods in order to challenge and confirm interpretations in the narrative inquiry process. This allows the researcher to enhance the validity of their study interview (Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016). Specifically, this study gathered data from multiple sources that included participants, member checking, a research journal, and a research log.

Member checks, a form of participant validation strategies, are processes in which the researcher checks with participants concerning different aspects of the research on their thoughts

and feelings concerning aspects of the research process and the pieces of the data set that directly relate to them (Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016). For the purposes of this study, participants were asked to verify the accuracy of statements and transcripts, approve the quotes that were chosen to be used, and to create conditions in which the researcher can explore if they are properly understanding the participant's responses.

For the research journal, an entry was written within a day of each interview (Josselson, 2013). This private journal entry served as an additional data point during the analysis process. This allowed the researcher to reflect on the approach, perspective, and methods during the research process and in presenting results. After each interview, reflections were recorded in a private researcher's journal in order to improve with each interview and strengthen the process. The main purpose for the researcher to maintain a journal are to a) develop good research habits in terms of researcher reflexivity; b) provide a structured process in which to reflect on the effectiveness of the study's research questions and ideas about the research study as a whole; c) create the opportunity to reflect on valuable concepts and references that can be incorporated into the research study or future research studies; d) provide the ability for the researcher to reflect on their own thoughts and practices throughout multiple points in the data collection process; e) develop plans of actions or consider changes to the research approach; and f) create meaningful for discussion with the dissertation committee and peers (Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016). Recording impressions of the interview, the researcher's feelings and reactions, the setting, the interviewee's appearance, any dialogue before or after the recording began, and other aspects of the interview that were not a part of the recorded dialogue is an important task of the interviewing process (Josselson, 2013).

In addition to the fieldwork journal, any and all changes, additions, or modifications to the data collection process and research design were kept in a research log. This log allows the researcher to archive and track changes and revisions to the research structure in one location (Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016).

Ethics

Two key ethical considerations include participants' right not to participate and confidentiality (Josselson, 2013). Participants need to be fully aware that they are free to withdraw from the study at any point in the research, including during or after the interview. Therefore, participants were informed of this right in writing, at the outset of the interviews, and during the member check. Also discussed with participants was their right not to answer any questions that they did not wish to or feel comfortable answering. After interviews had already occurred, participants were given the option to omit any information I obtained from the study. From an ethical standpoint, it was critical to consider that the women participants hold high, public positions and are vulnerable to public scrutiny. Confidentiality of the interview data has, therefore, been strictly maintained (Josselson, 2013). Furthermore, in writing up the data and final findings, it was imperative to give pseudonyms and disguise personal details to the extent possible nor give any indication as to the participants that were interviewed. Therefore, this also included not revealing participants to each other or to those who had recommended participants to me. Researchers must be aware of their ongoing ethical duty to protect the privacy and dignity of those whose lives they are permitted to study.

Limitations

This section explores the several research limitations that apply to this study. These included the inexperience and potential cultural biases of the researcher, limited attention to intersectionality, financial and time constraints, access to the population, and participant bias.

Limited experience and potential researcher bias. The first limitation for this study was that, as a doctoral candidate, the researcher has not yet conducted significant qualitative research, which could have affected the study. To address this limitation, it was important for the researcher to work closely with the dissertation committee, as well as other professional qualitative researchers; doing so assisted with investigator triangulation, the use of several different researchers or evaluators (Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016). However, with 10 years of experience in the field of education, having completed a thesis for graduate work, and the classwork completed for doctoral study, practical experiences gave the researcher the ability to relate to and understand the educational culture and verbiage of which was being studied. Additionally, given the researchers practical experience in education, precautions needed to be made to control and reduce biases about practices, policies, and particular organizations that were included in the research. Reflections through writing in the research journals assisted in awareness of personal biases and reactions to participants.

Limited attention to intersectionality. The significant majority of the prospective research population consisted of Caucasian women. Because few women of color are principals or higher in K-12 education, the sample population contained a disproportionate number of white women. As much attention as possible was given to diversifying the sample population. Likewise, attention to sexual orientation, gender identity, class, and age were also limited due not only to the large degree of homogeneity in the sample population, but also due to the need for

confidentiality. Because of the small sample size, revealing such participant identities may risk confidentiality. For these reasons discussions of intersectional identities are largely absent from this study. For future research, a national sample would provide both further diversity and the protection of participant identities such as to allow for a greater discussion of intersectional experiences.

Financial and time constraints. The design of the study was to conduct face-to-face interviews to establish better rapport with participants. The studied population was therefore limited to those within in the region of the researcher. Although three phone interviews were conducted with participants, more time and money could have broadened the pool of possible participation.

Conclusion

This research sought to answer the overarching question “What circumstances do females encounter as they aspire to and obtain leadership positions in K-12 public education?” The focus questions to guide this research are as follows:

1. What barriers do females report when aspiring to leadership positions in K-12 public education?
2. What opportunities do females report assisted them when aspiring to leadership positions in K-12 public education?
3. What barriers do females who have attained leadership positions in K-12 public education report that hinders them in their leadership role?
4. What opportunities do females who have attained leadership positions in K-12 public education report that assists them in their leadership role?

Leaders in K-12 educational organizations were interviewed, 12 in total. Access to these groups was gained via personal networking, online research, and outreach; this outreach included both purposeful and snowball sampling. The primary data collection method used was semi-structured

interviews, using a narrative inquiry approach. Data were transcribed and used in coding and narrative analysis. This study attended to trustworthiness through data triangulation by gathering data from multiple sources that included participants, member checking, a research journal, and a research log. Limitations were researcher inexperience and personal bias, limited attention to intersectionality, and financial and time constraints. This study holds the potential to make a positive impact on the understanding of how women conquer the barriers that come with being female in a leadership position, particularly with how they navigate the work-life balance, and harness the opportunities that are afforded when they present themselves.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine the intersectionality of gender and other cultural themes and their connection with barriers and opportunities experienced by female leaders through their lived experiences in their journey to leadership and during the development of their leadership abilities. The overarching question of this research study is “What circumstances do females encounter as they aspire to and obtain leadership positions in K-12 public education?” The focus questions to guide this research are as follows:

1. What barriers do females report when aspiring to leadership positions in K-12 public education?
2. What opportunities do females report assisted them when aspiring to leadership positions in K-12 public education?
3. What barriers do females who have attained leadership positions in K-12 public education report that hinder them in their leadership role?
4. What opportunities do females who have attained leadership positions in K-12 public education report that assist them in their leadership role?

Participants

There were 12 total participants in this research study, many of whom have worked in multiple educational organizations. They include leadership experiences from 14 organizations total, including different districts spanning multiple states, a State Department of Education, and educational consulting organizations. All participants are currently in leadership positions in K-12 public education as principals leading schools or in a department of K-12 public education leading principals. On average, their years of experience total 19.5 years. Nine out of the 12

participants currently work in a city to which they are not native. Of the participants, 9 out of the 12 are married, they have an average of one child each, and one of the participants is currently expecting her first child. These women spent, on average, 5.7 years in various educational organizational positions before obtaining their first formal leadership role. These positions include elementary, middle, and high school teachers, both public and private; counselors; speech pathologists; and educational assistants. The racial demographics of the 12 participants includes 6 African-American, 5 Caucasian, and 1 other. Participants responded to an email requesting participation in this study and expressed the hope that their experiences help other women in their leadership journey. Pseudonyms were assigned in order to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Of the participants, 6 are currently principals, 3 are superintendents at some level, 2 are department directors at an executive level, and one participant requested her title be omitted from the study.

Emergent Themes

After reviewing the audio interviews and their transcripts carefully, the participants' narratives showed common themes in the classification of their reported barriers and opportunities through their lived experiences in their journey to leadership and during the development of their leadership abilities. The themes that emerged were generally found in both categories identifying barriers and opportunities, implying that depending on the context, these themes hold the ability to create inverse consequences. This section of Chapter 4 describes those identified themes, which include relationships, mindset, and organizational structure; their subcategories; and the circumstances in which these themes manifest into barriers and opportunities for women in leadership according to the participants' experiences as female leaders in K-12 public education. These themes and their subcategories can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

Overview of Emergent Themes and their Subcategories

Theme	Subcategory
Relationships	Mentors Networking Female-Female
Mindset	Women Hold Themselves Back Work-Life Integration Pursuing Growth Personal Principles and Beliefs Stereotypes
Organizational Structures	Demographics of Current Leadership Hiring Processes Politics

Relationships

When asked to recount the barriers and opportunities faced when aspiring to and obtaining leadership positions, participants continually discussed the connections between their professional ambitions, ability, and growth in conjunctions with the relationships with mentors, colleagues, friends, and networks. These relationships were often interchangeable with each other.

Mentors. Mentors played a key role in encouraging women to pursue leadership, being a role model for what successful leadership looks like, and guiding them through the processes and challenges leadership can hold. Though only two participants revealed that they had always wanted to be a principal, every participant in this study reported that a mentor or supervisor brought the idea of leadership to them as a career path they should seriously consider. Dena recounted her first call from a principal, and future mentor, encouraging her to apply for an open

leadership position: “So when she called me...I was shocked, because I really couldn't believe it...I just never really thought that highly of myself and didn't really feel like I would be the right fit to lead teachers.” This encouragement to consider leadership from mentors also existed at higher levels of organizations. For example, Erika shared why she decided to pursue a superintendent position when she was a principal. “[My superintendent] encouraged me. She’s like, ‘You know you can do this job, right?’ And I said, ‘I don’t know about that.’ She was like, ‘Yes you can!’” Rachel shared a similar story, “My administrators that I was teaching under were very, very supportive [of me pursuing leadership roles]...They already saw me as leader.”

