

In Her Own Voice: Gender Discrimination Facing K-12 Female Educational Leaders

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Dedication and Acknowledgements

In keeping with the theme of this study, I would first like to begin by giving homage to the long line of women in my family that have forged the path for me to have the ability to complete this momentous accomplishment. To my great grandmothers, grandmothers, aunts, cousins, and mother who faced barriers and challenges personally and professionally in their lives and persevered. They might not view themselves as strong or courageous but to me, they exhibited the silent strength to push through challenging times, they made a way for themselves professionally when they faced cultural and social traditions that did not encourage women in leadership roles, and they were unyielding in supporting their families so the next generation of Szewczyk and Celano women could aim for success and accomplish their dreams.

The research and data collected from the women leaders in this study uncovered two attributes of successful women that I see reflected in my own life and contributed to my attainment of this great academic milestone. Stated in the literature and expressed by the participants, there is a relationship between the expectations that parents hold for their children of both genders and the expectations that the children hold for themselves. Growing up I believed that I could achieve anything, and education was the gateway to success. I never considered that I would ever face barriers or challenges based on my gender. The guidance, sacrifices, and unwavering belief in my abilities that I received from my parents have been the driving force behind my academic journey. Mom and Dad, your boundless support and encouragement have been the foundation upon which I've built my dreams. From instilling in me a love for learning to providing endless encouragement and wisdom, you have shaped not only my academic pursuits but also the person I am today. A 'thank you' will never be enough but know how much you mean to me. Thank you as well to my brother, Chris, who always served as my biggest academic inspiration and editor. As I reach this milestone in my academic career, I am profoundly grateful for all of your love, guidance, and unwavering belief in me. This dissertation is a testament to your enduring influence on my life and my scholarly pursuits.

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Abstract

The number of women in the education field in comparison to men shows a gender disparity. According to the United States Department of Education (2023) for the 2020-2021 school year, 77% of full- and part-time public-school teachers were female and 23% were male. Despite high rates of women in the teaching profession, they are underrepresented in administrative roles, and there are documented internal and external barriers and challenges that prevent women from aspiring to and/or seeking a leader role (Diez Gutierrez, 2016; Kruse & Krumm, 2016). There are women, however, that have overcome these barriers and challenges and have secured an educational leadership role (Diez Gutierrez, 2016; Kruse & Krumm, 2016; Uwizeyimana & Mathevula, 2014). The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to describe the gender barriers and challenges of twenty females in their role as an educational leader within K-12 public schools in Northeastern Pennsylvania. Special focus explored how the gender barriers and challenges encountered in the pursuit of a leadership position compared to the barriers and challenges while serving as an educational leader and what strategies were employed to overcome them. The seven themes that emerged from the interview data included Aspirations, Smooth Ride to the Top, Support System, Changing Titles, Time Constraints, Gender Bias and Discrimination, and Strategies. The women participants, overall, did not seem to have barriers or challenges in acquiring a leadership position but there exist challenges in the position that can be traced back to traditional gender roles and the patriarchal structure that still persists within society.

Keywords: female educational leaders, K-12 leaders, support systems, gender bias and discrimination

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Chapter 1: The Problem and Its Setting

The field of education has been widely stereotyped as feminized work, and the profession attracts women as it provides a great schedule for working mothers. This stereotype found its genesis in educators of the 1800s that declared women were the ‘natural’ teachers and were better suited to teach children especially in grade school (LeQuire, 2016). Therefore, women were encouraged to enter the field of education, and they have been ever since. The number of women in the education field in comparison to men shows this gender disparity. According to the United States Department of Education (2023) for the 2020-2021 school year, 77% of full- and part-time public-school teachers were female and 23% were male. When aggregating the data to elementary and secondary levels, 89% of elementary school teachers were female in comparison to 64% at the secondary level. Translating this into numbers, there were 874,000 male teachers in the 2020-2021 school year nationwide and 2,926,000 females. Despite high rates of women in the teaching profession, they are underrepresented in administrative roles. In the year 2000, only 13.1% of the 14,000 school districts in the United States were led by a woman. This almost doubled to 24.1% in 2010, but then only modest gains were reported in 2020 with 26.68% of school districts having a female superintendent (Modan, 2020). Low rates of women in leadership roles are also present at the higher-education level. Women represent only 26% of college presidents, 13% of medical school deans, and 30% of law school deans (Brower et al., 2019).

The reasons for the lack of female educational leaders have been well-studied and documented. Women face barriers attaining an administrative position as leaders have been

traditionally regarded as males. Traits such as confidence and assertiveness are synonymous with male leaders while women are stereotyped with communal traits such as concern for others, sensitivity, and nurturance (Northouse, 2019). Conflicting gender stereotypes cause women to experience cross-pressure where they attempt to exhibit male leadership traits but then are labeled as being too masculine or not feminine enough. If female leaders emphasize group processes and consensus they are judged as being too communal (Brower et al., 2019). Therefore, women in positions of power are fighting against beliefs about leadership and power and the perpetuation of masculine leadership (Diez Gutierrez, 2016).

In addition, there are also pervasive gender stereotypes and gender roles that segregate women in the workforce into roles that are not as prestigious. Statistics revealed that in the field of education women greatly outnumber men at the teacher level but are underrepresented at the administrator level. If women are in a position of power, they are often more concentrated at the least prestigious level as an elementary principal and were less likely to serve as the head of a school district as superintendent (Kruse & Krumm, 2016). One researcher claimed that the low representation of women in leadership positions within schools is directly related to the dominant patriarchal worldview that is ingrained into society (Diez Gutierrez, 2016). According to Brower et al. (2019), this patriarchal social paradigm is evident through the data that shows women having a greater tolerance for accepting men as their superiors than men have for accepting women as their superiors. Women moving into leadership roles also challenge the 'old boys' club' and the invisible network that has been forged among men within the organization to be successful. Men are, therefore, favored in recruitment and promotional practices because these procedures are managed largely by other males within this network (Uwizeyimana & Mathevula, 2014).

Lastly, women also face cultural and social pressures based on stereotypes and gender roles that are not experienced by men. When men move into leadership roles it is celebrated and it is widely acceptable for a man to devote less attention to his family (Korver, 2021). It is often the opposite reaction for a woman. Undertaking a leadership role for a woman is perceived as a problem and correlated directly with the assumption that she is neglecting other responsibilities such as emotional neglect of her partner, less time for childcare, and neglect of household chores (Diez Gutierrez, 2016). Females are more likely to have household and childcare responsibilities that hinder them from taking on leadership positions at work that would require more time and energy (Korver, 2021).

Women represent a large segment of the education profession but face internal and external barriers and challenges that prevent them from aspiring to and/or seeking a leader role (Diez Gutierrez, 2016; Kruse & Krumm, 2016). These barriers and challenges include gender-role discrimination that prevents their hiring as well as cultural/social pressures such as child and household responsibilities that prevent the females from seeking positions of power. The present study analyzed and highlighted the experiences of women K-12 educational leaders who have overcome some of these barriers and challenges to attain their leadership roles and studied their journey in the position. Through the exploration of this phenomenon, recommendations were made that will encourage educational organizations to create more hospitable environments for women to thrive in leadership roles and be respected regardless of gender.

Theoretical Framework

The root and continuance of the lack of women educational leaders is complex, multifaceted, and has been studied from many different angles (Diez Gutierrez, 2016; Kruse & Krumm, 2016; Uwizeyimana & Mathevula, 2014). Social scientists have researched the

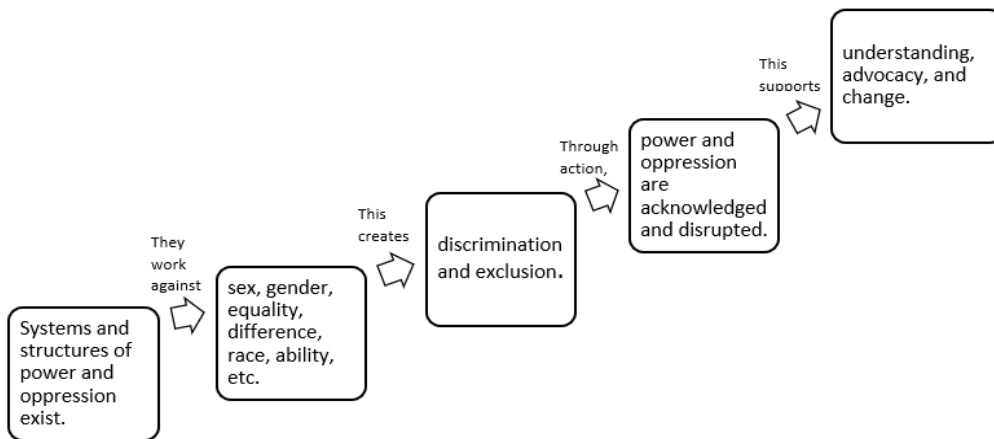
influence of gender socialization, gender roles, and gender stereotypes, as well as social policies that make it difficult for women to synchronize work and family roles (Lippa, Preston, & Penner, 2014). Others have approached the subject through the lens of the differences between educational backgrounds of men and women and found that to accommodate family responsibilities, female teachers earn more advanced degrees while remaining in the classroom and raising children and are, therefore, more prepared for administrative positions (Kruse & Krumm, 2016; Watt, 2008). While others dove into the interests, values, and motivation of both genders and uncovered differences between the seeking of leadership roles (Ceci & Williams, 2007; Kaufman, 2010). After synthesizing the literature on the lack of women leaders in education, as well as other industries, the barrier that continues to be prominent is social structure of gender roles. Gender roles segregate women and men into different professions and normalize men, and not women, in leadership roles.

The problem was viewed through the lens of the Feminist Standpoint Theory (Bowell, n.d.; Kruse & Krumm, 2016). As with other feminist theories, it would be somewhat misleading to represent it as a single set of epistemological commitments or a single methodological approach, and it is best described as several theories with common themes (Bowell, n.d.). These theories specifically describe the systems of viewing inequalities and/or exploitations of women from the standpoint in which they view the world (Kruse & Krumm, 2016). Standpoint feminism stresses the view that the social situations experienced by women due to gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and physical capabilities are central in forming an understanding of what women experience while also simultaneously limiting understanding unless one is in that standpoint (Bowell, n.d.). Since women's lives are much different than men's in almost all cultures and societies, they "see and understand the world in ways that are different from and

challenging to the existing male-biased conventional wisdom” (Narayan, 1989, p. 256, as cited by Kruse & Krumm, 2016).

Feminist standpoint theory is based on the following beliefs: “knowledge is socially situated; marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of things and ask questions than it is for the non-marginalized; and research, particularly that focused on power relations, should begin with the lives of the marginalized” (Bowell, n.d.). This theory emphasizes that social constructs, rather than characteristics of the group, shape the conditions and experiences common to girls and women and make their lives systematically and structurally different from men’s lives (Wood, 2012). When studying these groups, acquiring knowledge from the marginalized social situated groups is more complete than knowledge from the non-marginalized as the subordinated groups are more likely to understand both their own social group’s perspective and the perspective of the dominant group (Wood, 2012). Studying marginalized group locations and knowledge sheds light on the lives of the members of the group and the dominate group practices that continue to cultivate inequality.

Figure 1
Model of Feminist Theory

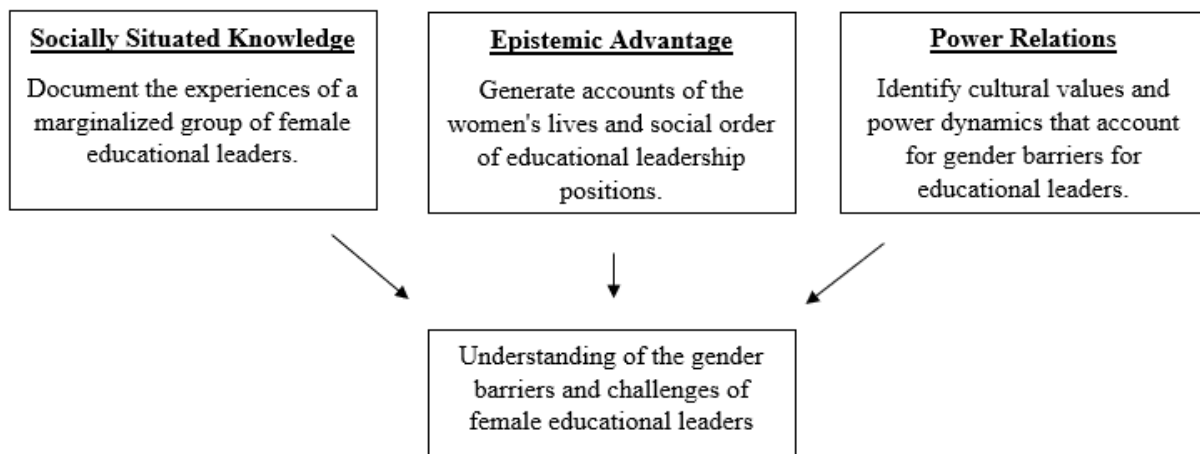


Note: Schematic model of Feminist Standpoint Theory. Adapted from Egbert, J., & Roe, M. F. (Eds.). (n.d.). *Theoretical Models for Teaching and Research*. Pressbooks. Open Text Washington State University. Retrieved March 22, 2023, from <https://opentext.wsu.edu/theoreticalmodelsforteachingandresearch/>.

Conceptual Framework

This study sought to investigate the perceptions and experiences of female educational leaders in K-12 schools in Northeastern Pennsylvania regarding gender barriers and challenges. The study also explored strategies that female educational leaders utilize to overcome the challenges to their leadership position based on their gender. This study utilized the Feminist Standpoint theory to guide the research which is based on the beliefs that knowledge is socially situated. Women, along with other marginalized groups, provide an epistemic advantage on the power structure between the dominant group (males) and marginalized groups, and women have a standpoint to highlight the cultural values and power relations that contribute to subordination (Bowell, n.d.). The diagram below demonstrates how the Feminist Standpoint theory merges with the present study by documenting the experiences of a marginalized group of female K-12 leaders, generating accounts of the women’s lives and social order in these positions, and identifying cultural values and power dynamics that account for gender barriers.

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework for the Study of Female Educational Leaders



Purpose

Women, while representing a large segment of the education profession, continue to face internal and external barriers and challenges that prevent them from aspiring and/or seeking an educational leader role (Diez Gutierrez, 2016; Kruse & Krumm, 2016; Uwizeyimana & Mathevula, 2014). However, there are some women that have overcome these barriers and challenges and have secured an educational leadership role (Diez Gutierrez, 2016; Kruse & Krumm, 2016; Uwizeyimana & Mathevula, 2014). The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to describe the gender barriers and challenges to females in their role as an educational leader within K-12 public schools in Northeastern Pennsylvania. Special focus explored how the gender barriers and challenges encountered in the pursuit of a leadership position compared to the barriers and challenges while serving as an educational leader and what strategies were employed to overcome them. In the research, gender barriers are defined as something immaterial that blocks or impedes access to a leadership position while a challenge is something that tests one's abilities or resources in a demanding but stimulating undertaking (Farlex, n.d.; Merriam-Webster, n.d). Recommendations for practice are presented to aid in encouraging and supporting women in education administrative positions. These findings can be used for aspiring educators, those currently in practice, and others within the field to create a culture where females have equal access to educational leadership positions.

Research Question

The following research question guided this study:

What is the lived experience of female educational leaders in their role in Northeast Pennsylvania K-12 public schools who faced gender barriers and challenges in their position?

Sub Questions

- Sub question 1: How do the gender barriers and challenges encountered in the pursuit of a leadership position compare to the barriers and challenges while serving as an educational leader?
- Sub question 2: What strategies were employed by these female educational leaders to overcome the barriers and challenges to their leadership position?

Definitions

Barrier – Barrier is defined as something immaterial that blocks or impedes access (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Challenge – In this study, a challenge is defined as something that tests one's abilities or resources in a demanding but stimulating undertaking (Farlex, n.d.).

Educational leader – In this study, the term educational leader is used interchangeably with the term administrator who serves as executive director, assistant executive director, superintendent, assistant superintendent, special education director, curriculum director, principal, or assistant principal.

Gender bias – Gender bias is behavior toward a person that results in receiving different treatment based on the person's real or perceived gender identity rather than real differences in ability (Cornell Law School, 2020).

Gender stereotype – Gender stereotype in this research study is defined as the socially shared expectations, attributes, or beliefs that apply to persons of the male and female gender (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

K-12 education - For this study K-12 education includes the students and teachers of grades kindergarten to 12.

Leadership – Leadership in this study is defined as a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2019).

Local Educational Agency (LEA) - A LEA is a public board of education or other public authority within a state that provides administrative control and direction for public elementary and/or secondary schools in a city, county, township, school district or other political subdivision of a state. LEAs can be school districts, intermediate units or charter schools (Allen, 2022).

Northeastern Pennsylvania – This area of Pennsylvania is comprised of Lackawanna, Luzerne, Monroe, Pike, Susquehanna, and Wayne counties (Northeastern Pennsylvania Alliance, 2014).

Public School - In this study a public school is a brick-and-mortar institution for the teaching of children that is established and maintained under the laws of the state of Pennsylvania at public expense. A public school can be an elementary, middle or junior high school, secondary or high school (Zinth, 2005).

Delimitations

The scope of the research study focused on K-12 female school administrators from LEAs in Northeastern Pennsylvania. While this was done for convenience, it delimits the number and diversity of participants. Participants were comprised of 20 school administrators who served in any of the following roles during the 2022-2023 school year: executive director, assistant executive director, superintendent, assistant superintendent, special education director,

curriculum director, principal, or assistant principal. Those that responded to the researcher's call for participants may be more likely to volunteer to complete such requests and may be fundamentally different than those that chose not to participate. This may have led to a biased sample.

Assumptions

It was assumed that the experiences of female participants were different from male educational leaders. It was also assumed that the participants would share similar experiences in their position or in the attainment of their position. Finally, it was assumed that participants would be open and honest in their interview responses.

Significance of the Study

Despite high rates of women in the teaching profession, they are greatly underrepresented in the leadership roles within schools. In the school year 2020-2021, 77% of public school teachers were female while less than 27% of school districts had a female superintendent and fewer than 36 % had a female high school principal (Taie & Lewis, 2022; United States Department of Education, 2023). Previous research uncovered that there are internal and external barriers and challenges that prevent women from aspiring to and/or seeking a leader role (Diez Gutierrez, 2016; Korver, 2021). These barriers and challenges include gender-role discrimination that prevents their hiring and negatively impacts their performance evaluation as well as cultural/social pressures such as household responsibilities and the patriarchal view of male leaders (Campos-Garcia & Zúñiga-Vicente, 2019; Lippa, Preston, & Penner, 2014). The lack of women leaders in education may be a result of discrimination and inequalities between the genders. The imbalance was studied to prevent this bias from perpetuating and influencing future

generations. This may lead to school entities creating environments where social constructs display equity and equality for all marginalized groups.

Women have been historically viewed as secondary to men with their unique strengths ignored (Northouse, 2019). There is a perpetuation that men's experience in leadership roles stand for all human experiences and the voice of women that do hold these positions are shut out (Gilligan, 2016). Hence, the situation has been created within society where leadership is synonymous with men and male agentic characteristics such as competition and instrumentality, typical masculine leadership traits, are expected of both male and female leaders (Diez Gutierrez, 2016; Northouse, 2019). Much can be gained from women in administrative roles as they operate with leadership styles utilizing communal qualities and emphasizing participation among subordinates (Northouse, 2019). So, while it may be contradictory to the ideal of what leaders should look like and how they should behave, having more women in leadership positions will aid in changing the cultural vision of leadership.

