

**Women in Educational Administration: The Professional Effects of External Obligations
and Internal Prejudices in the Workplace on Their Attainment of the Superintendency**

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Doctoral Dissertation

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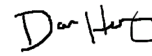
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Chapter 1

The Problem and Its Setting

Introduction

The American education system is a stalwart institution in our nation, providing high-quality instruction and opportunities for our children from east to west. Dating back to the nation's first public school building, *The Boston Latin School*, in 1635, our national paradigm of the structure of education has been evolving and expanding (Lisa, 2020). According to Wendy Paterson of Buffalo State, "Public education, common in New England, was class-based, and the working class received few benefits, if any. Instructional styles and the nature of the curriculum were locally determined. Teachers themselves were expected to be models of strict moral behavior" (Paterson, 2022). After the Revolutionary War, Thomas Jefferson began to craft his vision of a public education system which was funded by taxpayer dollars. Although this concept did not come to fruition until the 1800s, his forethought set the stage for future local educational boards and publicly-funded school opportunities (Chen, 2021).

Early examples of public education were largely reserved for white children and were executed through a hodgepodge of modalities. Students "were excluded on the basis of income, race or ethnicity, gender, geographic location, and other reasons, "(Center on Education Policy, n.d.). With its origins in the New England area, by the 1840s, generalized education "had diffused rapidly among the free residents of the world's greatest nineteenth century democracy" (Goldin, 1999). By some estimates, the per capita enrollment of primary school students in the

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United States had by this point exceeded that of Germany and the U.S. was on its way to becoming the most well-educated populace in the world.

Recent student-targeted foci within the field include an emphasis on education with a trauma-aligned lens, as well as a generalized and much-needed push for equity across all elements of our schools. With efforts aimed at equity and equality across student populations and a focus on leveling the playing field for the learner, there still remains a gap in the pursuit of equality for the educator in terms of opportunities for career advancement for the female educator. Even with all the gains made on behalf of women in many facets of life, why has the leadership differential persisted for so long in the field of education?

Looking purely at numbers and comparing between genders, one may ask the question as to whether this is a supply-and-demand problem, a problem of available talent, bias, or are they just not getting hired? Statistics on degrees earned seem to point away from a talent issue. “Federal data show that women earn around two-thirds of all leadership degrees in education, usually the foundational credential needed to advance to the principalship. There seem to be plenty of qualified, talented, and even credentialed women leaders, but relatively few of them ever advance to the superintendency” (Sawchuck, 2022).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2018 female teachers made up 76% of all classroom educators (NCES, 2021). We do tend to see a lower percentage of male teachers (11%) at the elementary level as compared to the secondary level (36%). Even when adjusting for the elementary/secondary difference, the ratio is still inverted when examining gender and the principalship. There are over 37,057 high school principals currently employed in the United States. 35.9% of all high school principals are women, while 64.1% are men (Zippia.com, 2022). In public education, like many professions, the ladder of promotion is linear

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with little opportunity for career change from classroom teaching unless one wishes to pursue the path of administration. Once in administration, building-level administrators then funnel into the next tier of district office administration, largely consisting of superintendents and assistant superintendents. Of those females who do reach the goal of working as a central office administrator, many enter the department of curriculum which is not always a path to the superintendency in the same manner as the assistant superintendency would be. With these statistics in mind, it is clear that there is an obstacle to overcome for females interested in career advancement in the field of education. As author Tanya Tarbutton points out, “there is no shortage of female educators; however, there is a shortage of female leaders” (2019).

The discrepancy is even more apparent when we examine the rates of ascension from building-level leadership to the superintendency. Of the nation’s 7194 school superintendents, 28.5% are women while 71.5% are men (Zippia.com, 2022). To bolster the inequality argument, it should be noted that in 2021, women earned 93% of what men earned. A 2017 study by the American Association of School Administrators showed that “94% of female superintendents earned on average \$2100 less than their male counterparts” (Tarbutton, 2019). This trend tended to creep into institutions of higher education, where females unfortunately earned an average of 11.4% less than males occupying similar professional positions. Further complicating this trend, according to the NCES, is that women are outpacing men in acquiring degrees at every level, from bachelor’s to doctorates (2013). Why, then, does female employment not keep pace with their levels of education? The answer is complex, but all explanations point to a level of institutionalized gender bias which still pervades the office spaces of our schools.