Mentors acted as more than just cheerleaders for pursuing leadership opportunities. They also were role models, demonstrating how women can be successful leaders. Stacey saw first-hand that moms can be leaders too, “I interned with a leader that was a female principal who was a mom of three kids, who had the highest expectations for anyone, but I was able to see how she could balance things.” Dawn also saw her mentor as a role model for how she wanted to be as a leader, “You model yourself a little bit behind your mentors...[she was] sweet and kind, but results driven and bottom-line oriented. She wore her dresses, but she could have a crucial conversation with someone.”

Growth experiences and navigating challenges were also reported as successful due to having the guidance of a good mentor. Participants shared how they were given opportunities to practice leading before they began applying for leadership positions. These opportunities allowed the protégés to practice leadership with direction and encouragement from their mentors.

Whitney shared an experience that demonstrated this:

My principal was very good about giving me autonomy and very good about allowing me to just initiate and do work around instruction in the school. People recognized what was

happening there, and that I had played a large part in what was happening to change the instructional culture to improve achievement.

Whitney's mentor also helped her navigate the difficult and competitive process of applying and interviewing for principalships, "It wasn't formal. It wasn't structured. It was just, 'Come on let's talk about this today. Come over here, we're going to prep for this.'"

While 11 out of the 12 participants reported having a female mentor who was instrumental in their growth and success as a leader, there were also multiple stories of men providing the same guidance and encouragement for females. Stacey, who reported many women who helped and encouraged her throughout her career, thought it was important to share an event that occurred with her male superintendent. Stacey said:

When I was pregnant with my third child, the learning superintendent called me into his office. He wanted to meet me to ask me why I hadn't applied for principalships. I was really pregnant. I felt very encouraged, and I would not have probably applied had I not had that encounter with this man. He didn't see [my pregnancy] as a negative. He saw it as, 'Well tell me when you're ready.'

There were also instances in which mentors, perhaps poor mentors or even a lack thereof, were identified by participants as barriers. There were reports of mentors who gave poor advice, became jealous of the success of their protégé, or that there was not a leader that could provide proper mentorship. Nicole started her career in a district that did not have any female, African-American leaders. As an African-American woman, this made navigating her specific and unique challenges difficult. Nicole said:

I didn't have a mentor or a proof point, like another African-American female principal, so that I could say, 'Let me just take you out for coffee and find out how did you end up in this situation?' And, there really wasn't anyone there.

Nicole, now a director at the executive level, chose to leave her first district in order to find more opportunity and mentors to help her maneuver the barriers that come with being a new leader who is also a woman of color.

Networking. Networking and social capital were repeatedly mentioned by participants as necessary for advancement into leadership and further advancement into higher levels of leadership. Networking was intentionally sought out through trainings and meetings that were required, through volunteer work that participants took on to gain experiences, through informal meetings, and in the participants' place of employment. When Hillary was invited by her principal to attend a training on improving results for their students, she used this as an opportunity to expand her networks. At the time, Hillary was in a middle-management leadership position, but her principal saw the potential in her, and wanted her to learn more. Hillary, now a high school principal, said:

We had to do this training that was going to address [low] test scores. So, we had people come in [to the district] that were talking about educational branding. We had people talking about legal advice. We had people talking about how you evaluate and give feedback; how you review data. So it was great to have those connections across the state.

Hillary kept in contact with these networks with different strengths, and it has paid off for her in her leadership experiences. Nicole, who had to leave her district for a proper mentor and

opportunity shared how networking, and sharing her goals with those networks, played a pivotal role in the success she was looking for:

When I met with [the superintendent in my new district], she said, ‘We need to get you in the [principal] pool, because I [told her], ‘I’m ready.’ So, I went and did that process, and then, unbeknownst to me, she already had a plan. She was like, ‘This is where you’re going to land.’

That landing Nicole is referring to, was her first principalship at a high school. Hillary, pointed out that networks are not only beneficial with those who hold positions higher than your current positions. She said, “I think there’s value in connecting at every level if you can.”

Erika and Tina both shared that their lack of networks early in their careers were barriers for them when asked about challenges in obtaining leadership positions. They both made an effort to expand their networks after they realized how important connections were in getting invited to interview for a leadership role. Tina talked about how in order to get higher level positions in educational organizations, networks are vital. “You have to build relationships. Building relationships is so crucial.” Erika, now a superintendent, talked about how the higher up one ascends into the leadership ranks, the more important networks become.

Female-Female. For almost all of the participants, the most critical of all the relationships, in connection with barriers and opportunities, were identified as the relationships and interactions they had with other women. These relationships were sometimes mentioned by participants when asked about opportunities in their leadership journey. Some participants recounted these interactions as barriers in their career. In other cases, it was never mentioned until I asked the participants if there was anything else they would like to add that I did not already ask about. Participants in almost every interview continually reflected on their positive

and negative relationships with women and how those relationships and interactions were essential in both the direction their professional lives took and the type of female leaders they became.

Stacey, a mother and director at the executive level, shared both positive and negative interactions and relationships with other women that created critical turning points in her career. Stacey pointed out that “[of] the people who have influenced me along my journey as a leader, I have a lot of women leaders that have been behind the scenes seeing things in me that I didn't see.” She pulled out a notebook out from years past of an exclusive conference that she strongly felt changed how she sees leadership and the trajectory of her career. She was invited to this experience by a woman who saw her potential and wanted to see her grow. It was mentioned earlier in the chapter about Stacey getting to work with a female principal who she felt was an excellent role model, modeling being a mother and a successful principal. But, Stacey also shared a story that led to her being able to work with that principal in the first place. Stacey had just finished her internship preparing for leadership. She was expecting her first baby, but it was not yet obvious. She went through an extensive interview process for an assistant principal position and was offered the job she had been working towards.

“I went on the interview. This was my first child so I really wasn't showing. So there really was no indication that I was going to have a baby. I got offered the position, and it really was, to be quite honest, the response of female leadership...that caused some red flags. I said I appreciated the opportunity to work in this district, but I did want to share, because my due date was very close to the start of school...that I was expecting. ‘I don't know how this is going to work out.’ was the response I was given. So not in a congratulatory way, but it was more ‘I'm not sure how this is going to work out.’ I think I

was more disappointed that a female in leadership would have the response that they had.

[I decided] that might not be where I wanted to start my career.

This altered the mentality of Stacey and how she saw the role of women in leadership. She reflected on how this made her pregnancy seem like something negative. She also shared how this shaped how she would respond as a female leader when interacting with females expecting a child.

When I found out I was pregnant, I cried. I was concerned about how that would be perceived, and that's ridiculous. I'm angry at myself that I had that reaction. Because, when I became the leader of a school, and teachers would come in and tell me they were pregnant and start to cry because they felt so guilty about their timing or when the due date was, I would stop them to say, 'These are joyful tears. Work, it'll be okay; we'll figure it out.' I would never want to make someone feel badly about being pregnant. That is awful.

Hillary shared how these reactions seem to come from women, and not men, when discussing starting a family while also starting a leadership role.

Definitely not men; they don't care. But other women have said, 'If you have young kids, and you apply for a high school principal position in a traditional school, you really need to consider that you can't stay late at football games on Friday nights.'

Grace shared a similar story in her interview. "I was talking with a colleague whenever I was talking about starting my principal program pregnant, and she said to me, 'So you're going to do the principal and mom thing?' ' Yeah.'"

While some women seem to believe that it was not possible to be a successful mom and leader, there were numerous interactions with female leaders that were identified as opportunities

by participants. For example, Dena shared an experience that she felt was pivotal in catapulting her into her leadership success. Dena said:

[The superintendent] came out to meet us, wanting to know, ‘What’s the magic over here?’ Because we’d taken that school from the 40s to the 80s [in proficiency] in about 2 years’ time. I’ll never forget that meeting. [My principal] said, ‘Ask her, she did it!’ I was nobody, and so that was one of those moments where I think as a leader, it hit me. I need to be that person for someone. She put me in the spotlight. She could have easily taken credit for everything that happened, and said, ‘Well here’s what we did.’ But, she turned it over to me, and I think that was a moment where servant leadership, respect, and integrity kind of meshed. And, it was life changing.

Tina also pointed out the value in female relationships. “It’s just, you’ve got to help each other.”

One of the largest discoveries uncovered through these interviews was an informal women’s group that began as a book club. They have a name for their group, but I will refer to them as The Firehawks. Due to snowball sampling, a collection of the women interviewed for this study were connected with the group. No one seems to know how or why the group was formed or even how they were chosen to join the group. No one could recall the books they used for the book study. They do remember several authors of the books coming in to speak to them about women in leadership and to sign their books for them. They met informally, with no consistent meeting schedule, for over 4 years. Someone mentioned that it may have been every other month. They were all given a formal invitation from a female leader who would eventually become a female superintendent of a very large school district. They considered the women in this group still to be some of their closest friends and connections. Many of them had the exact same picture of the group framed in their offices. The Firehawks were a group of women who

met with each other and studied leadership, studied themselves, set goals, personally and professionally, held each other accountable, and gave each other guidance and support. They would all end up becoming extremely successful female leaders who would change the landscape of their organization, and they all mentioned the pull they felt to pay it forward to others. Whitney, a member of the Firehawks, reflected on the importance of having a women's group.