The inequality in the number of male to female school administrators, whether intentional or unintentional, perpetuates sex discrimination. "We silently say to young girls that leadership is a masculine role and when they see that the majority of their teachers are female, but the leader of the school or school division is a male we continue to perpetuate the substantial gender roles that are still part of our culture" (Eagly & Sczesny, 2009 as cited in Krover, 2021, p. 68). As it has been continually shown, despite the positive strides that have been made in gender roles since the 1970s and the dramatic increases in the number of women in the workforce, the role of school administrator continues to display marked sex segregation (Lippa, Preston, & Penner, 2014). For adolescent girls experiencing a school environment that is rooted in highlighting the experiences of powerful men, this marks the beginning of self-doubt and development of

psychological dissociation between societal expectations and the hearing or listening to one's voice (Gilligan, 2016). The internalization of this environment may add another layer to the glass ceiling for women, but this barrier, unfortunately, will be one that girls place there themselves. They may doubt their abilities to be leaders and will be exposed to the social and cultural barriers in their pursuit of leadership if they so choose. Without a more encompassing view of what leadership can look like, the next generation of boys and girls will continue to accept past gender roles and stereotypes regarding their leadership abilities and capabilities (Gilligan, 2016).

The lack of female educational leaders has many origins and continues based on a multitude of social norms and stereotypes (Eagly et al., 2020). From a broad perspective, there exists social norms and gender role stereotypes that influence how women and men should act, what professions they should seek, and what leadership looks like (Diez Gutierrez, 2016). Women and men are then raised with these social norms, and they become part of the fabric of their moral and psychological development. Narrowing the focus at the individual level, young males and females internalize and perpetuate the expectations of their gender which lead to discrimination and biases (Gilligan, 2016). Therefore, this study aided in sharing the voices of female educational leaders in their current roles. Their stories can be used to normalize women in leadership roles. Locally, this study can educate male and female educators on the discrimination that exists in schools within Northeastern Pennsylvania for female leaders. And at the personal level, the stories of the women in the study can encourage female educators to follow in the footsteps of the women that forged a path to seek a leadership role and overcame gender discrimination in those roles. They may see the barriers and challenges that were encountered and will use the experiences of these female leaders to persevere in their own pursuits. While there exists well-documented gender barriers and challenges for women in their pursuit of a

leadership role due to gender role stereotypes, a patriarchal society, and cultural pressures of motherhood and household responsibilities, this study specifically studied the gender barriers and challenges that arise while in the leadership position.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Historically, the education field began as a mainly male-dominated profession but pivoted to one that is predominately female due to changes in society. Education in the early colonies was only for boys from wealthy families and consisted of religion, reading, Latin, and mathematics to aid in college studies and business. These classes were taught by males since females could not attend grammar school or college. America's massive social and industrial changes of the mid-1800s, however, transformed the education system and shaped the feminization of teaching (LeQuire, 2016). With the Industrial Revolution, males began to leave the teaching profession to seek wealth in the owning and operating of factories, railroads, mining companies, and in the stock market. The increase of available work in America attracted waves of immigrants, and ultimately children, to eastern cities and states. Additionally, in 1884, public funds began to be used to support the expansion of secondary schools (Armstrong, 2012). With males leaving the profession, more children needing schooling, and the expansion of secondary schools, teachers were in high demand. It was at this time that women were called upon to take the place of male teachers as they were natural teachers, were more benevolent, and were more qualified to work with human development (LeQuire, 2016). Normal schools in the United States began to be established to educate and train female teachers, and in some areas of the country this was the only means for women to achieve an advanced education (Bohan & Null, 2007). Teaching allowed females to hold a high and honorable profession and to gain economic independence, especially for single educated women. By the 1930s female teachers were largely

successful in the push to create teacher unions. However, despite the gains they achieved, few females forged ahead into administrative roles (LeQuire, 2016).

Barriers and Challenges

There are multiple documented and theorized reasons for the barriers and challenges that impede women as they attempt to climb the organizational ladder into leadership positions. Many of these barriers and challenges even exist as architectural metaphors that attempt to describe what women face in the workplace. The ‘glass ceiling,’ first coined in 1986 by two *Wall Street Journal* reporters, describes an invisible barrier to advancement in a profession beyond a certain level (Brown et al., 2020, Northouse, 2019). Despite increased awareness of the glass ceiling effect across academia, industry, and society more widely, many women continue to struggle to attain career positions equal to their male colleagues, even when they have comparable skills and experience (Brown et al., 2020). Another metaphor that highlights the struggle of career progression of women is the term ‘sticky floor’ which describes the position of women where fewer are promoted and are offered less resources at the start of their careers to set their trajectory (Brown et al., 2020). Research has found that women not only face barriers by the ‘glass ceiling’ in terms of advancement but were ‘stuck to the floor’ by the lack of investment by the organization (Brown et al., 2020). Some women that do rise to senior-level management positions are still barred from the inner sanctum of male executives by a ‘glass wall’ (Klenke, 2017). This term indicates that although some organizations are promoting women and they are breaking the ‘glass ceiling,’ these women are still barred from upper echelon leadership positions.

Eagly and Carli (2007) identified faults with the glass ceiling metaphor as it implied that everyone has equal access to promotions until women hit this single, invisible, and impenetrable

barrier. They offered the image of a labyrinth instead where women experience challenges throughout, not just progressing to leadership. Alternatively, Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg (2013) in her book, *Lean In*, describes career paths as a jungle gym where there are multiple ways to get to the top. Regardless of the metaphor, the persistent barriers and challenges that women face include traditional gender roles, patriarchal social constructs, structures that are unsupportive of work-family balance, and a lack of effective mentors and resources that would champion female ambitions (Brown et al., 2020).

Gender Role Stereotypes

One of the primary barriers that impedes women in career advancement are traditional gender role stereotypes. Gender roles provide a means for our brains to categorize individuals. Scientists estimate that at any given moment, a person can be exposed to 11 million bits of information per second even though the brain can only process 50 bits of information per second (Pickard et al., 2015). Therefore, to effectively process the most information, the brain activates a shortcut to categorize information by using previous experiences and the cultural environment. When members of one gender occupy or perform certain roles more than members of the other gender, the associated traits become engraved as aligning with one gender (Eagly et al., 2020). Young children begin to recognize the gender groups based on reproductive functions and understand the differences between the two groups through direct observations of their behaviors and indirect observations through social sharing and cultural representations (Eagly et al., 2020). The extent to which these beliefs become prevalent within the culture depends upon people within the same society having similar observations. Individuals acquire some versions of their cultural gender role stereotypes and assign these stereotypes upon viewing role-constrained

behaviors. Therefore, gender role stereotypes are pervasive and highly resistant to change (Northouse, 2019).

Because of the importance of gender role stereotypes, much research has been conducted. Eagly et al. (2020) are some of these researchers and emphasize the themes of communion and agency in their studies of gender. *Communion* orients people to others and their well-being, and they express traits such as concern for others, sensitivity, and nurturance. *Agency* orients people to the self and their own mastery and goal attainment, and they exhibit characteristics such as confidence, assertiveness, rationality, and decisiveness (Eagly et al., 2020; Northouse, 2019). Predominantly, women are viewed as communal and males as agentic which arise from the direct and indirect observations of each gender in their social roles. The behaviors associated with communion and agency have influenced the gender role stereotype and has permeated which professions are more suitable for each gender (Northouse, 2019).

These stereotypes are especially challenging for women as they can lead to biased judgements about who should be leaders. The traits of a leader often align to the masculine agentic characteristics which is expressed in the phrase, “think manager, think male” (Diez Gutierrez, 2016, p. 348). For women, the agentic qualities thought necessary for a leadership role are incompatible with the communal qualities that are often assigned to the female gender. Therefore, it can be challenging for women as they attempt to pursue leadership roles. Not only do women in leadership positions fight against pervasive gender role stereotypes, but they also face cross pressures of expressing communal traits associated with their gender and agentic traits aligned with leadership roles (Northouse, 2019). Women who emphasize competition and instrumentality, typical masculine leadership traits, are perceived by both men and women as “too manly,” but then can be viewed as not being “female enough” when showing these

leadership traits (Northouse, 2019, p. 410). Likewise, women who emphasize group processes and consensus are judged as being “too communal” (Brower et al., 2019, p.121). These opposing expectations for women result in the perception that they are less qualified and effective in elite leadership positions (Northouse, 2019).

Women who violate gender role stereotypes are penalized in the workplace in terms of hiring, compensation, and evaluations. A 2012 study found that when evaluating identical resumes for a lab manager position from a male student and a female student, science faculty members of both sexes gave better marks to the male applicant and offered the potential female candidate a lower starting salary (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012). Both men and women undervalue the performance of women and overvalue the performance of men in male-dominated professions even when the evaluation was intended to be fair and objective (Stewart & LaVaque-Manty, 2008). Researchers have found that confident and assertive women who were not perceived as nurturing received lower hire-ability ratings than men who were not perceived as nurturing (Brower et al., 2019). Similarly, a meta-analysis reviewing gender and the evaluation of leaders showed that women leaders who were perceived as uncaring received lower performance evaluations than men who were perceived at the same level of uncaring (Brower et al., 2019).

Bias in the workplace leads *both* genders to positively correlate success and likeability for men and negatively for women (McGinn & Tempest, 2009). When Cameron Anderson of New York University and Frank Flynn of Columbia Business School ran an experiment to test perceptions of men and women in the workplace they used the same case study about a real-life entrepreneur, Heidi Roizen, but assigned half of the students to read the story with the name changed to Howard. Students rated their capabilities as equal, but Howard was rated as a more

appealing colleague while Heidi was deemed selfish and not someone you would want to hire or work for (McGinn & Tempest, 2009). These studies show that women hold a bias against other women in the workplace. It was uncovered that women perceive other women as emotional, aggressive, and high in dominance and would prefer to work for a male manager as they have more trust in male leaders (Brinia, 2011). The negative opinion of female colleagues by other women is even more damaging as this is viewed as an objective assessment – more credible than the views of men (Baron et al., 1991). As a result of internalizing disparaging cultural attitudes towards females in the workplace and echoing them back, women are not just victims of sexism, they can also be perpetrators (Sandberg & Scovell, 2019).

The stereotyped feminine view of education places hindrances on the progression of women into management roles. Because of women's communal traits and gender roles, they can be segregated into positions that impede their ascent up the management ladder. Researchers cite occupational segregation that can be both vertical and horizontal. Vertical segregation is the traditional discrimination against gender where opportunities for career progression for women is limited. Horizontal segregation, on the other hand, is where the genders are separated into different kinds of work based on occupational characteristics (Lippa, Preston, & Penner, 2021). In K-12 administration, women are most concentrated at the elementary level and least likely to serve as a high school principal. When extending the view to central administration, only 25% of superintendents in America are female (Korver, 2021). While women are making strides having a presence in educational leadership roles, they still seem to be segregated into roles that hold less prestige and may require more communal traits.

This holds true in higher education, as well, as women state they often complete 'academic housework' which refers to women taking on gendered responsibilities associated

with caring in the workplace such as mentoring and committee work that can result in an excessive amount of time-consuming and lowly esteemed service work inhibiting or delaying promotion chances (Macfarlane & Burg, 2019). Macfarlane and Burg (2019) found that women professors in STEM subjects were more likely to experience an additional sense of responsibility to fulfill service commitments in comparison to males. Likewise, typical women responsibilities also arose in a qualitative study of women vice chancellors at universities in the United Kingdom and Germany by Read and Kehm (2016). They found a pattern where women were elected or appointed when there were problems and change was needed and wanted. Some of the participants described this in terms of the duties of the traditional housewife where ‘cleaning up’ or ‘straightening out’ had to be done. These women felt the reasons for their appointment are valued less culturally in contrast to the more highly valued qualities of ‘charismatic’ masculinized leadership traits (Read & Kehm, 2016).

Despite the perceived pervasiveness of gender role stereotypes and bias against women, some research shows that gender stereotypes are changing. Since the mid-1900s, the female labor force has increased from 32% in 1950 to 57% in 2018 while the men’s has fallen from 82% to 69% (Eagly et al., 2020). With such drastic changes in the workforce, it might be hypothesized that the gender stereotypes in the labor market should also show such shifts. Cross-temporal meta-analysis conducted by Eagly et al. (2020) which synthesized 16 national opinion polls of over 30,000 American adults from 1946-2018, show that there is a clear increase in the ascription of communion to women with little to no change in agency. The authors reason that women have been pushed into work roles that emphasize social skills and social contribution which are strongly linked with communal traits. Data gains from these polls show that women have made positive gains in their level of competence relative to men over time.

Child Rearing

Gender role stereotypes provide a barrier to women as they attempt to make strides in career advancement due to preconceived beliefs about what professions are more appropriate for each gender and who should serve in leadership positions (Brown et al., 2020). Another barrier that stems from gender role stereotypes that can impact future careers is how a child of each gender is reared. Research has suggested that parents' beliefs and aspirations that they set for their children may be tied to gender role stereotypes with more positive perceptions of their daughters excelling in social skills and sons in math and sports skills (Chhin et al., 2008). Chinn et al. (2008) propose that it is likely that parents' general beliefs and expectations for their children's future occupations will affect the child's own beliefs and future expectations. In a longitudinal study of children in grades 2-6, there was a positive relationship between parental occupational expectations and the children's own reports of educational expectations (Helwig, 1998). According to theories on achievement and motivation, self-concept of ability and intrinsic values, or enjoyment in a subject matter, relate to behavioral intentions, behaviors, and achievement choices (Frome et al., 2008).

When looking at differences between the genders, Nagy et. al. (2006) in their study of the connection between self-concepts and intrinsic value found that there is a marked difference between the rate of males and females enrolling in advanced math or English courses in high school. Males are three times more likely to be enrolled in an advanced mathematics class in comparison to females. This can suggest that women's underrepresentation in male-dominated fields is due to women not feeling smart enough or do not value such fields of study (Frome et al., 2008). However, when mothers held predictions that their adolescent daughters would succeed in a male-dominated profession, the child was more likely to have interest in these

professions in young adulthood (Bleeker & Jacobs, 2004). This suggests that gender role attitudes and expectations of a mother can play an important role in influencing decisions to have a gender-typed or non-gender-typed occupation and self-efficacy (Chhin, et al., 2008). Gender stereotypes and their impact on child rearing has been shown to have a profound impact on academic achievement of girls and, therefore, on their future career choices (Watt & Eccles, 2008).

Leadership Styles

Although there have been some improvements in the bias men and women face due to gender role stereotypes, some argue that women are still lacking in leadership positions due to the differences in leadership styles and effectiveness in the role (Eagly et al., 2020; Northouse, 2019). However, researchers such as Nannerl O. Keohane (2007) claim that leadership is too multifaceted and complex to provide a blanket generalization that all women lead in the same manner. Just as men in a leadership role with multiple goals and interests will display different styles of leadership, women are likely to do the same. Meta-analyses of research focused on stylistic differences between male and female leaders found that, contrary to stereotypic expectations, women are not found to lead in a more interpersonally-oriented and less task-oriented manner than men within an organization and are equally effective leaders (Eagly et al, 1995; Northouse, 2019). Because there is an expectation that women do lead differently, behavior of women may be coded as being more feminine regardless of the woman's intentions or accomplishments (Keohane, 2007). "Ingrained sex differences in traits and behavioral tendencies, a spillover of gender roles onto organizational roles, and subtle differences in the structural position of women and men could cause leadership behavior to be somewhat sex-differentiated even when occupants of the same organizational role are compared" (Eagly &

Johnson, 1990, p. 236). Therefore, social scientists hypothesize that organizational roles are more important than gender roles so differences between men and women occupying the same leadership role within an organization would be smaller than differences between men and women in differing leadership positions (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Kanter, 1977).

Differentiating leadership based on sex is also complex in that gender roles may be rigid in some situations yet quite fluid in other instances. For example, acceptable gender norms for a female educational leader may differ significantly from the norms for a female business leader (Brower et al., 2019). Even within the same organization, the acceptable gender norms may differ. So, while gender norms differ across generations, ethnic and cultural groups, disciplines, and geographic regions, the inconsistency of gender expectations has leaders from both genders uncertain of how to proceed in some roles (Brower et al., 2019). This has led to some researchers highlighting the need for an androgynous leadership style that combines the best qualities from both genders (Brinia, 2011).

Despite some analyses highlighting no differences in leadership style and effectiveness, there does exist research on marked sex differences in how women lead. Judy Rosener in her 1990 Harvard Business Review article, “Ways Women Lead”, claimed that first-generation women executives relied on leadership styles proven successful for men, but the second wave of leaders at this time were making their way to top management by using skills and attitudes that they developed from their shared experience as women. They were successful because of, not in spite of, certain behaviors and characteristics generally considered feminine and inappropriate in leaders (Rosener, 1990).

Further research has supported the claim of Rosener (1990). Women tend to lead with different styles and motivations in comparison to men. Women leaders, across many settings,

tend to be more democratic or participative in their manner (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; van Engen & Willemsen, 2004). Females are rising to leadership positions by embracing these communal qualities. Modern organizations have shifted to stressing teamwork and working relationships which align to female leadership styles. Women are more likely to employ transformational leadership approaches and place more emphasis on the human dimension of leadership (Northouse, 2019). This leadership style has been described as 'interactive leadership' and is comprised of characteristics such as “encouraging participation, sharing power and information, enhancing self-worth, altering self-interests, relating power to interpersonal skills, and believing that people perform” (Brinia, 2011, p. 40).

The type of leadership that exists within an organization has effects on the culture of the work environment and worker productivity. In a meta-analysis of 146 studies conducted in 33 countries, a significant relationship existed between the leader's gender and long-term organizational performance (Campos-Garcia & Zúñiga-Vicente, 2019). When looking specifically at educational entities, there is mounting evidence that school leaders and their leadership styles are essential components and determinants in school effectiveness and improvement. Data has shown that school leadership has an impact on the faculty and students within the building. The quality of the leader is a key factor in teacher motivation and the quality of teaching (Brinia, 2011). Likewise, school leaders can influence student morale, behavior, academic performance, and empowerment. To see success within these areas, school leaders are encouraged to enter the role with a multidimensional approach. In education there is a need for a structural leader to ensure efficiency, structure, and policy as well as a human leader where the leader cultivates empowerment and facilitation. The role also demands a political leader who negotiates and networks with stakeholders, a symbolic leader who carries out traditions and

school rituals, and an educational leader who supports the methods of teachers and achievement of students (Brinia, 2011).

Looking at the leadership styles of an educational leader, researchers argue that women and their leadership traits and gender-based communal qualities, are not only better suited for the education field through a teaching role, but also educational leadership positions (Campos-Garcia & Zúñiga-Vicente, 2019; Korver, 2021). Past research on student performance has shown that women leaders in education have certain gender-specific behaviors that influence the individual performance of students and the overall function of the school (Campos-Garcia & Zúñiga-Vicente, 2019). Some research has confirmed that teachers tend to be more involved, collegial, and cooperative with female administration, and student achievement within school and on state ratings can significantly improve when the principal is a woman (Campos-Garcia & Zúñiga-Vicente, 2019). This is due to women principals using the power of their position to enable a positive energy for change and growth rather than for wielding power.

Female school leaders may also be more successful in their positions because they are often more prepared and educated for these roles. Research by Larose et al. (2008) show that women's motivation in academic pursuits are often greater than males. Statistics reveal that women have more education degrees than men at all levels (bachelor, masters, or doctoral level) which can be tied to the research that women tend to be more prepared in advance for leadership positions through degrees and professional development (Korver, 2021). Women's persistence to complete their college program reflect higher levels of self-determination, academic involvement, and institutional attachment which has been reported in previous motivational research (Larose et al., 2008). Besides having more education, women tend to have more classroom experience before seeking an administrative role. On average, women spend seven to

ten years teaching in comparison to men's five to six years (Kruse & Krumm, 2016). This experience increases their knowledge of curriculum and instruction and gives them the confidence to be a leader of such areas. Females may also be stronger educational leaders because they wait until they have met all the requirements before applying for administrative positions (61%), while only 5% of males do the same (Kruse & Krumm, 2016). An analysis of these trends, however, showed that prolonged time in the classroom, obtaining advanced degrees, and seeking more professional development may be due to women's family duties and child-rearing (Korver, 2021).