Even with comparable or superior credentials, women are less likely to advance and earn the top spot (Tallerico, 2000). When school districts are in search of a new superintendent, search

firms and school board members are the primary sources serving as gatekeepers to the office. According to Lisa Elliot of the National School Boards Association, “the typical school board member today is white [78 percent] and male [52 percent]” (2020, para.6). Moreover, most superintendent search consultants are white men, retired university professors in education, or retired superintendents themselves (Tallerico, 2000). School boards, when advertising and creating descriptions of positions, assign value to a grouping of professional experiences and candidate attributes. Many school boards show preference for individuals with prior work as a superintendent, however, when they are open to reviewing the credentials of candidates without explicit superintendent experience (as in the case of a new or first-time superintendent) they are likely to value experience in the high school principalship and will consider these candidates (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). This is tantamount to a gatekeeping practice, restricting access and creating a filter as fewer women serve as high school principals (Shakeshaft, 1989).

Theoretical Framework

Two theories drive and will be applied to the background of this research: the Gatekeeper Theory of the Superintendency, and the Feminist Theory as it applies to the analysis of the limitations faced by women when they attempt to pursue equality in the workplace with men. The prevailing theories will explore the psychosocial, ethical, and economical issues entangled in this study and observed phenomena.

The Gatekeeper Theory as applied to the field of education aims to contribute to the understanding of the pervasive problem of underrepresentation of women in the superintendency. In short, this theory holds that “gatekeepers such as school board members and search firm consultants control the gates and channels of the superintendent selection process through which a candidate must navigate that result more favorably for men than women” (Bernal, 2019). The

understanding of the concept of a “gatekeeper” in any context originates in a 1943 study by Kurt Lewin examining the reluctance of homemakers to prepare and serve particular types of meat to their families. Lewin understood that it was the wives, not the husbands and children, who made the decisions as to what was served for dinner, therefore the women were indeed the “gatekeepers” of the flow of food into the home (Lewin, 1943). The same framework can also be applied to the selection process for the superintendency, as men and women frequently experience paths with different degrees of complexity in pursuit of the position. Ultimately, societal prejudices and other factors influence the decisions of the “gatekeepers” to allow or disallow candidates to proceed forward through the interview and selection process.

The following graphic depicts an example of gatekeeping practices which may emerge as themes which work against women during their quest to attain appointment as a superintendent. Some issues which may arise fall into the scope of androcentric language, including the use of male-centered terminology (“The top man...”) and inherent gender bias (“Can she establish dominance?”) and process barriers, such as the number of candidates interviewed and the process used to identify qualified candidates (Handy, 2008). Criteria, including prior experience with budgetary matters and finance, may impact the selection of candidates. Lastly, existing beliefs of the hiring committee may present as an impediment to women administrators. These beliefs include concerns about a woman’s ability to handle challenging situations, discipline, and questions about confidence, albeit baseless in many cases (Handy, 2008).

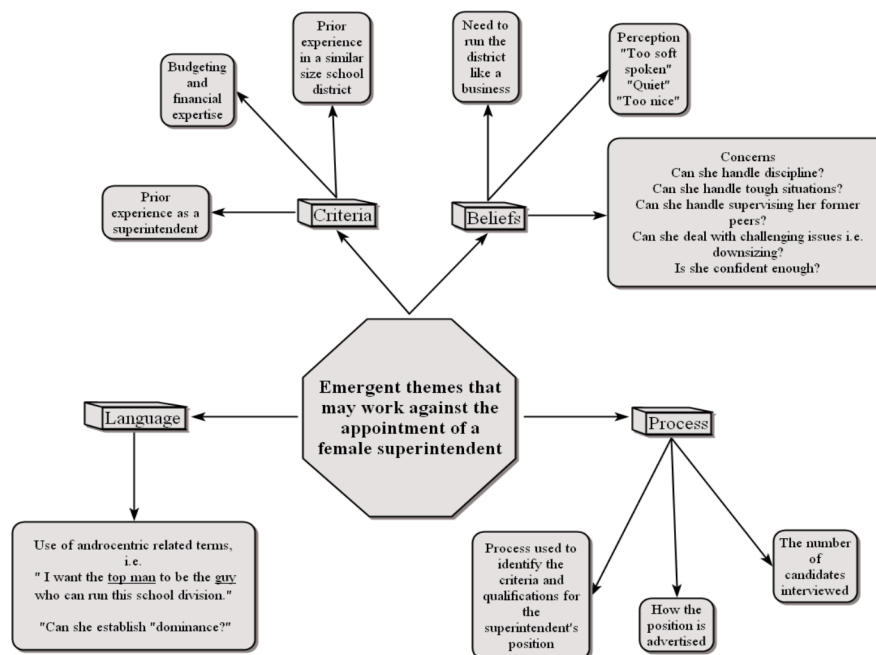


Figure 1- Female Superintendent [Handy, C. (2008)]

The broad understanding of feminist theory and feminist sociology informs this study as well. Key areas of this theory focus on the fact that women frequently face discrimination and exclusion based on sex and gender and experience structural and economic inequality (Allen, 2016). In general, “feminist theory is a set of ideas originating with the belief that women are not subordinate to men or only valuable in relationship to men (servant, caretaker, mother, or prostitute), and that the disciplines, systems, and structures in place in our world today may be changed for the better if infused with a feminist point of view. But it is more than this. Feminist theory sets an agenda for action, the aim of which is justice and equality for women everywhere and, of course, also for the men and children to whom they are inextricably linked” (Tong, 2001).