So, I do think that having this informal network of women to help support each other and encourage each other has been beneficial throughout my years. I don't remember when that group was really put together. But, I know I can call them. I know that. And, we also felt supported by the leader. We felt a level of support, so I think it's important for women to support women in this educational space. Because in educational leadership, the historical thing, has been to make the male the principal. So, it's important that we have those kinds of networks.

Dawn, also a member, saw the group as a top priority. She stated:

You didn't care if your school was burning down, you were going. You explored themes of the world and yourself and leadership, and you'd set personal goals. You'd set professional goals. And, each of you were all each other's accountability partners... It really was an organic professional development opportunity that just had a bit of longevity.

Erika on her feelings about being a part of The Firehawks:

Wearing your [Firehawks symbol] allowed you to stand out and have a different mindset of how you view yourself and how you present yourself. [That symbol] represented some of the ideas and the pieces that helped us really come together. So it started out being a

book study, and then it grew into something amazing. Because, it was a room with like 40, maybe 50, women and they were all in here being encouraged, being coached, and being supported.

In an effort learn more about the founder of the group, how this began, how she chose the members, and how all of these women became so successful, I reached out via email to all of the women who identified themselves as a part of The Firehawks during our interviews asking for contact information for the founder, or if they could share my contact information with her. Unfortunately, I did not receive a response.

Mindset

While some factors that manifest barriers and opportunities are out of the control of women, their mindset is not. Many of the barriers and opportunities participants identified during their interviews were centered around their own thinking. The major themes identified in this category are the way they feel about their work, how they feel many barriers are a figment of the imagination, how the key to managing their work and personal life is not equal to balancing the two, how they continue to keep learning and growing professionally and personally, and how they hold strong to their principals and beliefs. The last subcategory in this theme is not about the mindset of females pursuing leadership positions or those in leadership positions, but rather refers to the mindset of all stakeholders in the process. It concerns stereotypes and their effect on the leadership process for women.

Women hold themselves back. When asked about barriers that were faced in their leadership journey, one woman stated there were none at all. Most of the women reported experiencing very few such barriers, and added that many of those were actually self-inflicted. Dawn stated this perfectly: “A lot of the boundaries that we encounter are because we set them.

Men don't have those same boundaries. Because, no one creates them, they're in your head.”

Nicole agreed that some of the barriers were within her control: “Some of the barriers were internal. The narrative I was telling myself about I'm not ready. I'm not ready to do the principalship.” Robyn explained further how women second guess themselves when pursuing new roles with more responsibility:

We will second guess ourselves a thousand times over, and we're more than prepared.

What's that talk that we give ourselves? Say, I want to try to do this. Now, if I don't make it out of the interview process, fine. Maybe not this one, maybe another one. But, I've got to try. If you sit back and wait to get ready, you're never going to be ready.

Stacey, who repeatedly worried about how others judged her being a leader and a mother after her encounter with a female administrator who did not think the two could coexist successfully: “I didn't want it to be, ‘Oh she's not herself anymore, because she's a mom.’ And, I think I told that story in my head.” These women stated that they were more worried about doing a good job than others were.

Work-life integration. During the course of these interviews, only one female claimed that their family or family life posed as a barrier. She female reported that her marriage paid the price for the amount of time she put in to the job. Many spoke about a learning curve or how they got through difficult times when their children were small, but what was reported from these women is how they navigate their busy lives. No one claimed to balance them. Dawn, a mother and principal, explained:

Your job is not your life. It's part of your life. But it is not your life. And I don't believe in balance, but we all have these balls that we're juggling. And, whatever is in your hand at that moment, let that be your focus and everything else be in the periphery, because you

can very easily be caught up because you think you have to overdo. You don't have to do that.

Many of these women shared how they were becoming a mom and a leader around the same time. Grace shared her thoughts on starting her new roles simultaneously.

I was fortunate in that I had a great support system from my family. The lady that I entrusted with [my son's] care while I was at work, she was amazing. I don't know how I would have done it without strong family support, and somebody that I trusted with him. There were times whenever he was sick that I had to be there and had to be with him. That didn't happen too often. But, knowing then that you develop that capacity and the trust within the building to be human in front of them. Look, my kid's sick; I've got to be there.

Robyn was recently speaking to a leader who was becoming a new mom. As a mother who has been there, she shared these thoughts with her colleague:

Look, you're not going to get it all done. So you decide, based on your core values, what's most important. Prioritize and do what you can. Get those folks around you to get that second tier done. But you're not going to get it all done, at the level you are now, clearly. And she's one of those 110%, it's going to be perfect. It's not going to be perfect. So give yourself that space to be okay with it not being perfect.

I heard from others about how they wanted to keep working when they should be spending time with their family, but they had to learn to set boundaries. Stacey recalls being in the hospital after the birth of her first child.

The very first lesson I learned, so she came three weeks early, and I wasn't ready for her yet. The nursery was ready, but mentally, I wasn't prepared. I had this little baby, and

suddenly, I thought no I can keep doing everything that I was doing. I was in the hospital, and I was just ‘Oh my gosh! People don't have all my plans ready. What are they going to do without me at work?’ And I remember being secretly happy that there was Wi-Fi at the hospital. I was so excited about being a mom, but also, I felt very obligated to ensure I left things in a place where the work could continue.

Stacey also shared that this was not how she handled the births of her next children. She disconnected from work knowing that her school could handle operations until she returned. Stacey also shared how she loves that she can model for her kids how she gives to her community through her work.

I feel like part of my identity is in the work that I do, and get to do. I feel very privileged to get to work with others to help support kids. For me, it's always been that I want to be a role model to my [kids] of what they can accomplish. You can be a mom and contribute in other ways too.

Erika also shared with me that she had trouble setting boundaries, and through intentional leadership, she examined her priorities and made a plan to improve.

And finally I had a realization that once this is all said and done, what am I going to go home to? Because it won't be [my school district.] So, I finally had to have perspective. I was that person who would go home, cook dinner, eat dinner with my husband and my [child], and have the audacity to do work. Now how do you think that worked? It was awful. It didn't work. I was exhausted. I would be falling asleep trying to type observations. I didn't know what I was saying. I would be on an email getting upset before it's time to go to bed. I would be doing all these awful things that aren't good for you at 10:00 at night or waking up at 4:00 in the morning starting the cycle over before

intentional leadership...[Once I applied intentional leadership] after seven, I wasn't on the email chain anymore. I just decided that eventually you got to take a break to be home, and you got to enjoy life and be you. Being in it all the time was not going to help me be home.

The participants were candid in reporting their struggles and admitting that there will be struggles. They did not report that they attempted to rid themselves of struggles, but rather how to prioritize their days. They reported that they were intentional about their mindset, and accepting that both personally and professionally they need boundaries, help from others, and that things will not be perfect. However, they felt proud of their work and their impact with their leadership position and their family.

Pursuing growth. Seeking out opportunities to learn and grow was reported by all of the participants in this study. They recounted doing this by seeking opportunities to learn, observing and experiencing each role that they were in, volunteering to be a part of important work being done in the school, and taking risks and making big moves when the situation called for it.

The participants all had a very diverse set of experiences. No participant stayed in the same place very long in their pursuit of leadership opportunities. They learned to serve different types of kids, in different types of environments, with different types of colleagues. Hillary shared about all of her diverse experiences when she said:

I have been so grateful to have those opportunities, because you can get locked into seeing one thing, doing one thing, operating in the same manner, and not realize that there was something to be learned and gained at every step. So, I'm grateful, good and bad.

Whitney also looked back on her diverse set of experiences and how she saw each role with a new lens with something to be learned.

I was observing [other schools and leaders], and I had one lens. I had the teacher's lens, but I learned as I became a leader that you have a different lens; you have the whole school. So your decisions are whole school decisions. You're now thinking about the greater good for everybody. What's going to be the best decision? It's going to impact all the stakeholders in a certain way.

Erika agreed that there is something to be learned through observation of the environment that you are in. Erika stated, "Sometimes it's good to be the observer in the room and seeing what pieces you can take for best practice." Nicole also thought her experiences in schools, as well as with continuing her education, really helped her grow. Nicole felt continuing to learn was important to her personally and professionally. She said:

Being in the space of a learner, but also using some of the things that I learned in the doctorate to implement at school, was really empowering and inspiring for me. It got me doing the work that I love and being connected to those two principles of I want to be a learner all the time, and I also want to impact other people's learning. So if I could do those two things, I'm good, and that felt good to me.

To all of these women, learning more through their new experiences, their successes, and their mistakes was an important part of their leadership journey. Additionally, each participant communicated her work improving results for students in struggling schools as a critical experience that impacted their learning and gave them the tools they needed to help lead others.

Participants often talked about volunteering to be a part of initiatives early on in their careers as a learning opportunity to gain experience and insight into what leadership roles entail.