Studies have revealed that the leadership philosophy of female leaders may also cause positive impacts (Brinia, 2011; Campos-Garcia & Zúñiga-Vicente, 2019). Women stated that they can make a change in education through the development of certain leadership styles that stress diversity, values-orientation, the need to strive for social justice, democracy and equity, and the importance of a spiritual development (Brinia, 2011). In addition, women education managers tend to place more of a focus on the human dimension of leadership and employ a collaborative, people-oriented style of leadership. Women uphold close relationships with key stakeholders including students, staff, parents, and colleagues and use these relationships for shared decision-making and problem-solving so the leader can concentrate on the search for the best solution to most problems and issues in the interests of the greater good (Campos-Garcia & Zúñiga-Vicente, 2019).

Women bring to educational leadership qualities that enhance their leadership potential in comparison to men (Campos-Garcia & Zúñiga-Vicente, 2019). Some, however, have cautioned that highlighting these differences continue to perpetuate gender-role stereotypes and positive stereotypes can be precarious pedestals (Pittinsky, 2007). A gendered approach to leadership can

indirectly advocate for women to lead and act in a particular manner. Heilman's (2001) research demonstrates that gendered leadership stereotypes about what women are like and how they should act can lead to a devaluation of their performance, denial of credit for their success, and penalization for being competent. The expectation for how women lead can even exclude women for certain types of jobs that do not stress traits such as communality and warmth (Pittinsky, 2007). These advocates, therefore, call for a less gendered approach to leadership since leadership differences based on stereotypes are often exaggerated, misidentified, or overstated as effect size of leadership differences are very small (Pittinsky, 2007). A meta-analysis of 69 leadership studies found that effective leadership characterized as masculine has been decreasing over time and is even less pronounced in educational entities when compared to other society sectors (Brower et al., 2019). Leadership involves executing a certain number of functions such as setting direction, thinking of nonobvious ways to achieve goals, securing resources, and forecasting future conditions which can be accomplished in a multitude of ways (Pittinsky, 2007). Therefore, the critical piece of leadership theory and practice is function, not behavior or style (Pittinsky, 2007).

Patriarchal Structure

Another barrier or challenge closely related to gender stereotypes and gender roles, is the pervasive phenomenon of a cultural patriarchal structure. Male domination spreads through inequalities in the law, at home, and in the workplace. The long-standing history of this system is a powerful cultural norm and is supported by tradition, education, and religion (Higgins, 2018). Therefore, patriarchal ideology has become natural and is inevitable in society. The feminist Sylvia Walby in her 1991 book, *Theorizing Patriarchy*, cited six areas where male-dominance or oppression of women existed. These included areas such as at home where women do a

disproportionate amount of the housework and child-rearing, in the workplace where there exists a gender pay gap, and even at the state level where women are underrepresented in nearly all parliaments, legislatures, and the military (Walby, 1991). Many of these issues from 30 years ago are still very present today as 72% of women surveyed in 2017 through the Bright Horizons Family Index stated that they felt it was their job to organize child's activities, a gender wage gap is slowing but significant, and only 57 out of 278 speakers of parliament worldwide are women (Kleinjan et al., 2017; Korver, 2021; Soares & Sidun, 2021).

In the workplace, male dominance has taken shape in the development of male camaraderie and the 'think manager – think male' mentality. Within many organizations, invisible networks or invisible associations have developed which refer to "subtle, implicit, and in many cases unconscious strategies that men deploy to support other men as they move up the hierarchy of power" (Diez Gutierrez, 2016, p. 347). Others call these networks the 'old boys' club' where men socially interact with upper management outside of the workday often through masculine activities and develop strong interpersonal relationships to aid each other professionally (Korver, 2021). Whether it is called an invisible network or 'old boys' club', this social association among males reinforce the idea of men's capacity for leadership positions and make the selection of their peers within the group favorable (Diez Gutierrez, 2016). Women attempting to be accepted by this group or challenge the male candidate that has been backed by the group will be a challenging and difficult course of action.

The barrier of a patriarchal society to women educational leaders can be detected in the selection and promotion process and while in the role (Brinia, 2011). While formulating administrative teams, one female principal expressed, "if there is already a woman in one of the administrative positions in the school then a man would fill the other positions. It was not a

problem for two males to have administrative positions in the same school, but it was for two women” (Korver, 2021, p. 70). Women experience bias in hiring decisions as governing boards and search committees often exert ethnocentrism and/or homosociality and seek males. Some research has suggested that education administration is a ‘male-normed’ workplace and that women have a greater tolerance for accepting men as their superiors than men have for accepting women as their superiors (Brower et al., 2019). Once in a position, women leaders may experience microaggressions such as subtle discriminatory acts that is due to their gender or overt microaggressions when they are barred from participating in the ‘good old boys’ network that can assist in career advancement (Brower et al., 2019).

Work and Family Balance

Despite the increase of women within the workforce since the mid-1900s, they continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles due to constraints that are reiterated by women across all fields of employment (Eagly et al., 2020). Another barrier or challenge that causes women to hesitate to seek a management or administrative role is the precarious work and family balance, especially among working mothers. Women undertake a disproportionate share of household and parenting duties which often coincide with the prime years of a woman’s professional life (Brower et al., 2019; Korver, 2021). According to Mason and Goulden’s (2004) analysis of a nationally representative sample of doctoral recipients and 4,459 tenure-track faculty working during the fall and winter of 2002 and 2003 in nine University of California campuses, a barrier or challenge that affect women’s success and satisfaction centers around family responsibilities (Ceci & Williams, 2007). Of the men surveyed, 66% of fathers reported working over 60 hours per week and 50% of working mothers. The women cited that they devoted less hours to their career because when combining all their demands- career, housework, and caregiving- they

actually were working more hours per week (Ceci & Williams, 2007). The totals are 101 hours per week for women with children versus 88 hours per week for men with children.

This trend continues to hold true as data from the 2018 American Time Use Survey found that women devote more time throughout their lifetime doing unpaid household and care work in comparison to men (Hess et al., 2020). Daily, women aged 15 years and older, perform an average of 5.7 hours per day of unpaid household and care work compared to 3.6 hours for men. Among those in the age range of 25–34, a time when many families are raising young children and may also be caring for aging parents, the average hours spent on household responsibilities and care increases for both women and men. Yet the difference is still significant. Men in this age range spend 3.9 hours per day on this work compared with 8.0 hours for women, a gender gap of 51 percent (Hess et al., 2020).

Women in education also claim household and childcare responsibilities prevent them from advancing in their career. Garcia's (2015) study of female principals overwhelmingly reiterated the theme that it was a necessity to have a balance between housework and parenting duties and their careers. Without adequate childcare or supports in place, they feel it would be too difficult to manage both school and home responsibilities simultaneously. In one study by Brinia (2011), a well-educated female principal noted that:

We do display the drive and the motivation to progress, but eventually we are held back by our family responsibilities and simply get tired somewhere along the way. I believe this is not quite fair, when it comes to reflecting on the career potential that we have compared to what men have (p.47).

This coincides with previous research that shows as women progress in their careers they are more likely to conclude that it is harder to sustain a career in a male-dominated field than in a field that is female-dominated (Frome et al., 2008). Women recognize the struggle necessary to balance both home and work responsibilities, and the lack of women moving further into leadership roles is correlated with the unbalanced proportion of home responsibilities.

Researcher Sylvia Hewlett (2007) found that at young ages, there is not much of a gap between the ambitions of men and women. However, there is a distinct drop in the ambitions of women once they reach their thirties which often coincides with an increase in family responsibilities (Hewlett 2007). Unfortunately, girls begin to show the impact of work and family balance from a young age. Frome et al. (2008) found that high school girls are more likely than boys to plan for sacrifices to their professional life for their family responsibilities and college-aged females who placed a high priority on future family life were less likely to pursue a male-dominated major.

Diez Gutierrez (2016) states that it is considered acceptable for men in leadership positions to devote less time to their families, yet the opposite reception can occur for female leaders. Women who hold leadership positions are viewed by some as bad mothers since they will have less time with their partner and children and will neglect household chores (Diez Gutierrez, 2016). Because of this double standard and demands on working mothers, women who are in leadership positions are less likely to be in a relationship or have young children (Hoff, Menard, and Truell, 2006; Robinson et al., 2017) In a study of 845 school superintendents in the United States in 2015, males were more likely to be in a relationship (94.2%) in comparison to females (81.3%). These studied female superintendents are also nearly three to four times more likely to be childless in comparison to their male counterparts (Robinson et al., 2017). Likewise, 68% of female administrators studied by Hoff, Menard, and Truell (2006 as

cited by Kruse & Krumm, 2016) stated that they waited until their children were grown because of the challenges in balancing their home lives and extra duties that were required beyond the school day. Based on the data from these studies, it can be inferred that young women are not finding the progression into school leadership as appealing especially if they aspire to have a family or are currently in a relationship or a mother.

Mentor and Resource Investment

For women to succeed and obtain a leadership position, many career experts and research has shown the benefit of a mentor or a sponsor (Barkhuizen, 2022). In its broadest sense, mentorship refers to a relational process where the more skilled and experienced person, the mentor, serves as a supportive and guiding example for another professional that is less experienced, the mentee (Bynum, 2015). Sponsors, on the other hand, use their own reputation and credibility to expand a protégé's visibility within an organization and provide opportunities for career advancement (Omadeke, 2021). Mentorships are becoming more common among all industries. More than 70% of Fortune 500 companies are using mentoring to attract, develop, and retain good employees and it has become popular in teacher education and school administrator development (Kovnatska, 2014). However, Bynum (2015) claims that time constraints, geography, and organizational culture leads to traditional mentoring coming up short on accomplishing the deeper, multiple demands necessary for career growth and development. Additionally, some organizations do not reward mentoring activities or develop programs that randomly assign mentors and mentees which have been shown to be less successful (Rhode, 2017). To be truly effective, a mentoring program should be developed and implemented in a comprehensive and well-resourced fashion (Bynum, 2015).

Women leaders can play an important role in the success of fellow women by serving as a guide through their career paths (Barkhuizen, 2022). Some female leaders, desire to make the path to leadership easier for their successors because of their own experiences with discrimination, marginalization, or work-family conflicts (Rhode, 2017). Despite the research that highlights the benefits of mentorships and/or sponsors for young professional women, they often lack access to the support, mentoring, and sponsorship that are available to their male colleagues (Rhode, 2017). According to a global study on mentoring within business organizations, only 63% of women reported that they have or had a mentor (Barkhuizen, 2022). One of these reasons is a true lack of available female mentors. Research has shown that the small percentage of women that do make it to high-level management positions lack the time, leverage, or resources for themselves to serve as a mentor to all who aspire to join them (Rhode, 2017). This lack of gender-based guidance and support places an additional hardship on the rise to successful leadership (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016). If time or the clout are not the hinderance, some women avoid mentoring other women because of the negative consequences. Women who push for other women to be hired or promoted may be penalized in their own work performance reviews (Rhode, 2017).

Other women, however, have internalized the cultural biases in which they succeeded and chose not to promote opportunities that they did not have access to. In a groundbreaking study in 2004, Ellemers et al. found that female faculty members at universities in the Netherlands and Italy were more likely than their male colleagues to underestimate the career ambitions of junior female academics. Further, female faculty members reported a gender identity that was equally masculine as their male colleagues (Ellemers et al., 2004). The authors concluded that the female faculty members experienced gender discrimination in their own path to their position in a male-

dominated organization and internalized those masculine prototypes of a successful academic (Ellemers et al., 2004). They were, therefore, more likely to emphasize that they were different from other stereotypic females and would apply gender stereotypes. This was referred to as the Queen Bee phenomenon. Fifteen years later they retested their hypothesis and found similar results. This suggests that women still need to embody the masculine academic culture to advance in their career (Faniko et al., 2020).

Women aspiring to top leadership positions within a school district also lack support and mentors on their career path as well as in the position (Robinson et al., 2017). According to the 2015 American Association of School Administrators Mid-Decade Survey, 94% of women indicated that they had been mentored. While this number is large, the researchers Robinson et al. (2017) reflect that previous research questions whether this is a true mentor/mentee relationship or more passive in nature as mentoring relationships should be reciprocal, take place over time, and involve repeated interactions (Bynum, 2015). As was previously mentioned, this survey also shows that women may not be ‘paying it forward’ as only 72% of women stated that they served as a mentor to another superintendent or aspiring superintendent (Robinson et al., 2017). Just as with other professions, women educational leaders need mentors. According to Gilmour and Kinsella (2009), mentors play a critical role in cultivating the skills of a superintendent, no matter the years of experience in the position. The lack of female role models and mentors exists in the education field as well. Diez Gutierrez (2016) noted that there are more female role models for the position of school secretary than for the post of female principal. Regardless of the field, women’s career development and productivity suffer from a lack of mentoring (Cross et al., 2019).

Critics on why there exist a lack of mentors and organizational resources for young female professionals cite that investing in these women is costly because they lack commitment to their profession (Northouse, 2019). Women are criticized for having less human capital investment in education, training, and work experience than men (Eagly & Carli, 2004, 2007). According to these critics, there are less women in leadership positions because there exist less qualified women which is referred to as a ‘pipeline’ problem. Research has shown that there are women in the pipeline, but it is leaking because of the barriers and challenges that women face along the way (Northouse, 2019). For instance, among high-ability individuals, Lubinski and Benbow (2006) found that there is a gender difference in the number of hours individuals are willing to work by the age of 33. The researchers suggested that despite similar potential levels, women are not willing to work the 50-70 hours per week that is typical for some male-dominated professions. However, a review of 4,459 tenure-track faculty members highlighted that working mothers typically work 101 hours per week when combining career, family, and housework in comparison to 88 hours of working fathers and 78 hours of men and women without children (Mason & Goulden, 2004).

Women who attempt to ‘do it all’ by having a career and family often rely on taking leaves of absences, using sick time, work part-time to balance work and family responsibilities, or opt for the ‘mommy track’ which are positions that do not funnel into leadership roles (Northouse, 2019). Some women pull back from their careers and work part-time hours, utilize a flexible work arrangement, telecommute, or turn down a promotion to fulfill family responsibilities at home (Hewlett, 2007). The fear that women will pull back in their careers as they start a family, is what will prevent some organizations from investing time and energy into early-career women professionals. The personal and economic costs to invest in young women

who may not reach their career goals dissuade some from offering mentoring programs (Frome et al., 2008).

Patriarchal dynamics can also result in the lack of a mentor or organizational resources. Aspiring female leaders in comparison to males are less likely to feel that their supervisors support their career aspirations (Rhode, 2017). Because of the male-dominated social networks within some organizations, women receive less mentoring in comparison to their male counterparts (Stewart et al., 2004). This means that women have less access to information, advice, sponsorship, and opportunities for collaboration which continues to place them at a disadvantage for advancement. Women with already demanding work and family responsibilities often lack the time for mentoring activities or networking that have shown to boost advancement (Rhode, 2017).

Psychiatrist Anna Fels (2005) in her book, *Necessary Dreams*, argues that ambition stands on two legs – mastery and recognition. For women, they attain the necessary credentials and experience, but they also must have their achievements and potential recognized in the larger world (Hewlett, 2007). The latter is often missing in female careers which can lead to some women finding their careers unrewarding and a downsizing cycle begins. As a woman's confidence and ambition stalls, she is perceived as less committed. She then no longer gets good jobs or plum assignments which then only lowers her ambition further (Hewlett, 2007). Furthermore, self-efficacy in traditional male occupations is related to the amount of intrinsic value, or interest, in these occupations. If women do not feel like they will succeed in these careers, they tend not to pursue them (Chhin, et al., 2008). Not reaching their career goals has been shown to be problematic for midlife women. Carr (1997) found that women who fell short

of their career aspirations held lower levels of ‘purpose of life’ and higher depression levels in comparison to women who attained earlier career goals.

Overcoming Barriers

Women bring to leadership different points of view, values, experiences, and interests that provide unique and diverse prisms through which they view and approach the tasks and responsibilities of leadership (Klenke, 2017). Female educators who have moved into leadership roles have provided insight into their ambitions as well as the aspects of their position that they enjoy. Many women who participated in a study of educational leaders stated that they had been in the education field for several years and sought a higher position that allowed them to stay close to teaching and students (Brinia, 2011). They cited a strong support system, both personal and professional, that encouraged and aided in their seeking of an administrative role and while serving in that position (Kruse & Krumm, 2016). This highlights that working mothers may need a partner to take on more home responsibilities and shows the importance of social networks within the school system to support and encourage women to seek leadership roles. Furthermore, women can benefit from real role-models in male-dominated fields who can show work and family life compatibility (Barkhuizen, 2022).

The lack of women leaders is evident in all organizations from government to industry to education. The education system is unique in that it generally is a field that is dominated by women within the classroom, but when the focus shifts to the leadership within the school, a great disparity is evident as well. Women’s underrepresentation within these managerial roles is not due to a lack of competence or desire but is rooted in long-held social structures and norms that are difficult to overcome. Women are fighting against gender role stereotypes, patriarchal systems, leadership norms, and home responsibilities that make leadership positions challenging

to seek and acquire. The present study provided insight into the lived experience of female educational leaders. These women overcame the gender barriers and challenges cited in the literature to become a leader, but a view of gender discrimination in their roles was less studied. Therefore, this study offered analyses on gender barriers and challenges as a current educational leader.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Design

This study was conducted using a phenomenological qualitative design. Qualitative inquiry was chosen to study the human experiences of female educational leaders that is not achievable through quantitative methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative research studies the participants in their natural settings and the analysis of the data includes the voices of the participants through a complex description and interpretation of the problem. The researcher used this data for a call to change that is warranted in the current study of the underrepresentation of women educational leaders. Creswell and Poth (2018) describe qualitative research as a “set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These patterns transform the world (p. 7).” The study shared the stories of women and presented a call to action.

The phenomenological research design was utilized to describe the lived experiences of female educational leaders that serve within a public school in Northeastern Pennsylvania. The phenomenological approach reduced the individual experiences of these woman to a description, not an explanation or analysis, of the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The phenomenological study included thick, rich descriptions to reveal the essence of the educational leaders’ experiences. Through this approach, the common or shared experience of being a

female educational leader in Northeastern Pennsylvania was better understood to develop practices or policies that can improve the success of future leaders.

Additionally, the exploration of gender bias and discrimination, success strategies, and career advice from female educational leaders would have been more challenging to quantify. A full awareness of the career barriers, challenges, and successes of women was best expressed through their own voices conveyed as quotes and thematic development. So, while the subjects all experienced the same lived experience as female educational leaders, some of their experiences and successes were diverse which would have made quantifying the data a challenge.

Research Question

Data was collected through interviews with participants to answer the research questions:

- 1) What is the lived experience of female educational leaders in their role in Northeast Pennsylvania K-12 public schools who faced gender barriers and challenges in their position? 2) How do the gender barriers and challenges encountered in the pursuit of a leadership position compare to the barriers and challenges while serving as an educational leader? 3) What strategies were employed by these female educational leaders to overcome the barriers and challenges to their leadership position? The objective of this phenomenological study was to investigate gender barriers and challenges experienced by female leaders. The intent was to uncover gender biases or discrimination that was present as a female serves as an educational leader within a public school and focus on strategies that helped them be successful.