Figure 2 provides one interpretation of feminist theory explained within the context of women’s participation undergraduate programs in the areas of STEM fields. Adja Khavecí illustrates feminist theory presented through multiple strands, each focusing on specific aspects

of gender interactions, social structures, and systemic barriers. She illustrates various subsets of feminism and explains each within the milieu of science and technology programs, weaving the theory through three “strands” or “waves” as the development of the theory has evolved over time (Khavעי, 2005). Each strand contributes to understanding and addressing the challenges women face in STEM fields, as discussed in the context of the women’s program analyzed in the study. Together, they offer a nuanced framework for evaluating and improving interventions aimed at fostering gender equity in science, mathematics, and engineering.

Khavעי’s work explores the intersections of race, culture, and global inequalities related to experiences of women. First-wave feminism focuses on legal issues, such as women's suffrage, property rights, and educational opportunities. It can be most easily associated with legal recognition of women in critical areas, such as the right to vote. The significance of the first wave is that it represents a foundational moment in feminist history, where we begin to see women posing legal battles against inequality and discrimination. Much of the first-wave feminist movement in the West was driven by middle-class white women, leaving women from colonized, marginalized, or underserved backgrounds largely ignored in this first push for equality.

Second-wave feminism crept beyond simply the legal rights of the first wave to include issues such as gender roles, sexuality, reproductive rights, and equality in the workplace. Feminist thought in this wave was concerned with cultural inequalities that affected women’s everyday lives in areas like the workplace, education, and family.

In Third-wave feminism, we see an embrace of diversity and complexity of the experiences of women and a rejection of a single and easily-defined experience. It is characterized by a focus on the individual identity of every woman and promotes a broader

global perspective on gender justice. Third-wave feminism also pushed the boundaries of binary male/female stereotypes and began to embrace women of color as well as sexually-diverse female voices. These strands of feminism illuminate the belief that women cannot be reduced to a singular experience but women as a group produce varied and complex experiences in myriad facets of everyday life.