If they were asked to be on a committee or to coordinate an initiative, they took it on, not as something that had to be completed for compliance, but as an opportunity to learn more about the educational setting and to expand their networks. They continually shared these moments as opportunities that prepared them for leadership. Grace shared how being a key player in the Reading First Grant for her school helped her grow professionally. She acquired her assistant principal job very quickly after finishing her principal program. This was her response when I asked how that happened so quickly for her:

I think that the reason I was successful in acquiring the assistant principal position in [the new district] was because of the stuff that I had knowledge of in [my current school]. The work that I did in [my current school] in terms of looking at historically underserved kids in programs as far as school wide Title I. We were kind of working, at that time, on the Reading First Grant; it was huge. I had knowledge and kind of support of the Reading First Grant, helping my district through that process. [The new district] was in the same spot with Reading First in terms of the mandates that came there, and the work and the professional development that came along with that. So I think that as a candidate, looking back on it, I was a good fit for what they needed in the district at that time. So I think that that's probably why I was successful in acquiring that position so quickly.

Grace was quick to share how this Reading First Grant opportunity for learning did not stop with acquiring her first leadership role. As she used her background knowledge of Reading First in her new role, she made sure to keep growing in the new role through the same program. As an assistant principal, Grace used this to prepare herself for a successful principalship. She stated:

While I was in the position, I was afforded so many opportunities to network and to kind of grow my professional capacity with other professionals through the work done in that grant. I [was a part of] monthly meetings of principals within the Reading First Grant cohort... While I was wearing at federal programs hat and doing the work of the federal programs coordinator, I was able to put another lens on the leadership role in the building and at the district level. Because, in the federal programs role you have to know about the mandates; you have to know about all the red tape that comes with those federal dollars, Title I, how you can spend [federal dollars], and what kind of programming and reporting comes along with it... I think [those experiences] helped me to develop a leadership lens that has a bigger picture than just a building principal role, and I think that's been helpful in thinking about decisions that are made, keeping kids on the forefront of those decisions, and weighing it with the research and the best practice that you expect.

Grace was able to learn many things through this initiative, and she was professionally aware of the opportunity as it was happening. She was only in the assistant principal role for 2 years before she would get her first principalship and lead her own school.

Participants also mentioned taking risks and moving to other schools, districts, and cities in search of growth and opportunities. Taking risks in order to advance their career was a common theme when participants were faced with barriers. We heard from Nicole earlier on making a move to pursue employment in a district with opportunity when none of her leaders looked like her. Erika also reported that she left her hometown and close-knit family in search of opportunity. Tina reported not seeing an opportunity for advancement where she was, so she applied for and accepted a role in another city that gave her vast experience and networks, allowing her to come back a few years later to her original organization in an executive role.

Rachel loved the school, administration, and district she was a part of, but had to take a risk in order to be considered for an open leadership position. Rachel said, “Unfortunately, I didn't really have any other open doors there because there was no opportunity for promotion. That's why I left the next year. There was nothing else I could do; my opportunities were exhausted.” Robyn and Hillary both stated that taking risks is advice they give to females in their leadership journey as a means to propel one’s experiences and career.

Personal principles and beliefs. Being authentic, appearing human and sticking to your principles in difficult times was expressed by many participants as important to them in their successes as females. Dawn mentioned having her disposition questioned by a subordinate as one that a leader in a high school should not have if she wanted to be successful. She was new to the school and was replacing a man who had been leading the school for quite a while. This subordinate expressed that she should ascribe to more masculine traits if she wanted to be successful in her new role in their school building. However, she was adamant that women are not being the best leader you can be if you are pretending to be someone else. This is advice Dawn often gives to those she is mentoring: “You feel pressure sometimes to adjust your authentic self. But you just have to resist it...I hope that being authentic helps other people to see they can be authentic.” Stacey shared a similar sentiment about not changing who you are to fit what others think a leader should look like. Stacey said, “Being your authentic self, when you're able to do that, that can create so many other wonderful opportunities, rather than trying to fit something that you're not.” For Nicole, she had her principles and beliefs questioned early on in her career, by her supervisor rather than her subordinate. She recalls this experience as what led her to pursue a leadership in the first place. Nicole said:

I got into a situation with [my principal] around my instructional choices in grading. To grade students, I was doing mastery not grades. I had several students who were struggling, and I wasn't doing a whole lot of giving them the D, and moving on. I said, "I'm not gonna give him a grade right now. He hasn't shown it, and I want to give him time to show it. But, [my principal] was stuck in a structure of 'it needs to be this.' It was complicated and a difference in philosophy about what [grading] looks like, and I thought it was so odd. But, that was the kick in the butt. [I told myself] you need to practice what you preach, and you actually need to actively pursue a leadership position.

Participants also reported sticking to your principles is important when making school or district wide decisions that will not always be favored by everyone. Grace mentioned this was advice she recently gave to a female she is mentoring for a leadership position. Grace said:

[You need to have] a thick skin, the decisions that we have to make in these roles are not always popular. Be prepared to have the hard conversations with teachers around keeping kids in decisions. The decisions that we make are for kids. It's not always about the big people in the building.

Nicole also mentioned the difficulty of having crucial conversations with subordinates when coaching them. They will get upset; they will feel bad. However, she also mentioned that these decisions and conversations are for the benefit of the students, not to soothe people who have made mistakes or need to grow. A question that she asks herself for self-reflection is, "Did I give up on my fundamental beliefs and principles in order for somebody to feel good?" This helps her put in perspective her interactions when she is coaching adults. Dawn also mentioned that early on in her leadership journey, she would put a lot of effort into trying to make people feel better about it when she had to have a crucial conversation with a subordinate. She shared that this was

counterproductive to her goals, and she no longer says things that give a mixed message about the fact that the behavior she is trying to correct was inappropriate.

Stereotypes. The last subcategory in this theme is not about the mindset of females pursuing leadership positions or those in leadership positions, but rather refers to the mindset of all stakeholders in the process. It concerns stereotypes and their effect on the leadership process for women. Many of the participants discussed stereotypes, but did not report that they stopped them from opportunities. They rather shared how the stereotypes can create barriers specific to females that impact their work. Hillary found this to be true as a leader. She said:

Unfortunately, the message that comes from you may not land the same way it would coming from a male. I have found that to be true in certain cases. It's not so much about race as it is the gender difference.

Nicole found that stereotypes still exist, however, they are shifting and it is noticeable. Advice she was given as a new administrator was catered to stereotypes, but now, she does not believe that advice would be applicable.

I think what they told me when I started versus what they would tell me now is different. Because when I started they said, "Don't say anything, keep your head down, and work hard. If you need me, call me, but don't ruffle any feathers and just keep head down.'

Whitney shared that the advice she gives male and female principals is very similar, however, she has noticed that there are times in which she does have to coach females differently than men. This specifically applies to a female principal that has a female assistant principal. Whitney said:

You know having to have that conversation around maintaining your professional distance. I just haven't had to have that conversation where there may be two males in the building. Because, I think females just make different bonds. I was just talking to this [female] principal about being mindful of making sure the staff sees you as principal to everyone, not friends with some and principal to others.

Robyn has noticed that female principals are treated differently by parents more so than the staff. She has recently had to coach a female principal in her organization through that process, but a male principal in the same organization with the same circumstances is not dealing with the same response from parents.

I just had a conversation with somebody else today, and we were talking about supporting a female principal. Why are these parents giving her such a run, like do you see what all she's doing? Yeah there's some short falls, but who doesn't have any. And at this school that's comparable, I don't see this happening. Sometimes men can just do these things, and women can't.

While stereotypes are not keeping women from leadership positions in the organizations in which the participants are employed, there are still stereotypical issues that women must learn to navigate as leaders that men do not.

Organizational Structures

The research data revealed that the organization in which a female works can directly and indirectly affect the manifestation of barriers and opportunities in her career. These elements are often hidden and present themselves when women are attempting to rise through the ranks into leadership within the organization. The stories shared by the multiple women who experienced

these invisible factors allowed for the identification of what these scenarios had in common. The major contributing factors within an organization that were identified in these interviews are the demographics of the current leadership, hiring processes that are in place for offering leadership positions, and the political landscape of the organization.

Demographics of the current leadership. The demographic make-up of the leadership in an organization can have both positive and negative effects on females at all levels of leadership. Having a leader with the same demographic as an aspiring leader is not necessary for successful mentoring, but they will not be able to help navigate all of the specific challenges that are faced by that person. Those challenges may or may not have existed for the current leader in some form. Nicole expanded further on her experience with that, which ultimately led to her leaving the organization. Nicole said:

I was in [a district] trying to get a principalship. I was on my 5-year plan, supposed to get a principalship, and I'm in year 3 and not even close. I'm not even having lunch with the superintendent so they can find out more about me. Nobody's going to have lunch with me because they think I'm 12, because I'm a black female, or whatever the case may be.

I'm not really sure, I can't speak to it because no one's ever told me. But, that door closed. Rachel had a similar experience in which she did receive an opportunity. She had gone to a new district for a leadership opportunity, and had a challenge she was not expecting. Rachel said, "So I was the very first female leader in that building. So, before me, it was only males that served in any type of leadership role in this building." She shared how leadership and faculty alike were excited that a female would be a part of the leadership team, however, there was still a learning curve that occurred for everyone in the building. She shared what that looked like. "Although both [of the male leaders] I worked with were very kind people, [the challenge] was changing

that mindset of equity and adding that perspective of moving away from the Boys Club and treating all people fairly.” She also shared that in an effort to protect her from situations, they would try to take on all of the conflict that may have occurred with the staff. They felt as if they were doing the right thing, protecting the female.