Sample

The participants of the study were identified based on their role as a female educational leader within Northeastern Pennsylvania. To qualify as a participant for the study, one must have identified as female and have had the perception that they have experienced some barriers or challenges based on their gender in their pursuit or in their role as an educational leader. They also must have served in the 2022-2023 school year in one of the following roles within a brick-and-mortar LEA: executive director, assistant executive director, superintendent, assistant superintendent, special education director, curriculum director, principal, or assistant principal. The participant could have served in the role of principal or assistant principal at an elementary, middle school, junior high school, secondary center, or high school. The LEA had to be located within Lackawanna, Luzerne, Monroe, Pike, Susquehanna, or Wayne counties in Pennsylvania and classified as a public school that was established and maintained under the laws of the state at public expense (Zinth, 2005).

Recruitment

A listing of female administrators for the 2022-2023 schoolyear in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania were generated through the Educational Names and Addresses (EdNA) system on Pennsylvania Department of Education's website. According to this website, the counties of Lackawanna, Luzerne, Monroe, Pike, Susquehanna, and Wayne have 48 LEAs with administrators in roles such as an executive director, assistant executive director, superintendent, assistant superintendent, special education director, curriculum director, principal, and assistant principal. Through an initial recruitment email, the researcher sought 10-15 administrators from these LEAs to gather data to "inform an understanding of the research problem and central

phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 158). Saturation was not achieved, so purposeful snowball sampling was utilized to recruit additional participants.

The goal of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of female educational leaders, and the inclusion of 10-15 participants helped the researcher delve more deeply into those experiences. This number of participants was set with the expectation of reaching saturation, but more participants had to be recruited. The small number of participants benefitted the study as it allowed for follow-up questioning to gain clarification and participant feedback. These strategies contributed to the truthfulness of observations and interpretations.

Procedure

The methods of this study began with completing the Form B for an exempt review from Marywood University’s Institutional Review Board (Appendix A). Following approval, an informational email (Appendix B) was sent to all female educational leaders from LEAs in Northeastern Pennsylvania who were identified using the EdNA system located on the Pennsylvania Department of Education website. The recruitment email described the purpose, nature, and time commitment of the study, which was estimated as an hour-long, digitally recorded interview. The email also included a list of the three qualifications for the participants: identify as female, work within an LEA that is defended as being within Northeastern Pennsylvania, and have served as an executive director, assistant executive director, superintendent, assistant superintendent, special education director, curriculum director, principal, and assistant principal for the 2022-2023 school year. An informed consent form (Appendix C) was included as an attachment that provided more information regarding the risks and benefits, confidentiality, and voluntary nature of the research study. Contact information for the researcher, advisor, and IRB representative was available on the informed consent form.

Participants were asked to agree that they met the qualifications and were willing to be interviewed by responding to the email within a three-week period. Approximately 12 administrators initially replied to be participants within the study. Therefore, after three weeks, an additional email (Appendix D) requesting participation was sent to potential participants. Administrators that opted to voluntarily participate in the study were assigned a pseudonym for confidentiality purposes and the researcher created a computer file with this information that is password protected and will be stored on the researcher's personal computer for a period of five years. The researcher contacted the participant female administrators via telephone and/or email to establish individual interview dates. They were given the option for the interview to be conducted within the educational setting of the administrator for convenience, at a neutral location of their choice, or via a digital meeting platform (Zoom). Follow-up emails thanking the participants for agreeing to assist with the research and confirming interview dates were sent.

Individual meetings that were conducted in-person were recorded via a handheld recorder. Interviews conducted through Zoom were recorded through the platform. This allowed the researcher to focus on the verbal and nonverbal cues of the participant as well as any environmental contributions. The participants were asked a series of interview questions (Appendix E) that were designed to encourage reflective, honest, and thorough responses. Talking from the researcher was minimal outside of asking questions to avoid exposing personal bias beliefs on the topic. If the researcher felt that clarification of a response was necessary, additional questions may have been presented to the participant within the interview. Additionally, if new information emerged from any participant during an interview that the researcher felt warranted reflections by the other participants on that information, follow up telephone or email correspondence with the participants occurred. At the conclusion of the

interview, the researcher asked the participants for the names and contact information of any colleagues that they felt met the study's requirements and would be willing to participate in the study. The information gathered through this snowball sampling technique was used to secure additional participants that were needed to reach saturation.

The researcher checked for accuracy of the qualitative findings by employing multiple validity procedures. First, since there is no reliability or validity for the researcher-created interview questions, the questions were reviewed by an educational professional that was not affiliated with the research study. They attested that they were appropriate for the nature of the proposed research and fully endorsed utilization within the study. Additionally, data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions were taken back to three of the participants for member checking so they can determine whether they felt the findings were accurate (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). And lastly, the researcher utilized peer debriefing where a colleague reviewed and asked questions about the qualitative study to add validity (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Analysis Plan

Qualitative data analysis is often a challenging task of organizing written words, coding and organizing themes, representing the data, and developing an interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). More specifically, within a phenomenological study, the researcher may bring their own personal experiences with the topic. Therefore, the researcher completed a bracketing exercise with their own reflection on the topic and their personal experiences considering a career as an educational leader. Once this information was provided and the researcher's frame of view was realized, the focus remained on the experiences of the participants and a clear mindset was used to read and reflect on the transcripts of the participants.

The interviews were transcribed shortly after meeting with each participant using the transcription feature on the Zoom software or Otter.ai for in-person interviews. Names of the participants were masked, and pseudonyms were used. A copy of the pseudonyms and corresponding names are saved in a password protected file on the researcher's personal computer. The transcripts were loaded into MAXQDA, a software designed to assist with qualitative and mixed method research studies. The transcripts were reviewed and any information that may have needed clarification from the participant was dealt with via email or telephone. Transcripts were read at least twice before more in-depth analysis commenced with the development of codes and a code book. During these initial readings, the researcher made notes or memos that did not provide summaries but attempted to synthesize the data into higher level analytic meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Segment memos which captured ideas from a particular reading assisted with initial coding, document memos which conveyed evolving ideas were helpful with creating themes, and project memos documented how multiple concepts might have fit together (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data as modified by Moustakas (1994, p. 121-122) (Appendix F) was used to guide the data analysis. The first step in this method describes the researcher's experience with the phenomenon of being a female educational leader. The researcher has never been in the role of an administrator but works in a K-12 public education building, has obtained a masters degree in Educational Leadership, and has considered moving into a leadership role. The second step consists of seven parts listed as A through G:

- A. Consider each statement with respect to significance for description of the experience.
- B. Record all relevant statements.

- C. List each nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statement. These are the invariant horizons or meaning units of the experience.
- D. Relate and cluster the invariant meaning units into themes.
- E. Synthesize the invariant meaning units and themes into a description of the textures of the experience. Include verbatim examples.
- F. Reflect on your own textural description. Through imaginative variation, construct a description of the structures of your experience.
- G. Construct a textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of your experience. (1994, p. 122)

The transcripts were read again and significant statements from the participants that speak to the essence of their experience were recorded into the MAXQDA software. These statements provided an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon by creating a textural description of “what happened”, a structural description of “how the phenomenon was experienced” and a composite description of the “essence” of being a female educational leader (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.77). The statements were added to the list beside other statements that pertained to the same topic or sentiment. Once this step was completed, the statements were reviewed and arranged into sixteen initial codes that emerged from the data. The researcher then developed a codebook that defined and articulated the boundaries of each code, including inclusion and exclusion criteria, and examples of the code from the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The next step was synthesizing the meaning units, or codes, into seven themes and thirteen subthemes. These themes as defined by Creswell & Poth (2018) are “broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea” (p. 194). Looking

back at field notes, memos, and noteworthy quotes were used to develop themes. These themes were documented and organized via the MAXQDA software. An analysis of the data followed this step that interpreted the patterns, themes, and codes into a broader description of the textures of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Helpful questions asked during this phase of the data analysis included: “What surprising information did you not expect to find? What information is conceptually interesting or unusual to participants and audiences? What are the dominant interpretations and what are the alternate notions?” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 195). The last step of the data analysis was to construct a visual display of the themes from the information from the study.

The findings of the study were summarized into a written report that addressed the main research question and subquestions. The researcher hopes to present the information gathered on K-12 female educational leaders and the gender discrimination they face through mediums such as conferences and publications. Through the exploration of this phenomenon, recommendations were made that will encourage educational organizations to create more hospitable environments for women to thrive in leadership roles and be respected regardless of gender.

Chapter 4: Findings

This research was designed to give female educational leaders a voice about their experiences in their roles within Northeastern Pennsylvania school districts and LEAs. Participant interview questions were created to focus on their experiences regarding the support they receive, barriers or challenges in their role, strategies utilized to overcome barriers and challenges, and advice for aspiring educational leaders. Following data collection, the information from the interviews was transcribed and analyzed. Research questions were organized to facilitate analysis related to the three research questions: (1) What is the lived

experience of female educational leaders in their role in Northeast Pennsylvania K-12 public schools who faced gender barriers and challenges in their position?; (2) How do the gender barriers and challenges encountered in the pursuit of a leadership position compare to the barriers and challenges while serving as an educational leader?; (3) What strategies were employed by these female educational leaders to overcome the barriers and challenges to their leadership position? The researcher read through the data to identify commonalities within participants' responses. This process resulted in the identification of codes. The codes were reviewed and analyzed to identify themes. These themes speak to the essence of the lived experience of female educational leaders in relation to the research questions.

Participants

All 20 interviewed female participants were employed by LEAs in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as school administrators during the 2022-2023 school year. Nine served at a LEA within Lackawanna County, five within Monroe County, three hailed from Wayne County, two from Susquehanna County, and one from Pike County. In terms of their titles, there were four participants each who served in the following roles: assistant superintendent, director, or elementary principal. Three participants were directors or supervisors of special education, two served as assistant high school principals, two were assistant elementary principals, and one was a middle school principal. Looking at their personal lives, there were participants in all stages of relationship and family responsibilities. Some of my participants were single, others were married with no children, many were working moms with children under the age of ten, while others had children that were in high school or out of the house.

The Lived Experience of Female Educational Leaders

The diversity of the participants led to the researcher having a deep dive into the lived experience of female educational leaders in NEPA who faced gender barriers or challenges in their positions. With 20 participants, there was a diversity among the women regarding their leadership role, their marriage and parental status, school environment, and years of experience in an administrative role which ranged from two years to twenty-five years leadership experience. Regardless of their differences, commonalities among interview question responses emerged and were classified into seven main themes with two of the themes harboring subthemes.

Table 1: Definitions of Themes 1–6 and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme	Definition
Aspirations		A self-induced drive to become a leader and make systemic change
Smooth Ride to the Top		The pursuit and attainment of a leadership position without the barrier or challenge of gender
Support System		A network of people that provided emotional and practical support for the female educational leader
	Academia Support	Professors and classmates that provided encouragement to continue schooling, pursue positions, and/or provide support while in an administrative role
	Colleague Support	Teachers and administrators that provided support to attain their leadership role or in the position
	Familial Support	Parents, spouses, and/or other family that provided encouragement or support
Changing Titles		The changes that accompany the movement into an administrator role (i.e. changes in friendship and support systems)
Time Constraints		Time demands that accompany an educational leadership role

Gender Bias and Discrimination		The feelings and thoughts of being treated a certain way due to being a female
	Exclusion	Not being privy to certain information, being physically excluded from meetings or events, or feeling socially excluded from male colleagues
	Silenced	Being told or having the feeling of being quiet and/or ignored
	Talked Down to or Disrespectfully	Being spoken to in a belittling or disrespectful manner
	Men in Charge	Not being viewed as the leader in charge or having authority questioned
	Different Treatment	Male leaders receive more attention by school stakeholders and/or are not held to the same standard as women and without repercussions

Aspirations

When looking at the lived experience of female educational leaders in NEPA, one theme that emerged was a self-induced drive to become a leader and make systemic change. Among the participants, 13 described the goal or aspiration of becoming a leader of a school. Some participants such as Andrea, an assistant high school principal, clearly defined the goal of moving into a leadership role by stating, “For myself, personally, I knew I wanted something different. At some point administration would be the next logical step.” Olivia, a director at an LEA, states this aspiration with confidence by saying, “I always wanted to lead school change. I always thought there was a need for that. And I thought I had the skills to do that.”

While some participants described having an innate desire to become a leader among their peers, others described the origin of their aspiration stemming from a frustration or realization of systemic issues. Heidi, an assistant superintendent, explains this realization:

I was in a situation where decisions were being made, and I didn't understand them. I felt that I needed to see behind the curtain, so to speak, and then once I got to see behind the

curtain at the building level, I was like, I need to help make those decisions. I think I could help out more.

Emily, also an assistant superintendent, described her journey into leadership when she recognized systemic issues that she “had no control over.” As she progressed through different leadership ranks and positions within a school district, she felt she was able to “take the skills and the knowledge that [she] had and be able to advocate for those individuals from a different level.” A supervisor of special education, Karen, explained how seeing the deficiencies led to her desire to seek an administrative position. “I started seeing things differently, and I started having, like honest to God such a hunger to make change among teachers and among pockets where I felt like education was failing families and teachers, and then, of course, impacting students.”

Whether from seeing these areas of needs within education or fulfilling a personal aspiration to leadership, many of the women expressed a desire to want to make change within their school. “As an administrator, we can do more. We can make more things happen. So, I think our audience gets larger, but then our ability to make a difference gets bigger too,” stated Natalie, a former director at an LEA. The bigger impact that administrators can have on students, by leading teachers, was also conveyed by Meghan, an elementary principal.

I just always felt I wanted to be a building principal, a school leader being able to help teachers. I definitely wanted those years of experience under my belt and a variety of grade levels before I hopped into the administrative train so that I was able to actually feel the way that teachers feel. So, it was supporting kids, supporting families, supporting teachers. And I knew that I would have more of an impact hopefully, in a leadership position.

Some participants spoke of the small impacts or small changes that initially sparked their eagerness to become a leader. Farrah, an assistant high school principal summed up this idea by saying,

I feel like I love teaching. I love kids. I love inspiring them to want to read and learn, but I feel like if I could make a bigger impact if I could inspire teachers to want to keep learning and keep growing and things like that. So that's kind of what sparked it. I wanted to be that instructional leader that inspired teachers who then inspired kids.

Other women spoke in broader terms of how their profession could lead to greater impacts on the school and students. Tara, a director at an LEA, described a conversation she had had with a principal in her building while still a teacher. As a gym teacher, she stated, “I had access to 300 kids, as opposed to a classroom teacher.” But the principal told her, “Think of the impact you can have if you are in charge of the whole school. And I was just like, whoa, okay, wait a minute. Now, I have to think about that. And that's why I went [to get my principal certification].” While others spoke of the impact their leadership could have on teachers and students, Heidi, an assistant superintendent, even described a larger scope,

In the classroom you make change with the students you see. Once you move out of that, I tell people it's generational change. You're making change for this generation of students and the impact that you have. Nothing is more important than education. So, we shape society.

Regardless of the mindset of making smaller adjustments or having a larger effect, all the change that leaders can make comes back to the impact on children. As one participant stated, “I never understood when people would say I'm over the classroom, I'm going to be an administrator. That makes no rational sense.” She continued, “Because every decision you make is what's best

for kids. And if you don't have a passion for kids, you'll never be a successful administrator. And you'll never run a successful building.”

This aspiration to become an educational leader, regardless of its genesis, was something that many of the participants spoke of. Throughout the interviews, the topic turned to challenges and barriers being a female educational leader and they overcame these roadblocks. Having a sense of why they became an administrator, is something that these women leaned back upon when times were rough, and they were questioning their career path. The theme of aspiration will be reflected again.

Smooth Ride to the Top

Research question #2 asked how the gender barriers and challenges encountered in the pursuit of a leadership position compare to the barriers and challenges while serving as an educational leader. This exact research question was asked to each of the participants during their interview. The overall sense from the participants is that they pursued and attained their position without gender being a barrier or a challenge. Andrea clearly stated that in the pursuit of an administrative position, her gender was never something that she felt hindered or aided her. “During the interview process, everything was as fair as possible.” Likewise, Laura, an assistant elementary school principal reiterated that there weren’t “any barriers with the hiring process of becoming administrator.” Josie, an elementary school principal even followed up with other positions that she wasn’t hired for and found that, “In the few roles that I applied for prior to this one, females were hired. I followed up to see about the position and it was a female that was hired.” This allowed her to definitely say that “In terms of pursuing an administrative role, I don't think my gender personally had anything to do with it.” Some women went as far as to

share that gender wasn't even something that they were cognizant of during their pursuit of a leadership position. Valerie, an elementary school principal, when thinking about how gender may have influenced her hiring stated that, "I didn't think there'd be any issues. I never even gave it a second thought."

While the women were saying that they didn't experience barriers or challenges to attain a leadership position, they were sharing the support that they received from colleagues, both male and female, to apply for available positions. The theme of a Support System will be discussed later in more detail, but it will be described here how accommodations and support removed the barriers or challenges to secure a leadership position. Paige, thinking back on her initial administrative role, shared that she didn't feel like she "had a lot of challenges becoming an administrator." She "felt like there were a lot of people that advocated" for her. Farrah had a similar experience with support in pursuit of her position. She expressed, "I'm not sure that I had challenges or barriers. I think just because I had a lot of supportive mentors, and they were very encouraging, I had people working with me to even practice interviews."

Many participants also expressed that securing their administrative position wasn't a challenge and the school was very accommodating and supportive. Josie described how her previous school had "essentially created a position that didn't exist" for her so that she was able to complete her required internship hours and gain leadership experience. A similar sentiment was shared by Becky, an assistant superintendent. When describing her initial step into an administrative position she explained,

My district's pretty fantastic. There was a lot of support to get me to take that first position, and the position was really brand new. So, my superintendent who was a female at the time, my son was just born, and she said, "You don't even have to work in the

summer, if you take the job.” She was so supportive and letting me write my own way to make it work which was fantastic.

Some of the women even explained how the administrative position happened to just present itself. Paige described her first leadership role in that the “opportunity just came quicker than I expected it to and kind of fell in my lap at that point.” Likewise, Renee, an assistant elementary school principal, shared that the school where she was teaching at “never had an elementary assistant principal before”, so she “had an opportunity that [she] couldn't pass up.”

Later, the theme of gender discrimination and bias will be discussed regarding how they perceived to be treated in their current role, but under the Smooth Ride to the Top theme, some women expanded that their easy ride to an administrative position also carried over into their current role. Karen described, “I am one of the only females on my admin team, but I don't feel ever any different of how I'm treated, or my opinions, or my recommendations, or when I'm collaborating.” She continued, “I do feel like I'm on an equal playing field with the males that I work with.” Heidi shared a similar thought:

I honestly don't think in my current role I feel that there are any barriers. . . So I couldn't even think of an example or a reason why I feel that way other than it's just we're all kind of treated as equals and respected in the same capacity.

This sense of collaboration and gender being a nonissue may be due to the administrators that work alongside these women. Josie describes the working relationship with her colleagues, “I don't currently feel as though there's barriers. I work with an assistant principal and a dean of students who are both male. We have a very strong working relationship.” These women may also have a better self-confidence and do not perceive their gender as a barrier. Becky, speaking to her time as the first female high school principal within her school, remarked, “[Gender] really

was not something that I focused on, but it definitely put other people back on their heels a little bit.” Another reason for the lack of gender being a barrier in their current role could be due to the size of the LEA. Emily gave evidence of this claim by describing her previous school district. “It was a large district, so there was an equal numbers of representation within the central office. I had worked under both a male and a female superintendent. I never once felt like gender would be a barrier to any position.”

Throughout the interviews, a few of the participants described challenges in their current role that were unrelated to gender. Some of the women, especially those that had moved into an administrative role earlier in their career, cited that they felt that their age was more of an obstacle than being female. Josie and Paige both were administrators before the age of thirty. They both shared similar sentiments. “I felt the most kind of a discrimination was not because of my gender; was more because of my age.” Josie even described her physical stature as a challenge as well. “I’ve always thought more about my age, and being petite, white, blonde female. I’m quiet, more reserved. I’ve always thought more of that, and not always like associated it with my gender, which obviously I can’t separate.”