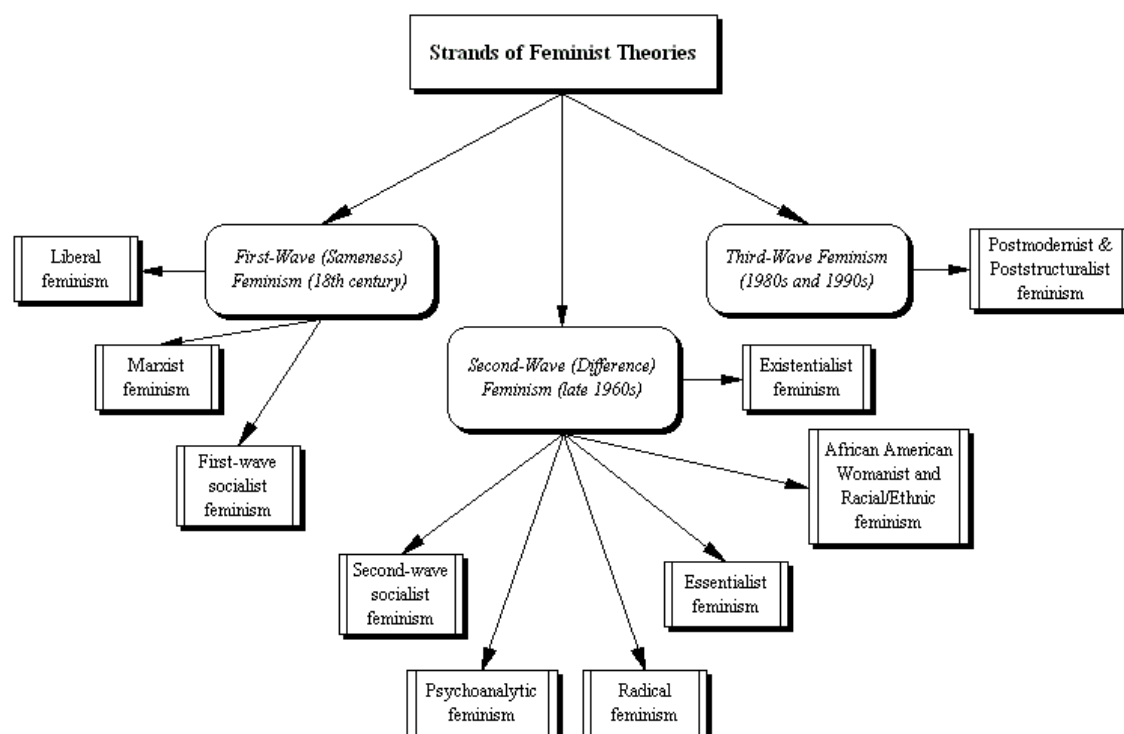
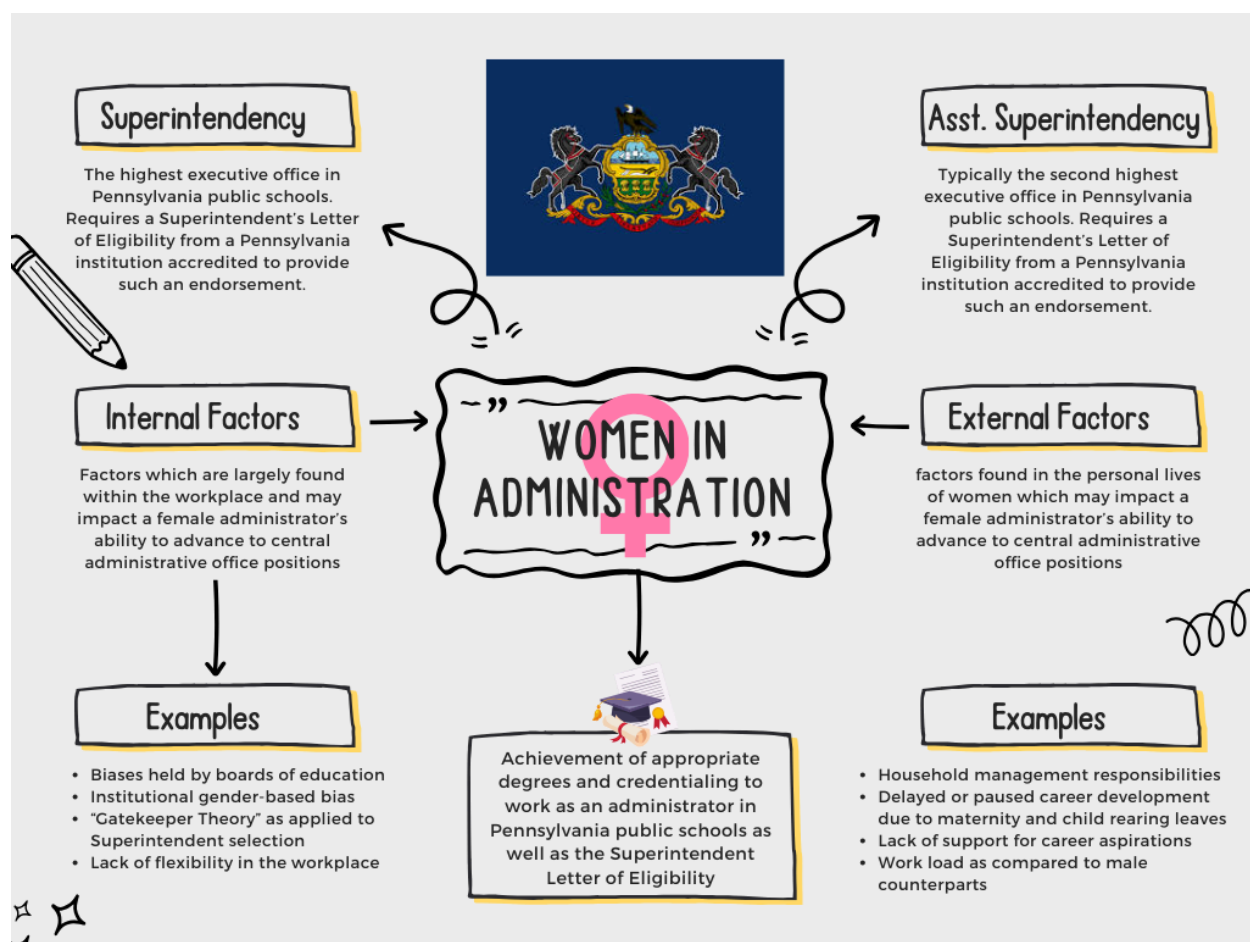


Figure 2: Feminist Theory [Khaverci, A. (2005)]

Conceptual Framework

The following graphic depicts the content of this research proposal. Women who enter the field of educational administration in Pennsylvania may wish to attain the highest positions in public education- the Superintendency or Assistant Superintendency. Those women who aspire to these offices must achieve the criteria set forth by the Pennsylvania Department of Education for proper credentialing for these offices, including initial certification and the Superintendent

Letter of Eligibility. Throughout their years of employment, women administrators may experience an array of internal factors within the workplace which impact their route, opportunities for advancement, and lived experiences. External factors, those present in the personal lives of women, may also influence their ability to achieve these offices in public education.



Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study using a phenomenological approach is to explore the factors that influence women on their paths to higher level positions in educational administration in Pennsylvania public schools. At this stage in the research, the factors that

influence women in educational administration will be generally defined as internal (those factors originating within the workplace) and external (those factors originating in the personal lives of the women).

Central Question

What are the barriers, both in their personal lives (external) and professional lives (internal) that are influencing women on their paths in educational administration in suburban Pennsylvania public school districts?

Sub Questions

- What biases may women face in the workplace, specifically public education administration?
- What role do school boards play as the gatekeepers of the superintendency?
- How is the office of the superintendency reflective of the priorities or biases of the school board and other administrators?
- Is the choice whether or not to pursue central office administrative positions one that is made by the women voluntarily, or is it imposed on them, or both?
- Is the work women are doing at home and in their personal lives a major contributing factor in this phenomenon?

Definitions

Pennsylvania public schools - These include the 500 public school districts in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (education.pa.gov). In this study, Pennsylvania public schools include those school districts within the geographical boundaries of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as cataloged by county on the Educational Names and Addresses (EdNA) database

from PDE (<http://www.edna.pa.gov/Screens/wfHome.aspx>). This study will not include PA Charter Schools or private or nonpublic entities.

Personal lives - “The part of an individual's life regarded as private and separate from his or her persona; private life” (en.wiktionary.org). In this study, personal life refers to those aspects of a female administrator’s life that are not directly related to or associated with her daily activities and interactions in the workplace. Personal life may include such things as marriage, children, family obligations, *etc.*

Professional lives - Professional life refers to the portion of an individual's life that is directly related to their career or occupation. This involves work-related activities, responsibilities, challenges, work-related relationships, goals, skills, professional growth, job satisfaction, and achievements. It also includes aspects such as professional ethics, demeanor, attributions and conduct in a working environment. Professional life may also influence and be influenced by one's personal life. In this study, professional life is defined as the daily activities associated with the female administrator’s career and the path or trajectory the female administrator followed or failed to follow during her career as well as the associated interactions with colleagues and various stakeholders integral to the public school system.

Educational administration - Educational administration is the management of a school system. It involves providing leadership for the education of students, developing curricula, implementing assessments and managing human and material resources to achieve specific goals. It also includes the management of processes within a school system to ensure the achievement of particular outcomes (indeed.com). For the purposes of this study, the field of educational administration shall be defined as any of the administrative public education positions in Pennsylvania public schools which require an administrative certification, principal

certification, and/or superintendent Letter of Eligibility. These positions may include: Assistant Principal, Principal, Assistant Superintendent, Superintendent, Career & Technical Director, Director of Curriculum and Instruction.

Paths in educational administration- Those that “included the positions of classroom teacher, assistant principal, secondary principal, assistant or associate superintendent, and superintendent” (Noel-Batiste, 2009). In this study, paths in educational administration shall refer to the progression through various positions in Pennsylvania public schools, beginning with classroom teaching and progressing through to building administration and central office administration.

Barriers- “Something not material that keeps apart or makes progress difficult” (merriam-webster.com). In this study, barriers to women will refer to those issues, events, occurrences, beliefs, paradigms, and any other factor which may negatively impact a woman’s ability and/or willingness to advance to higher positions within Pennsylvania public schools.

Internal factors- Those things that are of, relating to, or occurring on the inside of an organized structure (such as a club, company, or state), such as internal affairs (merriam-webster.com). In this study, internal factors shall refer to the factors which are largely found within the workplace and may include, but are not limited to, such things as gender bias from other administrators, biases held by boards of education, lack of willingness to accommodate the needs of women with respect to family and personal obligations.

External factors- These are the factors found in the personal lives of women which may include, but are not limited to, obligations caring for a spouse and children, household management responsibilities, delayed or paused career development due to maternity and child rearing leave,

difficulty attaining higher education and certification due to aforementioned obligations, lack of support from spouse or family members to allow for pursuit of career aspirations.

Influencing- “The power or capacity of causing an effect in indirect or intangible ways”

(www.merriam-webster.com/). In this research, influencing refers to the results experienced by the subjects in terms of their ability to or failure to, for myriad reasons to be studied, achieve the office of Superintendent or Assistant Superintendent in Pennsylvania public schools.

Woman/women- “An adult female person” (www.merriam-webster.com). Women in this study are defined as a female administrator or administrator candidate who possesses the Superintendent Letter of Eligibility through a Pennsylvania-approved program of study (see previous definition of female).