On the contrary, diverse leadership teams seek and offer opportunity to a diverse set of possible leaders. Nicole shared her experience after moving to a new district in which there was a diverse set of leaders. Her first principalship was born from a superintendent that wanted to build, develop, and support a diverse set of leaders for her district. This superintendent was also the founder of The Firehawks. Nicole reflected on how this woman recruited her from another organization in an effort to build a diverse team that made way for opportunities for minority leaders in her district, and how that cycle continues.

She was astutely sitting in all kinds of venues and meetings, meeting people and trying to pick out a potential person to put on the team. She was always mining for talent, which I think is a pretty strategic move. I'm working on that now in this role.

This was a refreshing experience for Nicole, compared to where she was in her first organization; not seeing an African-American woman in any type of leadership role and, therefore, not seeing one for herself.

Hiring processes. Upon speaking to participants about their barriers and opportunities when receiving, or not receiving, leadership positions they had applied for, responses shed light on the fact that hiring processes in an organization can create an unintentionally subjective experience that can keep women from the leadership opportunities. Rachel, the first female leader in the history of the school, spoke about why she felt the school made it over a decade into the 21st century never having a female leader.

I don't think there was a female leader here for any other reason than they just always hired people they were friends with or people that they knew. They never gave anyone a chance, that's just always the way it was. It was a boy's club. But, I don't think that they were discriminating against anyone intentionally. I think it was more ignorance than anything else.

When I asked Rachel how hiring processes have changed since the days of the male leadership team that hired her, she said there were more rounds to the process, and that those rounds required more than your typical questions and answer sessions in front of the principal. Candidates have to role play and perform for a panel of people, they are scored against a rubric, and other requirements that make it a more objective process.

Whitney had witnessed similar circumstances in her career that she felt created invisible barriers for women striving for leadership roles past the principalship. Whitney said:

I've noticed, over time, relating to people being promoted, the majority of the time when someone does not have to go through a formal interview process and apply for a position... Most of the time those positions are given to men. I may not even be aware of most of them, or all of them, but the ones that I know where opportunities that weren't opened up [to the public], went to men.

In Nicole's district, it was mentioned earlier that her superintendent had a plan for her to get a position once she got into the principal pool. However, Nicole had to do the work to get into that pool. It was a multi-round process in which candidates are cut or allowed through based on a scored rubric system. Rounds include processes that have written, spoken, and performance components that are scored by a diverse team of people from various levels of the district. Many candidates have to attempt the process several times before they make it through to the end and

are placed in the pool. Once candidates are in the pool, they are then allowed to apply for open principalships in the district. The district has a similar process for assistant principal positions as well.

The formal interview process with a scoring system, rounds of elimination, and a diverse selection team allows women an opportunity like Nicole was afforded in her new district, whereas the old system of questions and answers with only the principal creates barriers for those not already in the principal's favor like Whitney and Rachel witnessed.

Politics. When asked about barriers that were experienced in both the pursuit and attainment of a leadership role, 7 of the participants cited politics within the organization as an issue for them. Two participants specifically mentioned that positions past the principal level are more about the politics than the work you are producing. According to Whitney:

Leadership at that level and higher is really much more about influencing others. It's not necessarily as much about your work, because your work is now so far removed from the schoolhouse and the actual movement of kids. So, it is your influence that matters more at that position and higher.

Tina felt that taking a risk and getting a higher position in another organization allowed her the political power to come back to her first organization for the position she wanted. She did not feel that she had the political pull before she left to have ever gotten that position. Erika also cited politics as a reason for a slow promotional process. She did not have the political pull, but she worked on building networks and letting her work speak for itself. Nicole felt that "there were definitely systems, rules, and procedures that were hidden" within all of the organizations she worked, and it took time and maturity for her to learn to navigate those hidden systems successfully. The early years were especially difficult. Nicole reflected:

In year 3, I was wanting to be a principal, and I didn't feel like I had the self-efficacy to be able to navigate the political landscape that was needed in order to get a principalship in [another district]. People were giving me suggestions, but that wasn't guidance, it was just suggestions.

Whitney said that in order to navigate those hidden systems, she learned you have to “stay in the know. You’ve got to be micro-political. You have to engage with the right people. Have your networks work for you. Get in there and do that type of work.” Hillary shared that a large piece of doing that political work was to be sure to create a brand for yourself. According to Hillary, you have to understand what an organization needs and be able to communicate how you can be what they need, not just in interviews, but in any social situation in which you may be explaining your place in the organizational system. Hillary said that when creating a brand for yourself, “it's really not up to other people to see your value. You're the only one that can tell your story. It might as well be good when you tell it, and you need to be able to tell it.”

Conclusion

Chapter 4 reexamined the purpose and research questions that guided this study. It introduced the women who participated in this research study and the common themes in the classification of their reported barriers and opportunities through their lived experiences in their journey to leadership and during the development of their leadership abilities. The themes that emerged were generally found in both categories identifying barriers and opportunities, implying that depending on the context, these themes hold the ability to create inverse consequences. This chapter describes those identified themes, which included relationships, mindset, and organizational structure; their subcategories; and the circumstances in which these themes

manifest into barriers and opportunities for women in leadership according to the participants' experiences as female leaders in K-12 public education.

Chapter 5 presents the themes and narratives and how they connect with the existing literature. It further examines how aspiring female leaders and current female leaders in K-12 public education can use these findings to possibly strengthen their personal and professional lives through their relationships and mindset. It also examines how educational organizations can facilitate conditions that would lead to fewer barriers and more opportunities for females seeking leadership positions. Recommendations for future research are presented in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to explore the barriers and opportunities women in K-12 public leadership face, particularly with how they navigate conflicts in their work-life balance and in what ways they have been afforded opportunities. Work-life balance is generally defined as the reconciliation of the conflicting demands and obligations between a women's professional requirements and her personal life. Opportunities are defined as events that lead to a woman's career advancements and accomplishments. Eagly and Carli's (2007) research findings proved to be true through this narrative inquiry study; the glass ceiling is not an appropriate metaphor for the challenges that women face pursuing leadership, especially in K-12 public education. The labyrinth is a more applicable metaphor for describing the process that the women in this research study experienced while navigating barriers in their leadership journey. If a path ended in a dead end, they reflected on how they got there and sought a new avenue. These female leaders continued this process until they found the right path for them personally. Successful women sharing their experiences and journeys with me for the purpose of this study, in both their pursuit and execution of their leadership roles, will be used to provide a source for other women to obtain ideas for leadership development and strategies for success in order to better navigate the labyrinth in which they find themselves getting lost (Parks, 2018).

The answers to the overarching question of this research study, "What circumstances do females encounter as they aspire to and obtain leadership positions in K-12 education?" can contribute to the literature concerning aspiring and current female leaders by offering insights that may strengthen their professional experiences through their relationships and mindsets. It will contribute to existing literature about how organizations might tap into a larger talent pool

for potential leadership by examining their current structures and processes. In doing so, organizations can generate greater positive results with more women in leadership positions within their organization (Credit Suisse, 2012). Furthermore, organizations with men and women equally represented on leadership teams stand to encourage the underscoring of the contradictions that women have to play a certain role according to societal norms, and also influences the stringency with which people view gender roles (Zheng et al., 2018).

Chapter 5 offers discussions concerning the three emergent themes highlighted in Chapter 4, Relationships, Mindset, and Organizational Structure. The chapter then offers future research recommendations, for individual women and for organizations, and the researcher's reflections and conclusion.

Relationships

Mentors, networking, and female-female relationships were a common thread in the reflection the participants' experiences that led to what they describe as barriers and opportunities. While 76% of women make-up the American workforce as teachers in education, a disproportionate number of females can be found in the role of superintendent which is comprised of only 23% females. (American Association of School Administrators, 2016). One quarter of the sample population for this study was made-up of women holding a superintendent position, providing enlightening details on the circumstances in which this level of leadership could be attained by females that aspire to such a role. Women supporting and advocating for other women, as mentors, as networks, and as learning and accountability partners, was a fiber woven throughout the journey of the all the women that participated in this study. There was a positive relationship between the number of these relationships a woman had and her level of success.

Mentors

The women in this study generally had multiple mentors that they had acquired over time. Every participant interviewed cited her mentor(s) as a supportive reason for their success. Many still call and speak to them for guidance regularly. While I did not collect specific demographic information on the participants' mentors, it was noticeable through the interviews that the mentors were almost exclusively women. In most cases, these mentors saw potential in their protégés and encouraged them to pursue leadership or helped them navigate the labyrinth of leadership. Naholi (2008) cited lack of role models as barriers to the success and upward mobility of women in leadership. While the narratives in this study support that claim, these women did not allow that to end their pursuit of an effective mentor. In cases where women did not see mentors that aligned with their goals and beliefs, or if a possible mentor did not exist at all, they moved to another organization in search of this opportunity. All of the women in this study shared insights that coincide with what Dow (2014) reported: females with leadership aspirations should seek, create, and maintain relationships with leaders and excel at her current assignments in order to attract and secure effective mentors.