Support System

In almost all the interviews with the participants, the theme of a strong Support System was alluded to over and over again and in response to many different questions. The women described a strong support system while attaining their administrative credentials, in the pursuit of a position, and then while in the role. Due to the large volume of data regarding this theme, it will be discussed in three subthemes: academia support, colleague support, and familial support.

Academia Support

During the participant interviews, the women leaders were asked what type of support they received when pursuing an administrative position. Some spoke to current and past professors who encouraged them to continue schooling, pursue positions, or continued to provide support while in an administrative role. Becky shared how a professor provided guidance to pursue additional degrees. “A college professor is really the one that sent me on the path of special education and really pushed me to go for an administrator certificate.” “I even had support from my professors,” stated Andrea regarding her pursuing a leadership position. Heidi describes how her professors are still mentors that she leans on. “I graduated with my first masters in 2007, and I’m still in touch with a lot of those professors. They were incredibly supportive.”

Women in leadership roles also described how their classmates in their academic programs provided support and encouragement. Farrah cited the comradery and support of her peers. “I had my group of people that I took some classes with for my master’s program and did the internship with. We all studied together for the Praxis and cheered each other on.”

Olivia also shared how her classmates provided a support system.

What drove me was, I was in a cohort working to get my administrative cert, and I think that the cohort was supportive, of course, everybody was in the same cohort, getting that degree. . . And I think that I knew I wanted to do that job, so I was already in the right place. So, I would say the cohort was a pretty good support, help me persist on anyway.

Colleague Support

Besides having the support from academia, many women addressed the abundant support they received from colleagues within their LEA. This included fellow teachers while they were still in the classroom or administrators that helped them attain their leadership role or make the position more appealing. Paige shared how her administrator was pivotal in her journey to school leadership. “My principal at the time when I was a teacher was very helpful and kind of mentored me. He pulled me along and then still to this day continues to check on me.” This support, women claimed, help them to see their leadership capabilities and provided them with opportunities or the confidence to pursue an administrative role. Karen voiced how her colleagues set her on the path to school leadership.

People kept telling me for probably five to seven years, you would be a great administrator, and I thought they were crazy. I would then notice a pattern of all these different people from different areas of life that didn't really know each other kept bringing it to my attention.

Valerie described how the leadership at her school assisted in making her the administrator and educator that she is today. “I just had incredible mentors, incredible leadership. They saw something in me, and they started to send me to workshops. They sent me all over the country for leadership training.” Valerie claimed that these trainings afforded her the skills to lead a school and support fellow aspiring leaders.

The following women did not differentiate between the gender of their mentors, but Renee and Farrah expressed how mentors of both genders within their districts influenced their journey into leadership. Renee stated,

I was very fortunate. There was an administrator that I admired a lot. My administrator in my building and then another that were very pro woman administrator came up through the ranks when it was mostly men. So, she really was the driving force to get me to get my principal certification, and kind of told me that I could do it. She got in my ear. She definitely steered me in that direction, so when the time came, I was ready for it.

Farrah, on the other hand, when describing the importance of having a support system through mentors stressed how she didn't feel that gender influenced their mentor-mentee relationship.

My two biggest mentors are men, so I don't think that gender matters there. But if you find people who you know you can talk to, they don't necessarily have to be like you, because my two biggest mentors are not. . . But I feel like I can be honest with them. I know they're confidential. So, if I run something by them, I know they are confidential. My mentors have really, really helped me, too.

To be a successful female educational leader, many of the participants spoke to the vital need to have colleagues that you can depend on in many different aspects. As just mentioned, the female educational leaders value having a mentor that they can lean on for support through work situations and guidance. In addition to that type of support, some of the female leaders highlighted how their colleagues were flexible and accommodating to be a female educational leader that is also a mom. Becky remarked how her superintendent allowed her to have a flexible work schedule following the birth of her baby. She stated, "She was so supportive and letting me write my own way to make it work which was fantastic." Laura stressed how she was able to do the job of an administrator while also being a mom to two children was because of the support she received from her principal. She shared,

My principal will say, “Go, yes, you can take [your daughter] to a 2'clock dentist appointment” or “Don't worry about what time you got here.” I feel like if you don't have someone like that saying, “It's okay, I'll cover for you”, or being flexible, there's no way it can work.

A few of the women realized the importance of the support system in their journey to becoming an administrator and while in the position, so they spoke to how they have become mentors to younger teachers and administrators both formally and informally. Karen shared how she feels honored when women within the district approach her about her leadership. She expressed, “I've heard from a couple women that I work with that are pretty strong in their pursuit, and usually we'll talk about it, and they'll say things like, “I'm learning from you.” I think that's always the biggest compliment.” Meghan, who is an elementary school principal with over 20 years of experience, shared why she tends to aid younger teachers or administrators. She said, I “remember what it's like to be there. So, I really believe that we need to support one another.” Because of this she continued, “I currently am mentoring and that is my mission now that I'm toward the end of my years, and that is to mentor as many people as possible through furthering their education post education.”

Familial Support

The last subtheme under Support System centers around the scaffold of assistance that the female leaders received or receive from their families. Almost every participant described how their journey into leadership or their ability to be a successful school administrator was due to their family members doing such things as lending an ear, providing encouragement, or undertaking familial or housekeeping responsibilities. A few women spoke of the encouragement they received growing up with a supportive family and how they believe that helped them to

want to seek a leadership position. Dana, an elementary school principal, described how her former military father's advice was "Do it once and do it right." She followed up by saying, "I had a lot of support from my family growing up of high expectations and definitely education and giving it 100%, no matter what." Tara shared a similar upbringing and how her father had instilled in her a great self-confidence and the drive to achieve goals. She stated,

My dad was a very big motivator. For my sister, my brothers and I, he always said that you could do anything you wanted to do. And you put yourself out there, you can do it. And, and he was tough. But really it was you could do whatever you set your mind to do. Just do it well.

Other women spoke to the support they received from family in order to complete the schooling to become a school leader. They were at this time working full-time as teachers and simultaneously taking classes for their principal certification. Laura stated how her family assisted her while she was taking courses. "They took my son all the time when I was looking to become an administrator. I needed a lot of help." Additionally, Farrah provided, "My family was supportive of my coursework and things. They helped me with my dog. They understood that family commitments were missed for courses."

Once in the position, several shared how their husbands were supportive of their careers. Valerie remarked, "I have an incredible husband, who has done nothing but push me forward and encourage me to do what I want to do." Most stated that their husbands knew of their ambitions early in their relationship. "He knew that's something I always wanted to do" added Sandy. Heidi, when talking about her husband reiterated this high level of support when she expressed, "my husband's just completely all on board with me being fully engulfed in education." This level of support allowed her to have "the freedom to be so engaged and engulfed in the school

communities that I work in.” Karen added how her husband acts as a sounding board when dealing with stressful situations at work. “My husband is a good one, because he's pretty neutral because he's not an educator. He's not in the school and I just have to get it out because it will consume me.”

Besides showing encouragement, most of the participants in a relationship described how their partners helped with household responsibilities to accommodate the extra hours that being an administrator requires. “My fiancée stepped up on house duties, stepped up with kids. So that has helped me,” shared Isabelle, an elementary principal. When talking about the extra demands that an administrative position requires and how to balance with her responsibilities with her partner, Andrea added,

From September to through June, I really am focusing so much on having the support that I have at home. There's almost been a bit of a role reversal where I'm the breadwinner and have a full-time job, but he really does pitch in and help because my hours are extremely different. Being an administrator now, that's a big trade off the amount of time that you spend at work versus at home. So that's been a bit of a struggle, personal struggle. But it's important to have something like somebody that does support you throughout the whole year, packs your lunch.

Changing Titles

The previous theme, Support System, stressed the importance of having mentors, colleagues, and family to provide the scaffolds that a female educational leader needs to be successful. This theme, Changing Titles, describes how some women lost some of those supports

as they moved from a teacher position to one in which they were an administrator. Farrah described this unique experience.

Now that I am an administrator, it's not like I can lean on teachers and go tell them about my problems in my day. So, it's a smaller circle. I have friends in my other district that I used to work with, that I'm still very close with, but I can't tell them confidential things.

So, I think now, my circle of people that I can go to with work related issues is smaller. She then continued to stress how she found some camaraderie with her fellow administrators to discuss some of these challenges that arise as a school leader. Emily also reiterated this point by saying how she sought out support from others.

There is not that support system or that structure for mentorship. I have had to reach out to individuals who have since retired or moved out of the area because they understand the demographics of northeast PA and gather their support. But I can't say that that would be readily available if I wasn't seeking it myself.

The Changing Title theme also describes how the relationship between friends has changed since becoming an administrator. These were challenges that perhaps weren't expected when moving from a teacher position to a leadership role. Sandy shared the difficult situations that she must deal with as an administrator within the district in which she was a teacher.

I am in the same district where I was as a teacher, in the teacher union with everybody. And then I wanted to be a principal. I think sometimes you're still friends with people, and you know you have to be their boss sometimes. That's a challenge to do such as when you have to tell a friend what to do and they don't always, or you can't tell them what's going on with things. There are things sometimes the administrators know in the background or what's the direction somebody's doing. And the teachers will be like,

“Well, what are they doing that for?” And you can't say anything. So, I think sometimes they expect you to and that's a challenge.

The dynamic shift that occurs between former colleagues and friends once one becomes an administrator, was stressed even more by Natalie. She put more emphasis on having to pull away from colleagues when she became an administrator within the building in which she was a school counselor. She stated,

What I did as an administrator, you don't go to parties with them. Not that I really did before, but you have to be careful what you say as an administrator, rather than just a counselor. You just have to position yourself away so that nothing can be taken and used in any kind of a negative way.

Time Constraints

A common theme that was woven into many of the participants' responses to a variety of the interview questions centered around the time demands that accompany an educational leadership role. Therefore, the next theme examined is the challenge of Time Constraints as a school leader. Almost all the participants spoke about the extra hours, and some linked it to how difficult it is to strike a balance with household duties and childcare responsibilities. Farrah shared the unpredictability of what a day can hold and how that impacts her workday.

There's a lot of time required. My job takes up a lot of my time. It's hard to manage time between family, grad school, work, and fun things. It's different because I think when I was pursuing this role, I was a teacher so as a teacher, I know I'm going to teach first period, second period. I'm going to have prep, third, or I'm going to have lunch here. . . . But when I come here, if there's a fight, if there's a drug bust, if there's some kind of something going on like my whole day is thrown off, and so there's no real schedule. I

never really know when I'll get to leave work, because there's always these things that I can't just leave in the middle of. . . I just can't just say, "Well I have to go now. I did my 9-5." So, there is that piece of it. The not knowing.

Karen added, "I thought about it long and hard before I took the plunge because I was so worried about the schedule conflict." She went on to share how she cut back on certain activities due to the time requirements of an administrative position. "There were other things that I was doing like volunteering at Sunday school, and Daisy Girl Scouts, and of course teaching adjunct at a local college. So, I decided to step away from a lot of things in life." She anticipated the time demands and wanted "to throw my whole self into it and not be spread so thin."

When asked about challenges and barriers within their role as an administrator, finding the balance between work and home was often cited. Andrea said it was a "personal struggle," as well as Karen who stated that "The biggest challenge for me was thinking about like managing my family and the role of an administrator, because it is an endless role." It also seems that no matter what administrative position the person holds, there are always time demands. The two previous women quoted were an assistant principal and a supervisor of special education. Emily, who is an assistant superintendent, added,

I'm not going to lie, it's very difficult the amount of time that goes into this beyond the scope of whatever a workday is supposed to be. I don't even know, but I am very blessed to have the support of my husband and my family, because this is very challenging and taxing to be faced with this situation.

Specifically, a director of special education felt that her time demands were even greater than those of building principals because she is the "the only one in the district" that deals with special education. Sandy said she rarely takes days off because she gets "calls all the time,

everywhere, anytime.” A few days prior to her interview she said she took a mental health day and even though she had put an out-of-office message on her email, she shared that she was still getting school-related calls on her personal cell phone. With a tiredness to her voice, she said “I don't think I anticipated almost working 24/7 sometimes.”

The extra hours and “different type of stress” in comparison to their time as a teacher, has many of the women worrying about bringing “home a lot of stress.” The impact of her career on her family is something Karen questioned when she stated, “I still struggle with it, and I think I will throughout my whole career.” She wondered if she was “giving too much to the job” and how it’s “impacting my family.” Laura, a mom of two young elementary school-aged children was very candid about her “own personal struggle” whether the time away from her family is worth it. She questioned aloud if she was doing the best thing for her family to have “people babysit so I can get all my work done, or work longer hours, or work in the summer. Or was it better to just be in the classroom and be off with my kids in the summer.”

Overwhelmingly, female educational leaders who are moms, stressed the never-ending battle of the work-life balance and how to navigate the situation so they are viewed as committed to their jobs but also to their families. Valerie, when asked about the challenges in her role, said that “being a mom” and having “traditional” views on parental roles and feeling as though she had “to do it all” brought so much “guilt.” Thinking she had to “fulfill the traditional role of a mom and wife,” she said, “I wanted to get home and cook dinners. I wanted to help with my son.” Now that her son is older, she shared, “With hindsight now, I could have taken days off to go on my son’s field trip.” Becky, whose children are still school-aged, reiterated the mom-guilt feeling. “All of the mom things need to be done, be ready for the week, homework has to be

done, cooking, cleaning, everything has to be set up, no matter what your professional obligation is.” She continued, “So, I think that balance is difficult. Because you can't split yourself in two.” In order to find the balance, she said she “gets up at four o'clock in the morning, because I didn't know what else to do. I wasn't going to take away from my children's time.”

Besides thinking about how work obligations will affect their family, the mom administrators also shared the opposite viewpoint of how their family duties affect their work. Because of “the working mom factor,” some women may not even pursue a leadership role. Karen shared she feels like “a lot of great females that I really think hold themselves back, especially if they're working moms” because “you can only spread yourself so thin. And you're worried that it's going to impact your family. “She explained that as a mom, “you feel a lot of guilt, so I don't think as many female educators take the plunge.” Even some that are already administrators do not seek higher-level positions. Heidi told of “one administrator that was an assistant principal, and wouldn't even apply, because she said her children were too young, and she just she couldn't dedicate the time she needed to run a building.”

A few of the working moms that did attain a leadership role, offered the advice to delay the move until your own children are older. Tara said she wouldn't even consider taking the position that she did which required her to commute home on the weekends “until [her] children were older. Even with all the support that I had; you still consider the timing of for your family.” Laura also suggested,

If you do want to have a family, maybe consider going into administration after your kids are school-aged because it is an ongoing conflict in your head that you can totally avoid feeling like, “Am I being a good enough mom? Am I being a good enough administrator? A good enough wife?” You won't have to worry about that if you kind of just wait till

your kids are, you know, 8, 9, 10,11, 12 to try to do this. Then do this when it's just it's a lot easier.

Working mom administrators also shared how they must still fulfill their mom-duties even when it conflicts with her workday. Paige, an assistant superintendent, shared that she feels her role now provides her more flexible hours than when she was a building-level administrator because one is “tied to those building hours. I found that to be challenging with kids because things just come up.” She also felt like she inconvenienced her colleagues when her children were sick, and she had to leave or be off work. She would wonder, “Who's covering for me? Who am I going to inconvenience on this particular day?” Laura shared a similar sentiment, “During my work hours, it's me. So, if my daughter gets sick and needs to go home, I have to take her home. So, it's just like those are just constant things.” However, even as Paige moved from a building principal to the central office, she still feels the “only challenge is being a mom.” When her superintendent may need her for an evening event, it would often conflict “with my kids’ after school activities.” She stressed how difficult it sometimes as an administrator to “work around your kids.” The following description from Laura summed up challenges that can arise being a working administrator mom.

I don't think that some male administrators understand that we don't just wake up and walk out the door. For example, what I had to deal with this morning with my daughter, just to get her and myself here on time. I'm the one that takes them to their appointments like I'm the one that wakes them up in the morning. I'm the one that feeds the breakfast. Get them here, takes them to CCD after school. So besides, having this job, I have a whole other job that could interfere with this one sometimes. I know some people have husbands who have different schedules, but mine is out at 4:30 in the morning and home

at 7 o'clock at night. Next week, I have to go to a conference in Mechanicsburg, PA and I will have to leave at 6 a.m. No one thought that I have to have somebody sleep at my house or have my kids sleep over, because at 6AM I'm alone with my children.

Women that are coping with the work-mom life balance cited a few examples of how they handle the time constraints. Karen feels "It's been such a blessing that I have come to be an administrator at the school where my children go to school" because she is on the same schedule as her children. Also, she can leave work when her children have games by "coming in earlier that day or stay late other days." Likewise, because she lives close to the school, she finds herself going to the school for a few hours early on Saturday morning to catch up on items from the week. Josie, a mom with three young children, said since becoming a mom "all things have changed." She has instituted a "very, very strong boundary of work-life separation." When she gets home from work, she stated that she doesn't check her email as "survival" because she "mentally could not handle it." She felt she needed "separation or [she] was going to have a panic attack." She will do a few work things at night if needed after the kids are in bed, but she would "just like to devote that time to [her] family."

Gender Bias and Discrimination

Almost all the participants spoke to genuine feelings of being discriminated against as a female and experienced instances when they were treated differently, silenced, excluded, talked down to, or were questioned if there was a man in charge which were challenges in their role as a female educational leader. This theme will encompass the feelings and thoughts of being treated a certain way due to being a female. Because the perception of gender barriers or challenges was a requirement of the participants, there is robust data within the interviews that speak to the

gender bias or discrimination that the participants feel as a female educational leader. Therefore, the theme of Gender Bias and Discrimination will be broken down into the five subthemes of: Exclusion, Silenced, Talked Down to or Disrespectfully, Men in Charge, and Different Treatment. Each of these subthemes will be described below.

Exclusion

The subtheme Exclusion was created to describe instances when the female educational leader participants felt that they were not privy to certain information, were physically excluded from meetings or events, or socially felt that they were not included with male colleagues. One of the participants, Valerie, had a very prime example of this subtheme. She described that the school district was conducting interviews for new elementary teacher positions and of the six elementary school principals in the district, only the three men were invited to sit on the group interviews. She felt that it “should have been all of us.” She stated that there seems to be a divide between the administration within the entire district based on gender. Valerie shared, “When we’re all at meetings, it’s always the guys, the superintendent, assistant superintendent, talking to the male principals and joking around. It’s not the same with the females, and I feel very, very much like it is a gender issue.”

Emily painted a similar picture of division between males and females among the school leadership and even the school board. She said, “There are meetings that happen all of the time where I am not aware of.” She continued that it, “happens all of the time where there are individuals, the men, meeting without my presence, or them coming to me.” Even with the school board being “male-dominated,” she explained that there is only one female on the board and “there are times where she and I are excluded from any and all communication.” Emily used the phrase ‘Good Old Boys’ to describe her district leadership. She feels excluded from many

administrative meetings and gets the sense that she is then only invited “when our district is expected to provide a solution, a resolution” and “I show up because the male leaders know that I will figure it out and get it done.” She also described feeling blind-sided when she must report and support decisions that she learned about “right then” at “very public board meetings that are being recorded.”

Josie described the unprofessional, negative “frat boy” atmosphere at her previous district that caused her to resign and seek an administrator position elsewhere. When some female administrators at this district retired or left for other positions, males were hired and created “a very different environment and it had that same feeling as like a Good Old Boys club.” Recognizing that she was not going to work well with this group of administrators, she began to interview for other positions. Josie felt that the superintendent got wind of this and became “very condescending” and had “very inappropriate” conversations with her dissuading her from leaving. She questioned aloud, “Maybe it would have been different if I stayed, but part of me was like I don't know how I would stay professional and feel respected if I stayed.”