Delimitations

- The study is delimited to women in educational administration in Pennsylvania public schools who have either attained the office of Assistant Superintendent or Superintendent, or earned the Superintendent Letter of Eligibility and failed (for whatever reason(s) is/are revealed through the research) to attain the office of Assistant Superintendent or Superintendent.
- This study is delimited to individuals employed at Pennsylvania public, non-charter K-12 schools in suburban Pennsylvania school districts.
- This study is delimited to women administrators who are biologically female as assigned at birth.
- This study is delimited to women administrators who meet the aforementioned criteria, in addition to not being administrators within the Carbon-Lehigh Intermediate Unit so as not to have had previous working relationships with the author.

Assumptions

The assumption in this study is that respondents are being honest and truthful during the interview process.

Significance of the Study

There is a general lack of research to attempt to explain why there are far fewer women in the office of the superintendency in Pennsylvania public schools compared to their male counterparts. This phenomenon may be part of a larger societal bias consisting of myriad factors impacting the ability of female administrators to attain central office positions. There are larger research implications inherent in this pervasive web of biases negatively impacting women in the workplace, specifically in educational administration. This research shines a light on issues of gender equity and inclusion, helping to identify and address systemic barriers, biases, or cultural norms that limit women's access to leadership roles. By understanding these factors, we can work towards a more equitable and inclusive educational system. Gender diversity in leadership is crucial because it brings different perspectives and approaches to problem-solving, which can improve the quality of education and create a better learning environment for students. Furthermore, this research can influence policy and practice by highlighting ways to support and encourage more women to pursue leadership positions, such as offering mentoring programs and reforming organizational cultures. It can also reveal obstacles that prevent women from advancing, such as unconscious bias or work-life balance challenges, and help create strategies to overcome them.

Additionally, having more women in leadership roles provides important role models, inspiring younger female educators and students to pursue similar paths. Examining the gender gap also touches on societal expectations about gender roles and can help challenge outdated

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perceptions of leadership. Increasing the representation of women in leadership could lead to improved outcomes for educational organizations. In general this issue ties back to historical patterns of gender discrimination in the workforce, and understanding these patterns is crucial for addressing their lingering effects. Ultimately, this study may lead to insight about allowing for a more fair, dynamic, and effective educational system that reflects the diversity of the communities it serves.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

Introduction

Looking purely at numbers and comparing between genders, one may ask the question as to whether this is a supply-and-demand problem, a problem of available talent, bias, or are they just not getting hired? Statistics on degrees earned seem to point away from a talent issue. “Federal data show that women earn around two-thirds of all leadership degrees in education, usually the foundational credential needed to advance to the principalship. There seem to be plenty of qualified, talented, and even credentialed women leaders, but relatively few of them ever advance to the superintendency” (Sawchuck, 2022).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2018 female teachers made up 76% of all classroom educators (NCES, 2021). We do tend to see a lower percentage of male teachers (11%) at the elementary level as compared to the secondary level (36%). Even when adjusting for the elementary/secondary difference, the ratio is still inverted when examining gender and the principalship. There are over 37,057 high school principals currently employed in the United States. 35.9% of all high school principals are women, while 64.1% are men (Zippia.com, 2022). Examining historical trends in district leadership positions will reveal an inequitable representation of women in these roles as compared to overall percentage in the profession (Glass, 2000; Kim & Brunner, 2009). Although women represent 76% of all classroom teachers, they occupy only just over 50% of overall principalships and fewer than 25% of superintendent positions (Kowalski et al., 2011). Nationwide data show women comprise more than 50 percent of the graduate students enrolled in educational leadership or

administration programs. Additionally, women also are earning the doctorate in educational leadership areas at rates which are comparable to their male counterparts (Glass, 2000).

The discrepancy is even more apparent when we examine the rates of ascension from building-level leadership to the superintendency. The disparity in gender representation among superintendents has been a longstanding issue in educational leadership, where men have traditionally held the majority of these roles. For years, men have significantly outnumbered women in superintendent roles across both large and small districts. Despite some gradual progress, women accounted for only 24.1 percent of the nation's 7194 school superintendents during the 2022-23 school year (Kowalski et al., 2011). To bolster the inequality argument, it should be noted that in 2023, women earned 83.6% of what men earned (BLS, 2024). A 2017 study by the American Association of School Administrators showed that "94% of female superintendents earned on average \$2100 less than their male counterparts" (Tarbutton, 2019). This trend tended to creep into institutions of higher education, where females unfortunately earned an average of 11.4% less than males occupying similar professional positions. Further complicating this trend, according to the NCES, is that women are outpacing men in acquiring degrees at every level, from bachelor's to doctorates (2013). Why, then, does female employment not keep pace with their levels of education? The answer is complex, but all explanations point to a level of institutionalized gender bias which still pervades the office spaces of our schools.