Mentors mentioned in this study also served as role models for the now successful female leaders, supporting the research by Ghosh and Reio (2013), who claimed that mentors also double as role models for protégés as someone to emulate through professional skills, values, work ethic, and ethical integrity. It also echoed the findings of Morganroth, Ryan, and Peters (2015), who posited that role models influence the aspiring leader's achievements, ambitions, and motivations by acting as representations of the possible through behavioral modeling. Interestingly, it was discovered that women having this female support and role modeling through their mentor caused a cyclic effect. The protégés feel the pull to then become the mentor

and role model for other women aspiring for what these women have achieved. Flanagan (2017) cited this important effect as necessary to normalize woman as leaders in order to have more examples of successful female leaders and them to showcase the different ways in which they can be effective.

Networking

During the course of this research, participants regularly cited networking as a necessary element for promotional opportunities. Networking can provide opportunity by extending the females ability to find out about open positions and having networks advocate on their behalf. An insight shared by a superintendent that leadership at higher levels is more about one's influence with others than it is the actual work you produce is supported by multiple researchers (AAUW, 2016; Arvate et al., 2018; Catalyst, 2011; Kark et al., 2012; Sandberg, 2013; Zheng et al., 2018) who found that social capital gained from networking with top leaders is even more important for advancement than job performance.

Female leadership participants reported a lack of networks as a barrier when attempting upward mobility. However, these women used every opportunity possible to expand and strengthen those networks in order to navigate that barrier and create opportunity. They reportedly did this by making important contacts every chance they could at trainings, participating in initiatives in which they made new contacts both inside and outside of their organizations, diversifying their resumes by not staying in the same school or department for long periods of time, and then by maintaining those contacts. Park (2018) echoed this approach when she suggested the best way to network is by researching, asking questions, volunteering, seeking feedback, and connecting with people both inside and outside of your organization.

Female-Female

Current research had contradictory findings on how females support each other's aspirations for professional growth and leadership. One argument hinges its claims on the Queen Bee Phenomenon, referring to the situation in which women who succeed play a negative role in the development and advancement of other females within her organization. This theory suggests that senior women or women in leadership positions are more likely to discriminate against other women (Moss-Racusin, Dovidio, Brescoll, Graham, & Handelsmann, 2012), hold negative stereotypes about their female protégés (Gabriel et al., 2018), and block promotions from other women (Johnson & Mathur-Helm, 2011). There was evidence in this study that supports this claim. There were more cases of women judging and questioning women's capabilities than there were men in the interviews that were conducted. There were four reported incidences in which women questioned another women's decision to pursue being a mother and an educational leader simultaneously. In one particular case, a woman in a senior position told an aspiring leader who was expecting she "didn't know how it could work out."

On the contrary, there is also research that claims the Queen Bee Phenomenon is a myth (Arvate et al., 2018; Derks et al., 2011; Faniko, Ellemers, Derks, & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 2017; Gabriel, Butts, Yuan, Rosen, & Sliter, 2018; Kaiser & Spaulding, 2015; Zheng, 2018). Aravate et al.'s (2018) claim that contrary to the Queen Bee Phenomenon, the importance of the female-female relationship has influential ties through the "Role Model Effect." This theory claimed that allowing female leaders the opportunity to provide additional influence and inspiration as a role model created a pro-female causal effect of female leadership in public organizations when more female leaders were a part of the organization. Their conclusion was that the more female individuals that are seen in positions of power, the less the stereotype that leadership is male-

oriented, therefore, changing what is considered the norm and encouraging more women to seek leadership positions. There was evidence supporting this claim as well in my research. The Firehawks, a group of women that supported each other through mentorship, friendship, and personal accountability was a chance for females in the organization to meet regularly with other female leaders and aspiring female leaders and therefore create that pro-female causal effect. My findings are that the structure of educational organizations does not properly allow for the “Role Model Effect” to effectively play out for positive results. It has to be intentionally sought by women in senior leadership positions in the organization. I have concluded that this issue in educational organizations is due to faculty and staff in schools, including the leadership, having limited knowledge and visibility of the extent to which females can be seen in senior leadership positions within their organizations. This, in turn, leads to limited interactions with seeing these successful women’s abilities and work. The reason The Firehawks created access for such large amounts of success for its members was because a woman in a senior leadership position created an opportunity and a space for leaders that spanned different areas and buildings to come together, see each other, collaborate with each other, guide each other, set goals with each other, and hold each other accountable. They may not have risen so quickly through the ranks of leadership without this opportunity, and those who shared they were in the group agree with that sentiment.

One participant, a high school principal who does not have any children, shared how a female questioned if she would be able have children and still be a high school principal. However, when I asked her what advice she had for aspiring female administrators, she included those same thoughts. This supports claims made by Sandberg (2013, p.93) claiming that women are “leaving before they leave” and is defined as the hesitation a women experiences to accept

career opportunities, challenges, and advancement based on the expectation that she needs to make preparations and accommodation for a family that she does not yet have.

Throughout my experience interviewing these female leaders, I met several that are or have been high school principals that reported little to no problems with being a mom and a successful high school principal at the same time. This leads me to believe that this particular principal with no children has not yet had the opportunity to see a high school leader with children successfully model what that could look like. She does not have the opportunity to meet with and explore these circumstances with other women. She only gets to attend to business as usual in her school building. Therefore, my findings suggest that the contradictory theories both have supporting elements of truth, and that the ability for the female-female relationship to play out as a barrier or an opportunity rests on the senior leadership, both in the actual school building in which these leaders work and within the organization as a whole. The opportunities for women to meet, collaborate, and share within a safe environment must be available, intentional, and supported by senior leadership within the organization.

Mindset

A woman's mindset creates the unique way she experiences her own reality. Many of the participants in this study identified that a female's mindset can ultimately alter the trajectory of her career. They shared common stories of barriers that were created in their own minds early in their careers; that their professional life and their personal lives are not separate, but integrated, where every obligation has a priority; that they constantly pursue opportunities to grow and learn, even though their mistakes and failures; that they cannot let others' concerns sway their own personal beliefs and principles; and how to navigate the difficulty of working with people who have preconceived notions about who they should be as a leader due to stereotypes

concerning women and leadership. The mind, and the lens through which it is experiencing the world, needs to periodically be evaluated and reset to change with growth and circumstances, and it is best done with others that can help clarify and reflect to ensure proper focus.

Women Hold Themselves Back

The successful female leaders who participated in this research study repeatedly mentioned that barriers to women becoming leaders are in their own heads. Some of the barriers, women pointed out, centered around thinking they were not ready to apply for positions and worrying what other people thought of their performance once they became a mother. This is consistent with current research on the topic. Crum, Salovey, and Achor (2013) researched the mindset of women facing issues of worrying about their capability of leading and found that the mindset is a mental frame that selectively organizes and encodes information, thereby creating a unique way of understanding their own experience individually. Consequently, when faced with the perils of tensions experienced by working women, women leaders will naturally interpret their experiences as a result of their own mindset, which will have different outcomes depending on the lens through which they are looking at the issue. Sandberg's (2013) theory on women making small decisions over time that ultimately cripple their career could also be viewed as women seeing barriers that do not actually exist.

The significance of these findings is that women need to surround themselves with mentors, networks, and colleagues who can help them sort through their thoughts and evaluate important decisions using discussion and reflective exercises in order to ensure the lens through which their mind is viewing their circumstances is properly focused. Other female leaders who have been through similar circumstances will be able to offer clarity on what could otherwise be a foggy decision based on a perceived barrier that is not actually grounded in reality. Many of the

female leaders who participated in this interview are already providing that wisdom to other women. Stacey does not allow people to be upset about expecting a new baby. Robyn tells new moms that things will not be perfect, but that is ok. Without this guidance, these women would perhaps believe that they are not measuring up to a standard that does not actually exist. This also reinforces the need for proper mentors and female-female relationships.

Work-Life Integration

In the purpose statement of this study, it was stated that the work-life balance was to be explored. Work-life balance was defined as the reconciliation of the conflicting demands and obligations between a women's professional requirements and her personal life. After meeting with successful female leaders, the data show that there is no reconciliation between a woman's professional life and personal life. For most of the leaders in this study, these demands and obligations are all just that, demands and obligations. Instead of balancing one against the other, they see the two through an integration. Smith (2013) theorized that the answer to the work-life balance is not balancing, but rather integration. The findings in this narrative inquiry support that claim. Integration rather than balance also pairs with the findings of Miron-Spektor et al. (2017) that stated female leaders diffusing these tensions that exist between their expectations will strengthen the women leaders' resilience, gender identity and leader identity synchronicity, and her overall leadership effectiveness. Dawn shared that she does not believe in balance and used a metaphor of juggling instead. She believed that whatever ball was in your hand at that time required all of your attention and everything else was in the peripheral.

The most common response on handling these demands and obligation was with support, rather it be at home or at work. This supports Gupton's (2009) findings that an essential piece of the success of female leaders was due in part to their support. Some women mentioned that

everything has a priority level, and that's how you decide what is most important at that time. Erika felt that she must prioritize her demands, and that the prioritization had to be regularly revisited and evaluated. Sometimes she was not executing the plan correctly, and sometimes the priorities would shift. This echoes a message from McDonald, an account director for IBM (Parks, 2018). Her advice was to control where one spends her time and energy, but not on a day-to-day basis. McDonald instead sets long term goals and objectives that span months or, sometimes years. If she feels she has lost control, she will then reevaluate priorities for both work and her personal life, see where time is going, and be disciplined about meeting her newly set objectives. Erika does this as well, and mentioned in the interview that it was time for her to reevaluate. Parks also reported that Van Berne, the CFO of Amsterdam-based RIPE Network Coordination Center, had a similar message. She said not to worry about trivial things, delegate what you can, always place spending time with people that are important to you at the top of your priority list, and make sure to share and manage household responsibilities with the right partner.