Silenced

The next subtheme, Silenced, was created to describe instances when the female leader was either told directly or felt the sense that she should be quiet or was ignored. Andrea described one of these times when she felt that the males in the meeting silenced her indirectly. She explained, “I was responding, and I don't know if I paused, or something happened where then three other men started to jump in on the conversation.” She continued, “I remember feeling like I had to raise my hand to kind of regain the fact that I wasn't finished with the thought” and eventually “recognized that perhaps I wasn't done with my thought.” Claudia, a director at an LEA, experienced a more direct conversation to silence her. While speaking to another

administrator in her LEA, he told her to “knock it off” that she has her “nose in everything” and should just “mind her own business” instead of “worrying what he’s doing.”

These previous two women are not the only ones who had such experiences within meetings with fellow school leaders. Valerie also shared how she feels “ignored or not listened to” when she speaks in meetings by male administrators. This type of reaction by her colleagues has manifested into her feeling that she is not “valued” and “looked at as less than.” Isabelle has a comparable viewpoint. Many times throughout her interview she mentioned phrases such as “If I was a man this would not happen.” She shared that at the beginning of her principalship she would brush off these comments from other female administrators, but now she sees this as more blatant. In meetings with fellow administrators, her perception is that when she speaks up in meetings, it is viewed through a negative vocabulary such as being “hysterical” or “emotional.” She stated, “In meetings when I’m speaking there’s been a few times where comments were made about, ‘Oh, there goes Isabelle again with all her questions’, while the men just stay silent.” This came up on her yearly evaluation, and her supervisor told her, who was a female, that she was getting a proficient rating because “It doesn’t look good when you hit reply all in your emails and are asking too many questions. You really should refrain from doing that.” Just like Valerie, Isabelle feels that “people don’t take [her] as serious or don’t think [she’s] their equal sometimes.”

Talked Down to or Disrespectfully

A slightly different experience from being silenced by fellow administrators is being spoken to in a belittling or disrespectful manner. During the interviews, some participants described how they felt they were verbally or emotionally pushed around by others. Sandy was one of these women. She shared how her previous supervisor “always wanted to push her

around” because of her gender and would even “almost try to embarrass” her in front of teachers. She recognized the same behavior in his dealings with other females as he would “talk down to them” in interactions. Some of the stories and experiences previously told sometimes straddle two themes. The story of Claudia from the previous Silenced section is one of these. She was told by her male colleague to “knock it off” and should “mind her own business” instead of “worrying what he’s doing.” Her response to that statement provides some evidence of this theme of being spoken to in a disrespectful manner. She told him that he “would never have spoken to the former director in this way” and standing up for herself, let it be known that she found his remarks “offensive”, and she was not going to “allow him to disrespect [her].” She continued to talk about this experience by adding that she “had this conversation with a couple other people as well” where she told them that they “never would have spoken to [the previous administrator] in this way.” She believes that males spoke to her in the manner because of “a gender thing.”

A second manifestation of this subtheme can be seen in how these women are viewed as leaders and the way they are critiqued by their male colleagues. Olivia who was a building principal prior to her current role, shared that she was “accused” by the superintendent that she was “treating people like they were a part of my Italian family.” She reminisced how she would “never forget that quote” as that interaction stuck with her. Olivia continued that “in many cases that would be a compliment” but he meant that she was “treating people too well” and was “caring and asked about their personal interests.” In her current role, she believes she has been so successful because of this trait. Other women also shared how their leadership style was viewed negatively and came with disrespectful vocabulary to describe it. Isabelle lamented that she was “frustrated” that similar traits portrayed by male and female leaders are characterized differently.

More than one woman shared how they were told to her faces that they were the “Queen Bee,” “cocky,” a “bitch,” and “unapproachable” if they asserted themselves similarly to how a male leader would. They believe that these disparaging words would not be said to a man.

Men in Charge

The next subtheme under Gender Bias and Discrimination, Men in Charge, alludes to instances when female leaders were not viewed as the leader in charge or when others asked to speak to a man rather than a female school leader. Many of the female leaders had scenarios when their authority was questioned by parents and community members when asking to speak to a male administrator or assuming that the female did not hold the title that she did. Renee, who works in a school in the Pocono Mountains, described some of her school’s population as hailing from New York and New Jersey where sometimes there is a “macho man kind of role.” Therefore, families that come into the building often want to “speak to the man” although she doesn’t let this discourage her as she likes “to prove” herself and lets them know that she handles discipline so they will only be speaking to her. Farrah also shared how parents in meetings sometimes only want to talk to the male Dean of Students even though she is his superior. This has become a joke between her and her colleague that he is “her boss.” She laughs it off because she recognizes that it is a “stereotype” and just a “perception” of her being a young female in an administrative role that doesn’t make her look like the authority figure.

Others told of more threatening or intimidating tactics by parents. Heidi recalled a “bizarre” encounter with a male parent who stood up and asked her “very, very docile” assistant principal how much he bench presses. She stepped in front of him and told the father how much she benches when she exercises. Becky described similar experiences when she was a building principal that “fathers often tried to be very condescending, very threatening” because she’s a

female. Mothers would also play this card by telling her that they would “bring [their] husband.” Becky would also stand her ground, retorting that a male family member would have no bearing on her decision. She believes that they “felt that they were able to use a man’s will to try and get an administrative position or decision to change” and she doesn’t feel that “would be the case if [she] was a male.” Laura recalled how parents would have a “totally different conversation” with her male principal than when she was speaking with them.

Unfortunately, some also shared how they feel that males were promoted more quickly because of this idea that males are leaders. Heidi, when describing her previous female superintendent, stated that she “only promoted men” and only had “men as building principals.” Emily commented on the “ongoing stigma” to have female administrators within the district to be “on your court and on your team” because they’re “going to do everything that they need to do. However, they don’t want women in a top position,” shared Emily. On the positive side, other women noted how they felt that “the system of administrators” that they encountered were “very supportive of women.”

Different Treatment

“I think subconsciously men and women are treated differently. I don’t always think it’s intentional, but I recognize it.” This quote by Isabelle, describes how there still exists different standards, perceptions, and expectations for female leaders. The final subtheme under Gender Bias and Discrimination is Different Treatment and will explore how there still exists a double standard for women in leadership positions.

One of the most common conversations regarding the different treatment that male and female administrators receive pertains to male leaders receiving more attention by colleagues,

board members, parents, and community members. An example of this type of situation was described by Heidi in her previous role as an assistant principal. Heidi and another assistant principal who was male within the district met with her female superintendent regarding some updated changes to their job duties. The superintendent “was very vile, and said very, very negative things” when she had asked questions. Heidi continued that “the other assistant principal, the male, asked I’m not even kidding the same exact questions, and she’s like, you know, “It’s really interesting that you asked these questions, here’s why.” Heidi said, “It was probably the most irate I’ve ever been in my entire life.” Valerie said almost this exact same sentiment when describing administrative meetings. “When my male counterparts say the same exact thing. They definitely get more credit.”

Women also shared how their male counterparts are not held to the same standard as women and without repercussions. Josie remarked that she experienced “a couple incidents” where she felt as though “it was okay for [males] to not do certain things but I had to do them.” She gave the example of observations and walkthroughs that were tied to teacher evaluations. “I feel like that was an important part of my job, so I prioritized it.” Josie stated. She continued, “And then there was some male administrators who didn’t do them. They didn’t do observations, and it was brushed under the rug. I couldn’t really understand.” Another example cited by Isabelle showed the disparity between male and female leaders within a district. She described that in 2020 the schools were instructed by the district that they were not able to hold any in-person graduation events. She stated that she put in a request to hold a picnic for families where they would have blankets and be separated out on the lawn. She continued, “One of my male peers did exactly what I was going to do, and another had a drive-by graduation. There were no repercussions. That’s when my eyes were opened and I started to say, “Hmm, wasn’t that funny?”

Some participants even stated how males received different treatment regardless of the gender of the person giving the praise. More than one woman shared how female superintendents or other female administrators treated males and females differently. Heidi shared “I worked for, it's very interesting, a female superintendent and she treated females very poorly and she treated men like the ‘Good Old Boys’ Network.” After she became aware of this disparity, she continued “It was very interesting to watch. I would watch her in our administrative team meetings how she would respond to men.” She described how the superintendent would “slap them on the back and say, “Yeah, way to go, buddy” and women would ask questions and they were almost berated and degraded like, “How dare you have that question?”

Different Leadership. Some believe that they were treated differently by others because of a different perception of how women leaders should act and the belief that women are just fundamentally different than male leaders. Andrea commented how she had a hard time deciphering the motive of how teachers respond to her leadership. She questioned, “Is it my style of leadership they are responding to? Is it the fact that I am a female authority that they are responding to? Is it a combination of both?” Olivia had more conviction in her belief that her principalship shook the traditional beliefs of her former school district. She shared,

I was perceived as the woman who thought differently, behaved differently. I wasn't going to yell at kids which is what they had had known in the past. I wasn't behaving like a man, and I think that that was difficult for them.

Another phenomenon unique to these female school leaders related to extra work or extra duties piled on their plate. Several reasoned that this occurred because women “do more because we're multitaskers and naturally just take things on.” Farrah added that she noticed that “people will email the building principal and then they'll email me.” She explained, “I tend to be

organized. I don't know if that's because I'm a woman, but I remind my male colleagues what is coming up and what is due.” Emily recognized this extra burden of work and experiences “levels of burnout.” She explained, “There is this idea that I am given the task because I'm the female, and I'm a type A worker bee who going to do things the right way instead of the easy way.” She added, “It would feel like many things have been left on my plate to be handled.” Seeming discouraged, she said, “When I have figured out those systemic issues or have come up with recommendations, programs, strategies, interventions, whatever it is, those solutions have been presented as if they are not mine. They are someone else's.” She saw how this has “deeply impacted” others and is saddened to see in 2023 that “it’s still like this.”

To counteract the extra male praise and to make themselves more visible, some women voluntarily took on additional duties or initiatives within the district. Heidi is one of these women. She stated when thinking about a previous administrative role that “I worked harder than anyone else.” Wanting to please her superintendent, she said, “I put myself on every committee, so if she asked for someone, it was my hand that was up.” To “show [her] worth” she also sought to “interface with the school board on a regular basis by helping to write policies and be on committees.” Another participant summed up this idea. “I just think we have to work extra hard as a woman. I say that all the time even though we have the same qualifications, same everything.”

Positives of Being Different. Throughout the interviews, many women expressed the theme of Different Treatment not a derogatory manner, but as a positive for their school. Andrea shared that having females in school leadership roles is “actually needed” because they “bring a different perspective” and their “own experiences.” The perspectives of a woman and their style of leadership is something that Isabelle believes has impacted the climate of her school. “I

believe in leading by example and being a role model- my behaviors and actions are modeled by my staff. This, I do believe, impacts and influences my students, teachers, parents and possibly some of my peers.” Meghan also made the connection between her leadership style and the impact it has had on the school. She shared,

Being able to empathize, sympathize, and really connect with others in a manner that is very kind and caring yet structured has benefited me as a female leader . . . There's something about empathy that really allows for connections to be made with our school community.

The perception that women lead in a different manner was classified under this theme, but statements from the participants show that women may have a certain style or “empathy” that allows them to be successful in their positions. Paige, from her experience, shared that women “tend to be a little bit more empathetic and can see things from other people's perspective, sometimes a little bit easier than maybe a male counterpart.” Isabelle embraces her “compassion and empathy as a woman” and feels that “it is recognized by my peers – colleagues, teachers, and central office administrators.” Dana also shared that her experiences as a mom, wife, and even grandmother allows her to “understand perceptions” and she can “support people’s stories without judgement.” Her ability to show empathy with parents and guardians helps her to “serve [her] community.”

Citing their empathy, many of the female participants stressed how their ability to show compassion and connection has led them to place emphasis on the building of relationships among their peers, staff, and students. Renee was one of these women. “I feel I am a very compassionate person, and I'm very interested in building relationships with people.” With almost 600 students in her building, she claims to know over 400 of their names and greets them

each morning. She also wants to “build that rapport with the parents,” which she claims to “sometimes call more than [she] should.” “I try to build a trusting relationship because I do care, and I hope that comes across,” she said. Olivia also credited the building of relationships to the success she has had in her role. “I’ve been successful by being personable and having genuine interest in people and building relationships,” she commented. The establishment of connections between administrators and their staff is key, believes Paige. She said, “People are more apt to work for people they like, or that they trust, and they’re going to perform better. And I find that to be true.”

The Different Treatment theme can be seen in how staff, students, and parents sometimes tend to seek out a female administrator rather than a male for certain situations. Laura claimed, “There’s certain kids in certain situations that they don’t respond well to men. They want me. They want to cry to me. . . I do feel there are some family members, too, who feel that they could connect with me because I’m a woman.” Even among staff, Farrah commented that,

There are women especially that will come to me with concerns, issues, problems, or help, and they come to me because I’m a woman. Our building principal is a man, so if something’s bothering them, if they’re having an issue at home, maybe with their spouse, they’re going through a divorce, or they have some kind of medical issue, or whatever, I think they’re more inclined to speak with me a lot of times.

Whether it is being a mom or a female, Becky claims that women “understand things differently” which “helps with school culture.”

Interestingly, participants who worked in larger school districts in Pike and Monroe Counties or worked outside of NEPA prior to becoming an administrator within one of the counties within the study, didn’t feel as though they experienced gender as an issue. Within the

study, Valerie, an elementary principal who had become an administrator in another state shared in response to gender challenges or barriers within her role that “It wasn't until I came here that I started to feel like, wait a second. I identified it very early, and it's also seen by other male principals that I've talked to. They see it as well. So, I never even thought about it. It's kind of shocking that even now, in this day and age, it's there.”

Strategies

Table 2: Definitions of Theme 7 and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme	Definition
Strategies		Approaches or tactics to overcome barriers and challenges to the leadership position
	Be Seen, Be Heard	Speaking up to communicate needs and being visible within the school community
	Seek Support	Having a network of people that provide emotional and practical support for the female educational leader
	Fall Back on Aspirations	Reflecting on aspirations to become a school leader and/or seeking aspirational guidance
	Hard Work	Being prepared and working hard in the position
	Building Relationships	Making connections and building rapport with staff, students, colleagues, and parents

To gather data for the third research question, what strategies were employed by these female educational leaders to overcome the barriers and challenges to their leadership position, the participants were asked specifically what types of approaches or tactics they utilized in an administrative position. The women provided a wide variety of strategies that aided them through the barriers and challenges that they faced. The strategies were broken down into five subthemes, some of which were already addressed before through other themes. These subthemes are: Be Seen, Be Heard, Seek Support, Fall Back on Aspirations, Hard Work, and Building Relationships.

Be Seen, Be Heard

A large volume of the data collected pertained to gender bias or discrimination that the women were up against as a female educational leader. Therefore, many of them recognized this challenge and felt that a successful strategy to push back against the pressure was to ensure that they were communicating their needs in their role whether it be things they needed to be successful or things that needed to cease. Farrah's strategy simply was to recognize that there exist biases and stereotypes for "women in general and women leaders." She felt that just "knowing that it's there" assisted her in "not letting it bother [her]" and to not take it "personal." Once the acknowledgement of gender bias or discrimination is known, the women stressed the need to communicate their needs. Andrea encouraged the need to set boundaries. She feels that she gains more respect from others since she has these limits. She stated, "I don't just mean of what you could tolerate or not." Andrea continued, "I mean boundaries of when it's time to go home, have your family time, and have personal time as well. And also, boundaries of making sure other people aren't trying to get you to do their work or their job."

Laura spoke to this subtheme by describing how it is imperative that her building principal knows the responsibilities she has as a mother. She said, "If there was a new principal, I would probably have to say up front, "I am a mom. Here are my husband's hours." Laura continued that she would need to blatantly say, "This is how I work. If you are not okay with it, then I don't know what you want me to do." Meghan also pointed to the need to speak up to colleagues and even parents if they are using disrespectful or derogatory language. She commented, "There are times that I put people in their place. I put parents in their place if they happen to take advantage or not respect my position." And Heidi summed up how to overcome

gender challenges by “making [yourself] known and seen and present and engaged above anyone else.”

Seek Support

Several participants spoke about the immense support they received from professors, classmates, colleagues, and family to pursue and thrive in their administrative role. It would be remiss to discuss how to overcome challenges without circling back to the importance of support networks. Emily said she finds mentors invaluable and encourages other leaders to surround themselves “with some amazing mentors and even reach out to those people who are in your position in other districts or prior to you.” She believes in a strong network so “in those darkest moments and there will be dark moments, you need to fall back on that, because that is going to be what keeps you coming back each and every day.” Farrah’s experience with her mentors was discussed previously, but she stressed how she finds it necessary to lean on her mentors. She stated, “My mentors have really, really helped me. I think that's it important to find somebody you can rely on. Don't be afraid to ask for help.” Besides colleagues, female leaders found it essential to have family support especially being a working mom. Paige expressed how she was able to be a working female leader with small children. “I am blessed really with the most supportive family in the world. My husband is very supportive, and my sister in particular. Paige elaborated, “She watched my kids when they were younger which allowed me to be a working mom and know that my kids were safe and have some flexibility.” “I think having a good support system for any working mom is really important” declared Paige.

Fall Back on Aspirations

Another subtheme that connects to a major theme from this study is Fall Back on Aspirations. Previously it was examined how many female educational leaders had ambitions and aspirations to be leaders. Under the theme of Strategies, many women mentioned how they push through challenging times by reflecting on their initial aspirations to become a school leader or seek aspirational guidance. When dealing with difficult days, Emily commented that “you have to know your why.” She was explaining how one needs to think back to why they got into education or why you are having such a hard time with a particular situation. “You have to do the right thing and tell the truth, and that's all you can do. You just have to trust and believe that it's going to work out.” Claudia mentioned how she keeps inspirational quotes in her office to “keep me motivated and remind me why I’m here and my purpose” when she gets “really frustrated with somethings.” She specifically shared how one of her favorites is to “do the maximum amount of good for the maximum amount of students” which helps her to refocus her mindset. Some women also mentioned how their confidence begins to wane as they face some challenges in their administrative role. Josie combats this by shifting her “perception” and have the confidence to believe that she “deserves” to be in this position.

Hard Work

When the participants were asked about strategies they utilize to overcome barriers or challenges, multiple women discussed always being prepared and working hard. Whether you are a male or female, Andrea noted that being in a principal position requires you to be “a strong worker” as you cannot “sit on your hands.” It necessitates a person to be “as proactive as possible which means a lot of awareness of what's going on.” The drive to be an ambitious leader seems to be achieved by the perseverance of these women to “keep pushing forward.” They

personify this by “being the hardest working person at the table” since there is “a general sense that you're [female leaders] always working a little bit harder than the rest [male leaders].” Olivia stated, “I will be the most read; the most knowledgeable. It may not be at that moment, but I will have an answer. And I will find it wherever I need to find it.” “You need to be willing to work hard, and you have to be willing to just embrace what's thrown your way” commented Natalie because at the end of the day school leaders need to “make the best decision, ethically and morally,” that benefit students.

Building Relationships

The final subtheme under Strategies is Building Relationships in which female educational leaders discussed “looking more at the trees, not just the forest” to see the actual people they work with, not just as employees. Natalie, commenting that this may come from her former school counselor background, said, “I think that we need to look at the whole person and not just are they doing their job or not, but really get to know the individual.” Josie knew the importance of building a good rapport with her staff and described the first year at her new position, by stating, “I basically spent a year building relationships and getting to know people.” This effort has effects on what one can accomplish as a school leader which impacts the school culture. Meghan remarked that “being able to empathize, sympathize, and really connect with others in a manner that is very kind and caring yet structured, benefited me as a female leader.” She continued, “There's something about that empathy that really allows for connections to be made with our school community.” The reason why, simply stated by Olivia, is that “people are more apt to work for people they like or that they trust, and they're going to perform better.” Additionally, Isabelle found that these strong relationships translate to teacher “buy-in and being invested in the school.” A segment of how to build these relationships hinges on the ability to

also be a good listener for others. Becky described that “often times women will come in and say, “I just need you to listen because you get it.” So, I do think that it helps with your culture.”