Patterns in Career Mobility

When considering the move from classroom teacher to educational administration, the decision whether or not to move into the principalship may be a component of the phenomenon wherein women represent a lower percentage of administrators in public education. The principalship, by its nature in the hierarchy of educational administration, is a necessary step on

the pathway to the superintendency and indeed required for the Superintendent PK-12 endorsement in Pennsylvania (PDE, 2024). The traditional route in Pennsylvania holds requirements for a graduate program intended for the superintendency as well as three years of administrative or supervisory experience. For this reason, female administrators' decision to enter the career progression at the level of the principalship is the determining factor in their eventual ability to rise to the highest seat in any school district (Glass & Franceschini, 2007).

In public education, like many professions, the ladder of promotion is linear with little opportunity for career change from classroom teaching unless one wishes to pursue the path of administration. Once in administration, building-level administrators then funnel into the next tier of district office administration, largely consisting of superintendents and assistant superintendents. Author Flora Ortiz outlines the typical career path to the superintendency in an ethnographic study of public school administrators and describes the career flow as beginning with teacher, to assistant principal, to secondary principal (middle or high school), then assistant superintendent, and finally superintendent (1982). This is a path of compounded influence and one of a two-pronged hierarchy. As an individual advances the career pathway of educational administration, he or she experiences a greater degree of responsibility and ability to demonstrate one's leadership capacity. Concurrently with this phenomenon, upward career advancement in educational administration puts the employee in a greater position of influence over more essential areas of the school district. As the influence increases the administrator enjoys an elevated authority over other employees and a greater ability to affect and access those responsible for central district functions. (Ortiz, 1892).

Edgar Schein (1971) provides a conceptualization of career mobility within an organization and how this compounded responsibility and influence may impact a route to the

position of superintendent. Schein describes three types of organizational movement within a school system as circumferential, vertical, and radial. In circumferential movement, an employee's title and possibly nature of work may change but that individual is still hovering in the same circumference and relative position to the centrality of the organization. An example of circumferential career movement in educational administration would be a school principal moving to a similar-level administrative role within the same school district, but in a different department, such as curriculum development or personnel management. Vertical motion in an organization may include retaining one's job responsibilities, title, and relative position in the leadership hierarchy, but with the addition of responsibilities which may provide an impression of authority over members of the group. A good example of this in education is when a teacher assumes the added responsibility of becoming a department head, or takes initiative in creating curriculum materials. There is a change in the scope and possibly nature of work, but no defined advancement per se. Radial career motion is perhaps the most influential type of career movement and is described as a change in the centrality of an employee resulting in a closer proximity to the leaders of the organization, primarily the superintendent and board of directors. In this type of career movement, the employee experiences elevated responsibilities and enjoys a broader impact within the organization. A typical example in schools is the promotion of a building principal to assistant superintendent.

Movement Around the Centrality of Leadership

A number of studies on this phenomenon have pinpointed the secondary principalship as a prime position to occupy on the path en route to the superintendency (Glass, 2000; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Kim & Brunner, 2009). To this point, Ortiz (1982) suggests that the secondary principalship promotes organizational experience including circumferential, vertical,

and radial movements, thus placing secondary principals in a prime position within the hierarchical route to the highest office. This placement in the continuum of power in a school district promotes socialization within the power structure with a shift in focus from teaching students to managing adults and conducting administrative duties, putting them in close proximity to other administrators. Radial movement is introduced into this power schematic as the purview of the secondary principalship customarily extends beyond the academic and supervisory role into extracurricular activities and sports, allowing enhanced contact with members of the community, such as members of the Board of Education, and other leaders of the school district, such as the superintendent and assistant superintendent.

The proximity to the centrality of leadership appears to have a great impact on the order of the succession line in public schools (Ortiz, 1982). While all building-level administrators require some type of credentialing or certification and all provide oversight and maintain authority over other employees within their assignment, assistant superintendents and those holding director positions have a much greater frequency of interactions with the superintendent and school board and therefore an increased influence over the entire organization. High school and, to a lesser extent, middle school principals maintain a high degree of visibility at programming during and after the school day, allowing for an increased presence of leadership. Elementary principals do not enjoy this same level of exposure and do not experience the same degree of collisions with community and leadership, resulting in less visibility and proximity to the centrality of power. For this reason, elementary principal positions are more likely than secondary positions to become terminal placements in education. Career positioning is a concept seen in many professional arenas, but of paramount significance in career tracks of women in education. In the narrowing path to the superintendency, one's chances of reaching the top seat

increase based on a specific career trajectory. According to Sharp, et al., women who are hired as principals are hired in greater numbers at the elementary level (2004).