The findings of this study suggest that all female leaders, their family, and their current position will all have a unique set of needs. It is important that the leader finds a way to make sure she is making time for what is most important to her, and to be continually reflective of that approach as demands and obligations shift. There is no way to do everything by yourself, so surrounding yourself with people you can trust to support you is essential.

Pursuing Growth

The women who participated in this study were all continually seeking growth opportunities. The evidence of this mindset began for many of them before they were leaders, volunteering to take on tasks and initiatives for which they were not paid and were not required

of them. Gupton's (2009) interview with successful female leaders also found that women often mentioned the importance of taking the initiative and volunteering for the job that would challenge and grow their skillset, show their willingness and initiative, and enhance their resumes. Saxon (2017), the senior director of professional strategy for Bausch + Lomb, accredits one of her most important and pivotal leadership experiences by making her own opportunities through volunteering. Whitney spoke of volunteering to help with the master schedule at a high school, which in turn gave her exposure and knowledge she did not have before. Grace worked with the Reading One Grant that eventually led her all the way to her first principalship. Volunteering as a leader outside of your workplace allows the aspiring leader to practice leading others and provide a safe place to make mistakes, as new leaders often do.

It should also be noted that the female leaders in this study never spent a long amount of time in the same school. The average amount of time spent in one school was about 4 years for these participants. This diversified their experiences working with different students, levels, colleagues, administrations, communities, and environments. These diverse sets of experiences helped build their resumes, but it also allowed them to have multiple lenses through which a leader can view problems when troubleshooting solutions. Additionally, at some point, all of these women spent time in an impoverished or low-performing school with positive results. Meaning they were able to step in to a school where students were struggling and apply leadership and policy that showed positive results for those students and that community.

Buchanan, Warning, and Tett (2012) stated that female workers show particular implicit bias against female bosses when their research study found a negative correlation between the number of jobs a woman has held and her preference for a female superior. This study conflicts with these findings. The participants in this study did not state a preference for a male over a

female boss, but they all had current female mentors, and some female supervisors, and truly respected those women and loved working for and with them.

Personal Principles and Beliefs

Being authentic, appearing human and sticking to your principles in difficult times was expressed by many participants as important to them in their successes as females. According to the female participants in this study, your beliefs and principles are essential in guiding your leadership style. It was expressed that those principles and beliefs would be questioned, by colleagues, subordinates, supervisors, and community members. According to existing literature, there are existing stereotypes or expectations that lead people to believe that leaders should act a certain way. For example, according to role contingency theory, the expected characteristics believed necessary in an effective leadership role are conflicting with the primary qualities stereotypically associated with women (Zheng, Zhang, & Darko, 2018). Dawn experienced this when a male subordinate expressed the need for her to change her disposition and the way she interacted with other subordinates in the school. She is soft spoken and wears dresses, traits associated with femininity. She was adamant leaders must be authentic. She is a proven leader with impressive results, and does not need to compromise herself to make others feel more comfortable about her leadership style. Five of the participants in this study spoke on the importance of being authentic in connection with getting good results. The premise is that as those around you see you being yourself, authentic and human, it gives them permission to also be authentic, creating a comfortable working environment where everyone can be themselves and have an opportunity to grow.

Sticking to your principles and beliefs is also very important when coaching adults. As a leader, decision making is difficult and can often have public results. It is important, according

the participants, that the decisions you make as a leader align with those beliefs and that they are for the benefits of kids. You have to be able to have difficult conversations with people about the decisions made for your organization and about their performance and not fall into a maternal role in which you try to soothe them. This can send mixed messages to the recipient. Stick to your beliefs and deliver the message that is consistent with the vision you have for your organization.

Stereotypes

Evidence from this study supports that stereotypes about female leaders has shifted drastically over the last decade. Nicole reported advice early for women in leadership was “keep your head down and don’t ruffle and feathers” and shifted to being authentic and holding on to your principals and beliefs. However, stereotypes for women still exist that female leaders must contend with and be prepared to address. Several superintendents shared that they tailor all of their coaching to meet the needs of the principals, male or female. However, they have noticed that females have issues that are specific to their gender. Robyn says that it is important for her to show up and advocate for her female principals when unfair stereotypes are placed on her female leaders by outside stakeholders. Whitney tries to coach female principals to avoid potential problems before they arise. She has seen how things can unfold and thinks it is necessary to prepare them ahead of time. According to the findings of this research study, females need to be aware of the possibilities and guide and coach other females through these situations when they arise.

Organizational Structures

While this section does contain information pertinent to females interested in learning more about females in leadership, this section will also examine how educational organizations

can facilitate conditions that would lead to fewer barriers and more opportunities for females seeking leadership positions. The areas specifically identified in this study in need of review are the demographics of the current leadership, the processes and structures used for hiring leadership candidates, and the politics that contain hidden procedures within organizations.

Demographic of Current Leadership

The demographic make-up of the leadership in an organization can have both positive and negative effects on females at all levels of leadership. Having a leader with the same demographic as an aspiring leader is not necessary for successful mentoring, but they will not be able to help navigate all of the specific challenges that are faced by that person. Flanagan's (2017) research supports needing to have women included on leadership teams; he claimed that ignoring or purposefully sidelining the skills and talents women can bring to all aspects of leadership skew organizations in damaging ways. The answer is not to make women conform to the ideal that society holds for leadership, but rather to have more examples of female leaders and the different ways in which they can be effective. Several women in this research study shared instances with organizations in which leadership expected females to fit a certain expectation for leadership or leadership did not have a diverse team from which its staff could grow and learn. For example, Stacey not working out because she was expecting a child, or Nicole not finding a mentor that could help her navigate challenges specific to African-American women. In both of those instances, Stacey and Nicole left those organizations and found new ones where they did have opportunity to grow. They both eventually became principals, superintendents, and directors at the executive level. They both found success and brought positive change that ultimately affected thousands of students. Those organizations missed an

opportunity to when they lost those key players. How many more potential leaders have those organizations lost by not diversifying their team and their thinking?

On the contrary, diverse leadership teams seek and offer opportunity to a diverse set of possible leaders. A larger pool of people will feel supported in joining the organization with opportunity to work with someone who looks like them and can help navigate them through challenges that are specific to their demographic. Evidence from this research study supports that having a diverse leadership team offers a diverse set of perspectives to bring to an organization and allows for more objective practices. Furthermore, other research suggests that a diverse leadership team allows people to feel comfortable being their authentic selves. Ely (1995) found that in gender balanced organizations, women were more comfortable integrating masculine expressions and attributes with their expressions of femininity, and they experienced less anxiety, ambivalence, and tension about feeling required to act more masculine in their leadership roles at work.

Diversifying a leadership team purposefully may seem like a politically correct move to make a statement, however, it has long term implications and benefits to the organization past positive press. Women pursuing leadership should look for organizations that meet the qualifications needed for them to be able to grow, learn, and have promotional opportunities, and an organization with a diverse set of leaders is a good sign that they will have those qualifications.

Hiring Processes

Upon speaking to participants about their barriers and opportunities when receiving, or not receiving, leadership positions they had applied for, responses shed light on the fact that hiring processes in an organization can create an unintentionally subjective and biased

experience that can keep women from the leadership opportunities. Organizations should evaluate their practices to ensure that structures are in place for evaluating and hiring candidates objectively and give equal opportunity to all candidates, regardless of gender. According to the findings of this research study, a formal process in which candidates are subject to multiple rounds of elimination; a scoring rubric for each round; performance-based tasks that include writing, questions and answers, and role playing; and a diverse panel that oversees the process allows for a more objective structure, giving possible female candidates more opportunity to show their value to the organization.

Politics

When asked about barriers that were experienced in both the pursuit and attainment of a leadership roles, the majority of the female participants cited politics within the organization as an issue for them. There are systems, rules, and procedures that are hidden within organizations that are difficult to navigate. If women are the minority in these systems, they become increasingly difficult to see those systems and learn to navigate them appropriately. Organizations should investigate and evaluate if they have hidden political systems that effect their ability to give promotional opportunities to women that could add value. If the majority of women are citing this as an issue to upward mobility, it is worthy of further investigation. Several participants shared that one way they stay prepared for political advantages is to be able to communicate to people what you can bring to the organization based on the organization's needs and philosophy. This is something candidates routinely do for interviews, but this study found that this is a political tool for planting seeds when having social interactions with others from an organization. Gupton (2009) had a similar evidence when successful female leaders shared it was a necessary

skill when it came time to communicate to prospective employers what they have to offer as a young or emerging administrative candidate.

Recommendations for Practice

Recommendations for practice include recommendations for females aspiring to and currently holding leadership positions in K-12 public education and organizations in K-12 public education. These recommendations are meant to assist aspiring and current female leaders by offering insights that may strengthen their professional experiences through their relationships and mindsets. Recommendations can assist organizations by helping them tap into a larger talent pool for potential leadership by examining their current structures and processes. In doing so, organizations can generate greater positive results with more women in leadership positions within their organization.