Therefore, understanding people can have a huge impact on the success of a leader.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the 20 participants in this research study on the lived experience of female educational leaders in NEPA had provided data for the research questions (1) What is the lived experience of female educational leaders in their role in Northeast Pennsylvania K-12 public schools who faced gender barriers and challenges in their position?; (2) How do the gender barriers and challenges encountered in the pursuit of a leadership position compare to the barriers and challenges while serving as an educational leader?; (3) What strategies were employed by these female educational leaders to overcome the barriers and challenges to their leadership position? Many of these women expressed that they aspired to make real change for children and chose the route of school leadership to accomplish this goal. To be a successful leader, the data showed that a support system seemed necessary to provide the confidence, guidance, and sometimes logistical support especially for working mothers. The women participants, overall, did not seem to have barriers or challenges in acquiring a leadership role but there definitely exists challenges once women were in the position. The three themes that related to these obstacles included the time demands that accompanies an administrative role, the loss of some support systems once a woman moves into a leadership position, and gender bias and discrimination faced by female leaders. The last theme provides the strategies that current female educational leaders utilize to overcome the challenges in their role. These can be used to aid fellow and aspiring leaders to navigate the phenomenon of being a female educational leader in Northeast Pennsylvania.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This study examined the gender barriers and challenges to females in their role as an educational leader within K-12 public schools in Northeastern Pennsylvania. Special focus was utilized to explore how the gender barriers and challenges encountered in the pursuit of a leadership position compared to the barriers and challenges while serving as an educational leader and what strategies are employed to overcome them. The twenty participants, while all serving within an LEA from Northeastern Pennsylvania, were diverse in their administrative role, years of experience, their marriage and parental status, and school environment. Despite the differences, commonalities were uncovered, and the totality of the data collected revealed the essence of the educational leaders' lives. The shared experience, and sometimes unique instances, of being a female educational leader in Northeastern Pennsylvania is better understood in order to develop practices or policies that can improve the success of future leaders.

Summary of the Findings

Research Question #1

What is the lived experience of female educational leaders in their role in Northeast Pennsylvania K-12 public schools who faced gender barriers and challenges in their position?

The seven themes that emerged from the interview data could all describe the essence of the lived experience of a female educational leader in Northeastern Pennsylvania. However, three will be explored here while the others are more pertinent to the subsequent research questions. The themes of Aspirations, Support System, and Gender Bias and Discrimination will be examined and discussed through the lens of the cited literature in the study regarding women and leadership.

Table 3: Definitions of Themes and Subthemes Pertaining to Research Question 1

Theme	Subtheme	Definition
Aspirations		A self-induced drive to become a leader and make systemic change
Support System		A network of people that provided emotional and practical support for the female educational leader
	Academia Support	Professors and classmates that provided encouragement to continue schooling, pursue positions, and/or provide support while in an administrative role
	Colleague Support	Teachers and administrators that provided support to attain their leadership role or in the position
	Familial Support	Parents, spouses, and/or other family that provided encouragement or support
Gender Bias and Discrimination		The feelings and thoughts of being treated a certain way due to being a female
	Exclusion	Not being privy to certain information, being physically excluded from meetings or events, or feeling socially excluded from male colleagues
	Silenced	Being told or having the feeling of being quiet and/or ignored
	Talked Down to or Disrespectfully	Being spoken to in a belittling or disrespectful manner
	Men in Charge	Not being viewed as the leader in charge or having authority questioned
	Different Treatment	Male leaders receive more attention by school stakeholders and/or are not held to the same standard as women and without repercussions

Aspirations

Almost all the participants described having an aspiration to become a school leader or pursued an administrative position as a means to improve the deficiencies of the school system. Since these women have successfully moved into a leadership role and are currently still serving as an administrator, it appears that this self-induced drive to serve as a leader or having a drive to make change is a feature that should be possessed by aspiring school leaders. The origin of the leadership goal does not seem to impact the result as some women spoke of having this internal

trait while others found that their leadership potential grew out of support and encouragement from others. Therefore, if females have an ambition to move into an educational leadership position, then they should possess the desire to lead school change and the belief in themselves that they can make a bigger impact. This passion is important as many of the participants described how they reflect on why they became an administrator when the job was demanding or when they were questioning their career path. Without this foundation, the strains of the role may be too difficult to sustain, and the women may find themselves struggling in their position and leaving the profession.

In the study, the participants who held an internal drive to pursue leadership often described the influence and impact of family on their career paths and success. This can be connected to the literature regarding parental influence on the academic achievement and career trajectory of children. Watt & Eccles' (2008) research demonstrated the profound impact that gender stereotypes regarding childrearing can have on the academic achievement of girls and, therefore, on their future career choices. This was reflected in the data as five participants specifically mentioned how their fathers held the same standards of achievement for both the boys and girls in their families and how this shaped their desires to climb the leadership ladder in the education field. If parents value achievement and cultivate this equally on the raising of their sons and daughters, the data from this study is consistent with the literature on the impact of parental influence on future career goals of females. This manner of child-rearing can alter profession stereotypes and can have an impact on the number of females pursuing male-dominated professions and leadership roles.

Support System

A major theme from the lived experience of these female leaders was the presence of or necessity of a support system. The theme was broken down into academia, colleague, and familial support and participants didn't necessarily have all three. The volume of data regarding the supports that participants received seem to indicate that they are vital in aiding in a female becoming a leader and also in being able to endure the demands of the job.

Based on the data from this study, academia can impact the professional and career goals of females and these institutions can aid in cultivating more female educational leaders through their influence and encouragement of female students. Supports in the academia realm provided the encouragement for the participants to pursue or complete a principal certification program or urged them to seek a leadership position. Professors, sometimes having a leadership background themselves, and getting to know their students from classroom interactions and discussions can often identify students with promising potential for school leadership. Therefore, they can use their position to support and encourage female students to seek higher roles within a school setting. The professional experience of some of these professors and the esteem they conjure also make them ideal to serve as mentors as these females navigate their leadership roles. Therefore, academia and the support system it provides can play a role in tipping the balance towards more female educators aspiring towards leadership roles.

Another support that seemed vital for woman came from their colleagues in the school setting. Collegial support either presented itself as peers encouraging a female to progress in their leadership or made the acquiring of a leadership position more attainable. Many participants described how fellow teachers or administrators commented on their leadership potential and either planted the seed or encouraged them to pursue the role. The impact of peers cannot be

overlooked in the career trajectory of some of these participants. An educational organization can provide an environment that is supportive of not only the students in pursuing goals and achievement, but also the faculty. Identifying and encouraging educators that show the potential of leadership can make impacts on more females seeking leadership roles. Participants also described how colleagues, often administrators at their school urged them to apply for leadership roles by making them “too good to pass up.” This included adjusting hours that the position required or assisting them in the role. Women that were mothers often cited how their fellow colleagues were understanding of their childcare responsibilities and took over some of their work responsibilities when they needed to be away. This data emphasizes the need for LEAs to make educational leadership positions for women attainable considering their familial responsibilities.

The cultural and societal demands on women put them in a position that requires extra supports for them to achieve success as a leader in their profession. The presence of academia and colleague support align with the research that shows the benefit of a mentor for women to obtain a leadership position and be successful (Barkhuizen, 2022). Therefore, it is vital that these supports exist for women. Female administrators that provide this encouragement and assistance with the role is consistent with Rhode’s (2017) research which showed that some female leaders desire to make the path to leadership easier for their successors because of their own experiences with discrimination, marginalization, or work-family conflicts. As women in the study claimed, they often sought a fellow female administrator to talk to as they “get it.”

The amount of familial support cited by the women in this research study was not surprising. Even if the participants were not married, they still spoke about the amount of support they received as they moved into a leadership role or in their current role. Participants that were

married or had children almost always described how their partner or other family members aided with household and/or childcare responsibilities. This data shows that it is difficult for working mothers to uphold traditional gender stereotypes regarding familial responsibilities and be a school leader. The demands of both roles are not sustainable without the support of other family members. This conclusion aligns with Garcia's (2015) study of female principals which echoed the necessity to have a balance between housework and parenting duties and their careers. Without adequate childcare or supports in place, the women felt that that it would be too difficult to manage both school and home responsibilities simultaneously. The data indicates that women rely heavily on their families to be a successful leader especially as a working mother. It then begs the question if a school leadership position is attainable for single mothers or those without familial support.

Gender Bias and Discrimination

Overwhelmingly, gender bias and discrimination permeated the data collected from the participants, and therefore, their lived experience. A requirement of the participants was the perception that they experienced some barriers or challenges based on their gender in their pursuit or in their role as an educational leader. Therefore, it is difficult to determine if the amount of data pertaining to gender bias or discrimination is disproportionately higher than it would be if a different sample of women were interviewed. Regardless, the participants described their lived experience as a female educational leader heavily laden with bias and discriminate undertones.

More than one woman described how they held the feeling of being excluded from or silenced by fellow male administrators. Both of these actions highlight the social gender role biases that exist that keep women separate or submissive to males. In the study two women, an

elementary principal and an assistant superintendent, described how they were not invited to meetings while other male administrators were included. This shows that this type of segregation is present and occurs at all levels of hierarchy within school administration. The exclusion of women from a certain group of leaders is also consistent with the ‘glass wall’ analogy of woman in leadership. The data is showing that women are rising to senior-level management positions, in this study positions such as assistant superintendent, but are still barred from the inner sanctum of select male leaders by a ‘glass wall’ (Klenke, 2017). The glass wall is also synonymous with the persistence of a ‘Good Old Boys’ network of males. Many participants used this phrase to describe the social structure among the administrators in their LEA. Interestingly, though, females often found themselves included in the inner network of male administrators when solutions or action was necessary. This is parallel to Read & Kehm (2016) who found a pattern where women were appointed to leadership positions when there were problems and change was needed. This can be likened to the duties of the traditional housewife where ‘cleaning up’ or ‘straightening out’ had to be done which perpetuates traditional gender role stereotypes.

In addition to males barring the inclusion of females and attempting to keep them submissive by silencing their inquiries and ideas, many of the participants cited derogatory vocabulary that were used to describe them or their authority as a female leader was questioned. At least five of the participants commented that they were labeled by others as the “Queen Bee,” “cocky,” a “bitch,” and “unapproachable” by fellow administrators or educators. This emphasizes how women in leadership positions are still fighting stereotypes on what leaders should look like and how women are perceived as leaders. This degrading language aligns with previous research that found women in leadership positions fight against pervasive gender role

stereotypes, but they also face cross pressures of expressing communal traits associated with their gender and agentic traits aligned with leadership roles (Northouse, 2019). Women in the study that were called these derogatory names felt that they were perceived as such because they needed to flex their authority or were not behaving as a submissive female. The fact that more than one woman expressed these comments from fellow administrators confirms that gender stereotypes are present among the ranks of administrators in the counties of the study in Northeastern Pennsylvania. This bias view is also pervasive among some families within the LEAs of the participants as their authority as a female educational leader was questioned or challenged by some parents.

The above-mentioned gender bias and discrimination expressed by the participants all stem from a traditional patriarchal structure that still persists within society. The long-standing history of this system is a powerful cultural norm and is supported by tradition, education, and religion (Higgins, 2018). On a positive note, from the data, however, it appears that some progress is being made in this area. It was found that participants who worked in larger school districts in Pike and Monroe Counties or worked outside of NEPA prior to becoming an administrator within one of the counties within the study, didn't feel as though they had experienced this type of discrimination. This can be due to the size of the districts and a more equitable representation among genders in different administrative roles. It can also be surmised that the school culture and environment at smaller districts or within certain counties lends itself to this more traditional and patriarchal mentality.

The last bit of data that falls under the category of Gender Bias and Discrimination is the difference in the leadership styles of male and female leaders. While the literature shows that contrary to stereotypic expectations, women are not found to lead in a more interpersonally-

oriented and less task-oriented manner than men within an organization and are equally effective leaders (Eagly et al, 1995; Northouse, 2019), the present study could support the research that women leaders tend to be more democratic or participative in their manner (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; van Engen & Willemsen, 2004). This data was collected from the participants' own reflections on their leadership styles which could also be a biased assessment based on the stereotypic leadership style of women. It is difficult to make a conclusive statement about the leadership styles of the participants since the study did not have a comparison group of men to compare leadership styles and traits. The data collected from the participants, however, highlights the emphasis on building relationships to build a supportive and welcoming school culture where the needs of students drive the mission. This was consistent among many participants and doesn't necessarily have to be tied to gender. This follows along with the research that women uphold close relationships with key stakeholders including students, staff, parents, and colleagues and use these relationships for shared decision-making and problem-solving so the leader can concentrate on the search for the best solution to most problems and issues in the interests of the greater good (Campos-Garcia & Zúñiga-Vicente, 2019). Therefore, the present study has shown that successful female educational leaders have placed a large emphasis on the building of relationships and may have contributed to their accomplishments as a leader.

When analyzing the data and looking back to the accrued literature, one piece that did not align was statistics that show women are most concentrated at the elementary level and are least likely to serve as a high school principal (Korver, 2021). Among the 20 participants recruited for the study, there were four participants each who served in the following roles: assistant superintendent, director, or elementary principal. Three participants were directors or

supervisors of special education, two served as assistant high school principals, two were assistant elementary principals, and one was a middle school principal. While the sample of women that responded to the request for participation may not be indicative of the sample of all female educational leaders in Northeastern Pennsylvania, the variety of administrative titles among the participants are not segregated into roles that hold less prestige and may require more communal traits. Therefore, it can be concluded that women are not held by barriers of horizontal segregation where the genders are segregated into different roles within professions based on occupational characteristics (Lippa, Preston, & Penner, 2021).

Research Question #2

How do the gender barriers and challenges encountered in the pursuit of a leadership position compare to the barriers and challenges while serving as an educational leader?

Table 4: Definitions of Themes Pertaining to Research Question 2

Theme	Subtheme	Definition
Changing Titles		The changes that accompany the movement into an administrator role (i.e. changes in friendship and support systems)
Time Constraints		Time demands that accompany an educational leadership role

The literature cited barriers and challenges to women from pursuing and advancing in leadership positions due to such patriarchal ideologies as ‘think manager – think male’ or familial responsibilities (Northouse, 2019; Garcia, 2015). However, the overall sense from the participants is that they pursued and attained their position without gender being a barrier or a challenge. They described how some opportunities presented themselves or they received support to apply for available positions. This finding is unique as previous research highlights

women failed to attain leadership roles due to the barriers and challenges. The barriers and challenges include such things as hiring boards and committees exerting ethnocentrism and/or homosociality and seeking males (Brower, et al., 2019), household and childcare responsibilities preventing females from advancing in their careers (Garcia, 2015), and lack of proper mentoring opportunities (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016). While the participants did not see gender as a barrier to their initial administrative position, some described how their male colleagues progressed at a faster pace to more elite titles. Similarly, to the claim by Brown et al. (2020), many women continue to struggle to attain career positions equal to their male colleagues, even when they have comparable skills and experience. This also supports Eagly and Carli (2007) who identified faults with the glass ceiling metaphor as it implied that everyone has equal access to promotions until women hit this single, invisible, and impenetrable barrier. They offered the image of a labyrinth instead where women experience challenges throughout, not just progressing to leadership.

The challenges that many of the participants encountered while serving in their administrative role were not heavily stressed in the literature. These major challenges include the forementioned gender bias and discrimination as well as the themes of Changing Title and Time Constraints. Gender bias and discrimination was discussed above under Research Question #1 and those analyses of the challenges in the role pertain to this Research Question #2 as well. This section will assess Changing Titles and Time Constraints.

To assist women progressing in leadership, this study has discovered the importance of a sturdy support system. However, the women in the study described how their circle of supportive colleagues became much smaller after becoming a leader which was not mentioned in previous literature. This phenomenon of changes in their peer relationships seemed to be unexpected to

the participants and was not realized until they served in the role. The participants described how their support system was altered in two ways; the dynamic of their friendship with colleagues was transformed and as a result their supportive circle changed. Once they moved into a leadership role, their friendships with fellow teachers changed as they could not reveal confidential information regarding work and needed to serve as an authority figure and give directives. As a result of this changing relationship, they lost some of their peers as members of their support system. One participant shared that after becoming a leader, “I lean on my family and very close small circle, because, unfortunately, the higher you get up this ladder your circle gets much smaller.” This finding suggests that women may need to be prepared for this change to their former support system and may need to adjust to seek out new networks of supports as they move through leadership ranks within an LEA.

Another challenge that most participants described is the immense time commitment and the resulting effects on their work-life balance that accompanies a leadership role. A few of the women who were mothers commented that they delayed pursuing a leadership role because of their childcare responsibilities or those who were not parents questioned how they would be able to do it with children in tow. This is consistent with data that shows that women who are in leadership positions are less likely to be in a relationship or have young children (Hoff, Menard, and Truell, 2006; Robinson et al., 2017). Female administrators studied by Hoff, Menard, and Truell (2006 as cited by Kruse & Krumm, 2016) stated that they waited until their children were grown because of the challenges in balancing their home lives and extra duties that were required beyond the school day. Of the 20 participants, less than five had children under the age of ten. Because of this small number, it could be suggested that the time demands of an educational leader are not conducive to being a mother with small children. If changes are to be made to

make the profession more attainable for females, then perhaps lessening the duties and responsibilities of educational leaders is required.

While these extra hours and demanding schedules were expected, many women used variations of the quote “you don’t know what you don’t know” to describe this challenge once they were actually in the role. In order to make this challenge more manageable or achieve a better work-life balance, support systems are vital. This can be in the form of fellow colleagues that will be available to share administrative duties and extra obligations such as being at the school for evening events or even allowing flexibility in the work hours to ease demands of being a working mother with children responsibilities. Support systems can be made up of partners or husbands that abandon traditional gender roles at home and take on more household duties to ease the burden on the wife or mother. Support also is needed from family who may be understanding of reduced time for extended family commitments or may help with childcare while the mother works. The data from this study consistently revealed that female educational leaders need support systems to overcome some of the challenges that present as a result of the immense time constraints.

Research Question #3

What strategies were employed by these female educational leaders to overcome the barriers and challenges to their leadership position?

Table 5: Definitions of Themes and Subthemes Pertaining to Research Question 3

Theme	Subtheme	Definition
Strategies		Approaches or tactics to overcome barriers and challenges to the leadership position
	Be Seen, Be Heard	Speaking up to communicate needs and being visible within the school community

	Seek Support	Having a network of people that provide emotional and practical support for the female educational leader
	Fall Back on Aspirations	Reflecting on aspirations to become a school leader and/or seeking aspirational guidance
	Hard Work	Being prepared and working hard in the position
	Building Relationships	Making connections and building rapport with staff, students, colleagues, and parents

When looking at the challenges participants experience, many of them can be traced to traditional gender role expectations of women and the patriarchal societal structure that promotes male superiority. Women experience more pressure than men trying to balance home responsibilities and the time demands of being an administrator as well as fighting against social norms that place men in roles of leadership. Therefore, when participants were asked what strategies they utilize to overcome the barriers and challenges to their leadership position, many cited tactics to elevate the extra burdens due to the leadership role and how they can be successful among male administrators. Participants suggested fellow women to be seen and heard and rely on support systems. If women are to be successful educational leaders, they need to speak up regarding the challenges they face and push for support from colleagues or the school system to ease the burden. It has been uncovered through the data collected that support systems are vital to women as they pursue or serve as an educational leader. Women depend on others because of household and childcare responsibilities as well as being a female in a male dominated profession. This aligned with data by previous researchers that found that females lean on a strong support system, both personal and professional, to encourage and aid in their seeking of an administrative role and while serving in that position (Kruse & Krumm, 2016).

Another strategy tied to traditional gender roles is the eagerness to work hard and persevere. Multiple participants stressed the need to work hard or be “the hardest working person at the

table.” This drive to “prove” themselves may contribute additional research, meetings, or responsibilities on top of their normal duties. This may also be a factor influencing the immense time demands that participants discussed. It cannot be determined if the participants must work this hard to be successful in the position or if it is a self-imposed tactic to feel on par with male colleagues. Males were not interviewed in the study, participants indirectly questioned whether males would be driven to the same level of perseverance. If women are to flourish in a school leadership position with the time constraints and challenges, then perhaps the amount of extra work that women add to their expected duties should be reduced.

The next strategy of Falling Back on Aspirations appears to be independent of gender. Many mentioned how they push through challenging times by reflecting on their initial aspirations to become a school leader or seek aspirational guidance. When dealing with difficult days, one participant commented that “you have to know your why.” She was explaining how one needs to think back to why they got into education or why one is having such a hard time with a particular situation. This advice could be given by an administrator of either gender and speaks to the challenges of the profession rather than on the challenges of being a female in the role.

The final strategy of Building Relationships can also be presumed to be gender-neutral advice. Data has shown in previous research that school leadership has an impact on the faculty and students within the building (Brinia, 2011). To see success within these areas, school leaders enter the role with a multidimensional approach. In education there is a need for a structural leader to ensure efficiency, structure, and policy as well as a human leader where the leader cultivates empowerment and facilitation (Brinia, 2011). It can be argued that successful male and female educational leaders place an emphasis on building relationships among the staff and students to achieve success. However, past research on student performance has shown that

women leaders in education have certain gender-specific behaviors that positively influence the individual performance of students and the overall function of the school (Campos-Garcia & Zúñiga-Vicente, 2019). Some research has confirmed that teachers tend to be more involved, collegial, and cooperative under the leadership of female administration. Student achievement within school and on state ratings can significantly improve when the principal is a woman (Campos-Garcia & Zúñiga-Vicente, 2019). Therefore, if female educational leaders place an emphasis on and build strong relationships with the stakeholders of an LEA, then it will not only provide a successful leadership tenure but will be fruitful for the achievement of the school as well.

Implications for Practice

Significance of this study as stated in Chapter 1, is that despite high rates of women in the teaching profession, they are greatly underrepresented in the leadership roles within schools. Previous research uncovered that there are internal and external barriers and challenges that prevent women from aspiring to and/or seeking a leader role (Diez Gutierrez, 2016; Korver, 2021). This study has found that women are moving into leadership positions but face challenges within the role that pertain to continued gender bias and discrimination and the demands of the role. Therefore, this research reinforces a need for changes in principal preparation programs, school leader professional development programming, an assessment of the position at LEAs, and societal awareness to aid in encouraging and supporting women in education administrative positions.

To have the most significant impact, principal preparation programs need to increase the awareness of the disparity among the numbers of female educators and leaders, the challenges that they face, and how future leaders can support more women in leadership. While it may be a

generalization that there are more male school leaders, principal preparation programs need to stress the actual statistics that show there is a significant gender disparity among the leaders of schools, but females have been making gains. This will increase awareness of future male leaders on the need to support females, but it will also give courage to more females that others have forged the path. Within these preparation programs, the challenges of the profession should be exposed and the obstacles that are generally more geared towards females should be discussed. It is easy to say that women just aren't pursuing leadership, but the understanding of the barriers and challenges that women face due to household and childcare responsibilities are not going to lessen without conscious effort by both men and women to make change. Once the problem is understood, principal preparation programs need to explicitly cite approaches that can be used to create a culture where females have equal access to and are supported in educational leadership positions. This includes identifying and cultivating female teachers who show leadership qualities to pursue administration, ensuring hiring practices within LEAs are not influenced by gender, and ways to support female leaders, especially those that are mothers.

For leaders already in practice, professional development programming can also address the disparity among the numbers of female educators and administrators, the need to encourage women to pursue leadership, and how to support females in administrative positions. It is important to educate all leaders about the inconsistencies that are present among males and females pursuing leadership and remind leaders of the influence they hold to encourage females with potential for leadership. For leaders already in practice, professional development can address strategies to support fellow female administrators within the building including the power of mentorship. According to the literature, to be truly effective, a mentoring program should be developed and implemented in a comprehensive and well-resourced fashion (Bynum,

2015). Therefore, this professional development can include a mentorship model that administrators can use that utilizes research-based strategies that are most successful for a mentee. Finally, since the need for strong support systems has been shown through this study, these professional development opportunities can also be used to create female leader networks. These can be informal groups that meet, or they can be facilitated through a local college/university or intermediate unit for more formal networking opportunities.

Based on the data of this study, the women who were in positions of leadership struggled with attaining a work-life balance. The time demands prevented some women from moving into a leadership position until their children were older or those who had children commented how they constantly worried how their job was affecting their families. It was also seen that many of the participants did not have children at all. The time requirements that accompany an administrative role are not conducive to working mothers or family-friendly in general. Therefore, if LEAs would like to attract the best candidates to serve as leaders of their schools, an assessment of the duties and responsibilities of the administrators should be carried out. LEAs could make better strides and achieve higher success if they developed administrative positions that provided more flexibility and reduction of demands as more professionals would seek the role.

Lastly, results of this study indicate that strides have been made to allow females to attain leadership roles as most participants noted that gender did not impact the acquiring of their position. Societal awareness must continue to stress the progress that women have made in leadership and shift the ideal of males in positions of power. The image of women in leadership roles in schools can be especially impactful on students of both genders as it will normalize women in leadership roles and provide a role model for female students. To further change

societal views, there needs to be a push for self-reflection by current leaders in all industries to become cognizant of their own gender biases and stereotypes as their beliefs shape the decisions and actions they make for their organizations. And lastly, since social ideals and values originate within the home, awareness should also be brought to parents on the power they possess to raise children of both genders to strive for achievement based on the expectations they hold for their children.

Limitations

The sampling strategy for this study was criterion sampling to ensure the participants all experienced the same phenomenon of being a female educational leader. To reach saturation, snowball sampling was also utilized. All of the women that responded to the request to be interviewed were included in the study. Therefore, participants may not have been diverse in their experiences or demographics, a concern with all qualitative studies or quantitative studies that do not use a random sample (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study was also limited in its ability to be generalizable to other school districts. The data from the study was collected from K-12 LEAs in Northeastern Pennsylvania and may not be congruent with data that would be collected from a broader area. The inclusion of more research participants from other types of schools or other regions of the state or nation could have made the data more generalizable and could strengthen the themes identified or facilitated the identification of further topics and themes. Lastly, the qualitative nature of the study and data collection, such as the use of a recording device and/or a video meeting platform, may have limited the responses of the participants and ability to observe all nonverbal behaviors of the participants.

Suggestions for Future Research

The research design of this study dove deep into the lived experience of female educational leaders. However, when drawing conclusions and developing implications for practice, it was difficult to determine if all facets of the lived experience of the female educational leader were different from that of a male. Therefore, it is recommended that future research be conducted that includes male administrators for comparison. The researcher can evaluate the similarities or differences among the experienced challenges to determine if these are dependent upon gender. This research can even be a mixed method format to collect empirical data to look for statistical significance between barriers and challenges, and gender.

In addition, future research should be expanded to a larger geographic area to look for consistent trends among female educational leaders. In this research study, it is suggested that the researcher collect demographic information regarding school classification to see if differences exist between urban, suburban, and rural schools since the current study showed that the size of the district or the county may have influenced the gender bias or discrimination experienced by the female leaders.

Conclusions

In reviewing the findings, it is clear that female educational leaders have experienced challenges in their role that pertain to gender that can be traced back to traditional gender roles and the patriarchal structure that still persists within society. Multiple women described how they held the feeling of being excluded from or silenced by others or were described with derogatory or negative language in relation to their leadership. Women also spoke about instances when they were not viewed as the leader in charge or their authority was questioned.

Furthermore, participants described the pervasiveness of different standards, perceptions, and expectations for female leaders. The data revealed that the participants felt that male leaders receive more attention from colleagues, board members, parents, and community members and are not held to the same standard as women and without repercussions. Therefore, women need to work harder to be recognized or “prove” themselves. Additional challenges that arose while in the position pertained to the women’s circle of supportive colleagues that was scaled back after becoming a leader and the time demands of the position that are even more exacerbated for working mothers. Many strategies were offered to overcome these barriers and challenges, but the most consistent among the participants was the need for a strong support system. Women described the support they received from many different sources including academia, colleagues, and their families.

Two positive conclusions were uncovered in the data. One was the positive attributes that female leaders can contribute to an LEA including a different, more humanistic style of leadership. This often leads to more emphasis being placed on the staff and students and the building of relationships which impacts school culture. The participants also claimed that staff, students, and parents sometimes prefer the warm and welcoming nature of a woman in certain situations. The second encouraging piece of data was that participants did not feel there were barriers or challenges preventing them from attaining a leadership position due to their gender. Most participants described how opportunities presented themselves and worked out for the best. This shows that women are aspiring to leadership roles and are making progress in acquiring such positions.

These findings support the need for changes in principal preparation programs, school leader professional development programming, and societal awareness to aid in encouraging and

supporting women in education administrative positions. It is important to educate all leaders about the inconsistencies that are present among males and females pursuing leadership and remind leaders of the influence they hold to encourage females with potential for leadership. This will increase awareness of the need to support females who move into administrative positions and reassure females that others have forged the path. If remediations are to successfully address the disparity between the number of female educators in the classroom and in administration, then efforts must be made to create more hospitable environments for women to thrive and be respected in leadership roles.

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Appendix A



**MARYWOOD UNIVERSITY
EXEMPT REVIEW COMMITTEE**
Liberal Arts Center, 2300 Adams Avenue, Scranton, PA 18509

DATE: September 12, 2023

TO: Amanda Forgione

FROM: Marywood University Exempt Review Committee

STUDY TITLE: [2094801-2] *In Her Own Voice: Gender Discrimination Facing K-12 Female Educational Leaders*

MU ERC #: 2023-E028

SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: September 12, 2023

CHECK IN DUE DATE: September 12, 2024

REVIEW TYPE: Exempt Review

EXEMPT CATEGORY: 45 CFR 46.104 (d)(2)(ii)

Dear Amanda Forgione:

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials to your Exemption Request for this research study. Marywood University's ERC has **APPROVED** your submission. The project meets federal exemption criteria and involves minimal risk to subjects participating in the research. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a complete description of the study and assurance of subject understanding.

We have applied the ERC's approval stamp to the following documents, which have been uploaded with this letter in IRBNet (While viewing Project Overview for your study > Reviews tab on left > Under Board Documents at the bottom > Next to package #2). The stamp must appear on versions shared with subjects wherever possible (e.g., on consent forms attached to email). If it is not feasible to use the stamped versions online (e.g. some email systems), please ensure that the language in the transmitted versions is identical to the stamped versions.

1. Email Recruitment Messages
2. Informed Consent Form

Please also note that:

- **CLOSURE REPORTING:** Upon completion of the research, you must file a closure report form via IRBNet.
- **CHECK IN REPORTING:** While there is no expiration date for exempted studies, the ERC maintains oversight of open projects. If activities will continue beyond your approval's one-year anniversary of **September 12, 2024**, file a check in form by that date.
- **RECORDS RETENTION:** While there is no minimum retention period for exempted studies, you must retain records for the length of time stated in your application and informed consent form.
- **DEVIATION, UNANTICIPATED PROBLEM OR SERIOUS ADVERSE EVENT REPORTING:** If any of these events occur, you must file the appropriate form immediately via IRBNet.
- **REVISION REQUESTS:** If you decide to make procedural or document changes to your approved project, you must file a revision request form for review and approval prior to implementation, except when necessary to eliminate apparent, immediate hazards to the subjects. In hazardous situations, you must file the form immediately afterward.

The appropriate forms for any of the reports mentioned above may be found at irbnet.org. After logging in, click the Forms and Templates button on the left menu, or find the library after you begin a follow up package within your existing project (*Designer* button on the left menu, followed by the blue "Need forms" link on the main screen, which opens the library under Step 1).

If you have any questions, please contact the Research Office at 570-348-6211, x.2418 or irbhelp@marywood.edu. Please include your study title and IRBNet number in all correspondence with this office.

Thank you and good luck with your research!

Regards,
Exempt Review Committee

Appendix B

Subject Line: NEPA Female School Administrators Research Study

Dear Administrator:

My name is Amanda Forgione, and I am a doctoral candidate at Marywood University. I am conducting a research study. Its purpose is to investigate the gender barriers or challenges to female educational leaders within K-12 public schools in Northeastern Pennsylvania. Special focus will investigate if gender barriers encountered in the pursuit of a leadership position are still relevant while serving as an educational leader and if so, what strategies are employed to overcome the barriers.

You are invited to participate if you qualify. To qualify, you must identify as female and have the perception that you have experienced barriers or challenges based on your gender in your pursuit or in your role as an educational leader. You also must have served in the 2022-2023 school year in one of the following roles within a brick-and-mortar local education agency (LEA): executive director, assistant executive director, superintendent, assistant superintendent, special education director, curriculum director, principal, or assistant principal. The research will take place within your educational setting for convenience, at a neutral location of your choice, or via a digital meeting platform (Zoom). It will take about one hour.

Benefits may include recommendations for LEAs to aid in encouraging and supporting women in education administrative positions. These findings can be used for aspiring educators, those currently in practice, and others within the field to create a culture where females have equal access to educational leadership positions.

Please read the attached consent form for full details of the study and your participation. If interested in participating, please contact me so that we may arrange a virtual or in-person meeting. I can be reached at amforgione@m.marywood.edu or 570-479-1883.

This study has been approved by Marywood University's Exempt Review Committee.

Sincerely,

Amanda Forgione
amforgione@m.marywood.edu
(570) 479-1883

Appendix C

ERC Informed Consent Form

Title: In Her Own Voice: Gender Discrimination Facing K-12 Female Educational Leaders

Principal Investigator (PI): Amanda Forgione, Doctoral Candidate at Marywood University
Principal Investigator Contact Information: 570-479-1883, amforgione@m.marywood.edu
Research Advisor: Amy Paciej-Woodruff
Research Advisor Contact Information: 570-348-6211 x2318, apaciej@marywood.edu

Invitation for a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study about women educational leaders who have overcome barriers and challenges to obtain their leadership role. You were chosen because you:

- identify as female
- have the perception that you have experienced some barriers or challenges based on your gender in your pursuit or in your role as an educational leader
- have served in the 2022-2023 school year in one of the following roles within a brick-and-mortar local education agency within Lackawanna, Luzerne, Monroe, Pike, Susquehanna, or Wayne counties: executive director, assistant executive director, superintendent, assistant superintendent, special education director, curriculum director, principal, or assistant principal

Please read this form. Ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in this study.

Purpose – About the Study

The purpose of this study is to describe the gender barriers and challenges to females in their role as an educational leader within K-12 public schools in Northeastern Pennsylvania.

Procedures - What You Will Do

You will be contacted by the principal investigator via telephone and/or email to establish a date and time for a one-on-one personal interview where you will be asked a series of questions about your experiences as a female educational leader. These can be conducted within your educational setting for convenience, at a neutral location of your choice, or via a digital meeting platform (Zoom). You may be contacted to verify the accuracy of the transcript.

Risks and Benefits

The risks are no greater than the risks in daily life or activities.

A risk may be a discomfort that results from reflecting on your experiences and how that is a result of gender discrimination and bias within the educational system and/or societal structures.

A benefit may be that you can reflect on the challenges you overcame to become a female educational leader which will benefit others within the field. Recommendations for practice will be presented to aid in encouraging and supporting women in education administrative positions. These findings can be used for aspiring educators, those currently in practice, and others within the field to create a culture where females have equal access to educational leadership positions.

Payment or Other Rewards

You will not receive a payment or reward.

Confidentiality

Recordings will be transcribed using the software Otter AI or the Zoom transcribe feature. No web-based action is perfectly secure. However, reasonable efforts will be made to protect your transmission from third-party access. Recordings will be destroyed 90 days after they are transcribed. The records of this study will be kept private. Information used in any written or presented report will not make it possible to identify you. Only the investigator will have access to the research records. Records will be kept in a locked file. Records will be kept for 5 years. Then they will be deleted.

Taking Part is Voluntary

Participation is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the investigator[s]. It will not affect your relationship with Marywood University or your local education agency. You may withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty. To withdraw, you can contact the investigator. Your information will be deleted.

Contacts and Questions

If you have questions about this study at any time, contact the principal investigator or the advisor. Their contact information appears at the top of this form.

If you have questions related to the rights of research participants or research-related injuries (where applicable), please contact the Institutional Review Board at (570) 961-4782 or irbhelp@marywood.edu.

You may save or print a copy of this form for your records.

Statement of Consent

By proceeding:

- You understand what the study involves.
- You have asked questions if you had them.
- You agree to participate in the study.

Appendix D

Dear Administrator:

Approximately two weeks ago, I sent you an informational email requesting your participation in my doctoral study. This study will investigate the experiences of K-12 female educational leaders regarding gender barriers or challenges in their roles.

If you have already responded, thank you for your time and willingness to provide vital information to this study. If not, I would like to again ask for your consideration to participate. Please read the attached consent form for full details of the study and your participation. If interested in participating, please contact me so that we may arrange a virtual or in-person meeting. I can be reached at amforgione@m.marywood.edu or 570-479-1883.

As I have previously mentioned, your information is vital to my study and the future preparation of aspiring female administrators in Northeastern Pennsylvania.

Thank you for your time and assistance.

Sincerely,

Amanda Forgione
amforgione@m.marywood.edu
(570) 479-1883

Appendix E

Demographic information recorded about each participant from the web but not asked during interview: name, title, and LEA (where they work)

1. What was your professional experience prior to becoming an administrator?
2. What made you decide to become an administrator?
3. What support did you receive?
4. Did you experience challenges or barriers? If yes, what were the challenges and barriers?
5. How did your gender influence your journey to becoming an administrator?
6. In your role, what barriers or challenges do you face because of your gender?
7. How do the barriers or challenges encountered in the pursuit of a leadership position compare to the barriers or challenges now that you are in the role?
8. Can you describe instances when you felt you were discriminated against as a female educational leader?
9. How would you describe the social structure within your district?
10. If you are in a relationship, married and/or have children, how has that impacted your pursuit or current role as an administrator?
11. What strategies did you employ to overcome these gender barriers or challenges?
12. How do you feel that your leadership as a woman has influenced the culture or environment at your district?
13. What advice would you offer to classroom teachers who have ambitions of school leadership?

Appendix F

Moustakas' Modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data

1. Using a phenomenological approach, obtain a full description of your own experience of the phenomenon.
2. From the verbatim transcript of your experience complete the following steps:
 - A. Consider each statement with respect to significance for description of the experience.
 - B. Record all relevant statements.
 - C. List each nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statement. These are the invariant horizons or meaning units of the experience.
 - D. Relate and cluster the invariant meaning units into themes.
 - E. Synthesize the invariant meaning units and themes into a description of the textures of the experience. Include verbatim examples.
 - F. Reflect on your own textural description. Through imaginative variation, construct a description of the structures of your experience.
 - G. Construct a textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of your experience.
3. From the verbatim transcript of the experiences of each of the other co-researchers, complete the above steps, A through G.
4. From the individual textural-structural descriptions of all co-researchers' experiences, construct a composite textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience, integrating all individual textural-structural descriptions into a universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122).