Recommendations for Women

- **Continually seek female mentors with which to connect.** Females with leadership aspirations should seek, create, and maintain relationships with female leaders and excel at her current assignments in order to attract and secure effective mentors.
- **Be a mentor to other woman trying to grow.** Mentoring other women through challenges is cyclic. It creates more opportunities for women aspiring for more, who will in turn, do the same for women below them.
- **Continually expand and strengthen networks.** Networking can provide opportunities by extending one's ability to find out about open positions and having networks advocate on ones behalf.

- **Create opportunities for female-female collaboration.** Faculty and staff in schools, including the leadership, have limited knowledge and visibility of the extent to which females can be seen in senior leadership positions within their organizations and have limited interactions with their abilities and work. The opportunities for women to meet, collaborate, and share within a safe environment must be available, intentional, and supported by senior leadership within the organization.
- **Mindset must be periodically evaluated and reset to meet changing circumstances.** Sort through thoughts and evaluate important decisions using discussion and reflective exercises in order to ensure the lens through which the mind is viewing current circumstances is properly focused.
- **Make time for what is most important, and be continually reflective of that approach as demands and obligations shift.** Control where time and energy is spent, but not on a day-to-day basis. Set long term goals and objectives that span months or, sometimes years. Continually reevaluate priorities for both work and personal life, see where time is going, and be disciplined about meeting objectives.
- **Accept support, personally and professionally.** There is no way for one person to do everything, so counting on people one can trust to provide support where needed is essential.
- **Take risks and diversify experiences.** Working with different students, levels, colleagues, administrations, communities, and environments allows one to expand her skills and networks and to have multiple lenses through which a leader can view problems when trouble shooting solutions.

- **Be authentic.** Being yourself, authentic and human, gives others permission to also be authentic, creating a comfortable working environment where everyone can be themselves and have an opportunity to grow. There is no need to change your looks or disposition in an attempt to be what others think a leader looks like.
- **Take initiative and volunteer for jobs that will provide challenges and grow one's skills.** Volunteering for jobs outside of one's role and skillset allows that female to practice leading, build one's resume, and provide a safe place to make mistakes, as new leaders often do.

Recommendations for Organizations

- **Diversify the leadership team.** Diversifying a leadership team purposefully may seem like a politically correct move to make a statement, however, it has long term implications and benefits to the organization past positive press. This attracts all types of possible leadership which expands organizational possibilities and will have diverse approaches and perspectives to add to all structures.
- **Evaluate processes for hiring leaders.** Ensure that structures are in place for evaluating and hiring candidates objectively and give equal opportunity to all candidates, regardless of gender. A formal process in which candidates are subject to multiple rounds of elimination; a scoring rubric for each round; performance-based tasks that include writing, questions and answers, and role playing; and a diverse panel that oversees the process allows for a more objective structure, giving possible female candidates more opportunity to show their value to the organization.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this research study was able to uncover some interesting and informative information, it also brought to light further research that could assist females aspiring to and those that have obtained leadership positions. The findings of the research are based on the respondents that agreed to participate in this study. These are all women who have successfully obtained leadership positions, and therefore, have overcome many barriers and obstacles to reach this point in their careers. Additional information could help fully understand the extent of the barriers presented in this study if questions could be answered by:

- Females who left leadership roles due to work-life conflicts.
- Females who wish to pursue leadership roles, but are worried that they cannot due to the assumed time commitment.
- Childless females that are not pursuing leadership due to future family planning.

Females participants spoke of barriers that were in their heads. Further research could be conducted to investigate from where these perceived barriers manifest. Further research in the The Firehawks could expand the research on how this group was able to create such a pro-causal female effect through their meetings. Additionally, Further research into organizational hiring processes for leadership positions could help identify processes that create unbiased opportunities for more candidates.

Conclusions

The purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to explore the barriers and opportunities women in K-12 public leadership face, particularly with how they navigate conflicts in their work-life balance and in what ways they have been afforded opportunities. Through the women in this study, it was determined that a female leader's work and life are not balanced, but rather,

integrated. When searching for circumstances that create barriers and opportunities, the themes that emerged were generally found in both categories identifying barriers and opportunities, implying that depending on the context, these themes hold the ability to create inverse consequences.

Women who have been successful in obtaining leadership positions in K-12 public education navigate these circumstances as one would navigate a labyrinth. If a path ended in a dead end, they reflected on how they got there and sought a new avenue. These female leaders continued this process until they found the right path for them personally. Successful women sharing their experiences and journeys with me for the purpose of this study, in both their pursuit and execution of their leadership roles, will be used to provide a source for other women to obtain ideas for leadership development and strategies for success in order to better navigate the labyrinth in which they find themselves getting lost.

The answers to the overarching question of this research study, “What circumstances do females encounter as they aspire to and obtain leadership positions in K-12 education?” will contribute to the literature concerning aspiring and current female leaders by offering insights that may strengthen their professional experiences through their relationships, with particular attention to mentors, networking, and relationships between females, and through mindsets, with particular attention to personal mental barriers, work-life integration, pursuing growth opportunities, maintaining their personal principles and beliefs, and how to navigate stereotypes females inadvertently experience. It will also contribute to existing literature about how organizations might tap into a larger talent pool for potential leadership by examining their current structures and processes, particularly through examining the demographic make-up of their current leadership, the leadership hiring processes, and the politics that exist within their

organization. In doing so, organizations can generate greater positive results with more women in leadership positions within their organization. Furthermore, organizations with men and women equally represented on leadership teams influences the stringency with which people view gender roles.

Because the participants in this study are women who have successfully navigated the barriers that were identified, further research is recommended to understand the females that aspire to leadership positions or have held leadership positions but are not currently occupying a leadership position due to unsuccessfully navigating those identified barriers. Further research is also recommended to investigate the hiring processes organizations use in order to identify unbiased practices that offer equal opportunity to all candidates, regardless of gender.

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APPENDICIES

Appendix A

Interview Template

1. Tell me a little about yourself.
2. What is your educational background?
3. How long have you been in the field of education?
4. At what point did you know you wanted to pursue a leadership position?
5. How long after that decision did you begin pursuing leadership?
6. Describe your leadership journey.
7. Describe any barriers that you feel you encountered in pursuing leadership positions.
8. What types of opportunities were available to you when you were pursuing a leadership position?
9. Describe any barriers that you feel you encountered after attaining your leadership position.
10. What types of opportunities have you had after attaining your leadership position?
11. What advice do you have for aspiring female administrators?
12. Do you have anything else you would like to add?

Appendix B

Outreach Email

Good (morning/afternoon/evening),

My name is Misty Sweat, and I currently serve as the (role) at (school) in (city). I am also a Doctoral Candidate with the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at East Tennessee State University (ETSU) conducting research on women in leadership. I am conducting a study that investigates the circumstances females encounter as they aspire to and obtain leadership positions in K-12 public education with the goal of discovering information that will help more females through this process.

I am looking for females holding public K-12 education principal positions or those that lead public K-12 education principals for my study, and you were referred or identified as someone that would be ideal for my research. This participation involves an interview, which should take about an hour. I will share the results of my study with you upon its completion, and your confidentiality will be strictly maintained. The interview will take place at a date, time, and location that is most convenient for you. Please consider participating. Participation is voluntary. If you have any questions, please contact me at (email) or (cell phone number).

Thanks so much for your consideration,

Misty Sweat

(Professional signature with contact information)

VITA

MISTY MARIE SWEAT

Education: East Tennessee State University. Johnson City, TN
Ed.D. Educational Leadership, 2019

University of Memphis, Memphis, TN
M.Ed. Instructional and Curriculum Leadership, 2014

University of Memphis, Memphis, TN
B.S. Mathematics

Professional Experience: Instructional Accountability Facilitator, 2019 – Present
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, NC

Mathematics Facilitator, 2018 – 2019
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, NC

Professional Development Facilitator, 2017 – 2018
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, NC

9-12 Mathematics Teacher, 2016 – 2019
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, NC

External Review Team Member, 2016-2017
AdvancED, Nashville, TN

9-12 Mathematics Online Course Designer\Adjunct Instructor,
2013 – 2018
Bristol Tennessee City Schools, TN

Doctoral Fellow, 2015 – 2016
East Tennessee State University, TN

9-12 Mathematics Teacher, 2014 – 2015
Washington County Schools, TN

6-8 Mathematics Curriculum Designer\Curriculum Writer\Teacher,
2013 – 2014
Sullivan County School, TN

9-12 IB Mathematics Teacher, 2010 – 2012
Shelby County Schools, TN

9-12 Science Teacher, 2009 – 2010

Shelby County Schools, TN

- Professional Presentations: Canvas for Beginners, Presenter, 2019
New Teacher Institute, Charlotte, NC
- Online Project-Based Learning, Presenter, 2017
Northeast Tennessee CanvasCon, Johnson City, TN
- Harmonizing Math and Science, Presenter, 2016
NSTA National Conference, Nashville, TN
- STEM in a Digital Classroom, Presenter, 2016
AdvancED STEM Summit, Middle Tennessee State University,
TN
- STEM: What Works in Classrooms, Panel Member, 2016
AdvancED STEM Summit, Middle Tennessee State University,
TN
- Project Based Learning in an Online Forum, Presenter, 2016
Administrators Technology Academy, Knoxville, TN
- Transitioning from a Traditional to an Integrated Math Program,
Webinar Presenter, 2016
Professional Educators of Tennessee, Statewide
- Canvas for Administrators, Presenter, 2015
Washington County Schools, TN