Research consistently pinpoints the high school principalship as a key position in this career progression. “Few women apply for and are hired for high school principal positions, yet it is the number one position from which one ascends to the superintendency” (Sharp, et al., 2004). Further research on this trend reveals that the superintendency is also closely associated with the position of athletic director, and men are three times as likely than women to be hired as athletic directors (Maranto, et al., 2018). This fact leads to more questions than answers, as to the exact reasons for this discrepancy are not well understood.

An analysis of the administrative positions held by superintendents and their career progressions in education revealed that the high school principalship was the most common position held, 45.5% (Kowalski et al., 2011). Secondary principalship holds strong significance in the career progression in education due concretely to the position’s visibility and resulting positive impressions from school boards (Tallerico, 2000). There is, however, a noteworthy difference between the experiences of male and female superintendents’ career history with respect to the principal position at the high school level as observed by author Thomas Glass in a 2000 study. According to this research, in the year 2000 the career progression of superintendents revealed that 51.2% of males and 18.5% of females previously held the position of high school principal (Glass et al., 2000). There is evidence to suggest that recent sampling studies relying on voluntary responses of current or former superintendents and may not completely describe the career progression of females who reach the superintendency, and there may be a lower percentage of females who pass through the position of secondary principal on

their way to the office (Kowalski et al., 2011). More research is needed in this area to fully understand the complexities of the phenomenon.

Men also tend to be promoted at a greater rate than women in education. As in most professions, the path to the top is a pyramid, with narrowing opportunities as one ascends the ranks. “Men advance from entry-level leadership positions to advanced leadership positions at an accelerated rate compared to women. Barriers such as these are thought to have an impact on women’s leadership opportunities” (Tarbuton, 2019) With men occupying positions which are frequently on the trajectory to the superintendency compounded with a more rapid rate of promotion, women must work harder and faster to keep up with their male counterparts.

“The Glass Ceiling” Phenomenon

A brief examination of a few of the barriers presented to women encountering leadership roles will further underscore the unlevel field on which females are competing with their male counterparts. It is impossible to do any amount of research on female leadership status without encountering discussions on “the glass ceiling.” Management consultant Marilyn Loden coined this iconic and descriptive phrase in 1978 during a women’s panel discussion on their aspirations. Marilyn struggled to hold her composure as the female panelists painted their goals and desires in a largely self-deprecating manner, such as having poor self-esteem and lack of socialization. Loden instead “argued that the ‘invisible glass ceiling’ - the barriers to advancement that were cultural not personal - was doing the bulk of the damage to women's career aspirations and opportunities” (Loden, 2017).

The United States Department of Labor’s Glass Ceiling Commission was active from 1991 through 1996. This commission has recognized the glass ceiling to the degree of actually providing it an official definition as “those artificial barriers based on attitudinal or

organizational barriers that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organizations into managerial level” (US DOL, 1991). Author Joan C. Williams, in her article *Hitting the Maternal Wall*, describes various ways in which the glass ceiling is manifested for women who pursue academic careers. Williams points out that “Women professionals may have to try harder than men to be perceived as competent because their mistakes are remembered long after men are forgotten” (2010). To further compound this phenomenon, women may have to work harder to even be perceived as competent, while men frequently have to demonstrate more overt examples of incompetence before being assigned the label of incompetent. This is a constant battle for women in the workplace.

Loden continues her work to educate and rectify the systemic and internal prejudices which result in the invisible yet ever-present barriers for women in pursuit of high-level leadership positions. She recalls a situation early in her career, when, as a high-ranking human resources official in her company, her boss would continuously comment that she should “smile more”, making comments about her appearance nearly every day. Additionally, as the better candidate during a competition for a promotion, Loden was passed over in favor of the male candidate. In Loden’s words, “Once I was told that despite my better performance record, a promotion I was hoping for was going to a male peer. The reason given was that he was a “family man” - that he was the main breadwinner and so needed the money more” (Loden, 2017). This type of blatant gender discrimination has diminished since Loden’s early career, but is still present in many organizations. Given the path of uneven progress for women since the coining of the “glass ceiling” phrase, another metaphor has been suggested for women’s progress, that of a labyrinth. According to author Alice Eagly,

Unlike a glass ceiling, a labyrinth allows some women to reach high levels of leadership, yet the walls of the labyrinth remain in place to challenge the women who follow. If the paths that men take are construed as an open road (perhaps with a few potholes along the way), the labyrinth that women traverse presents perhaps a more difficult path (2020).

To add another layer to this labyrinth or glass ceiling, whichever is the preferred metaphor, occupational segregation is present in a large majority of high-level organizations which further marginalizes females looking to advance their employment options. There are higher percentages of women executives in specific areas, such as personnel, finance specialty areas, and public relations, which are subsets of the business world not typically tapped to fill the most powerful management posts. On the contrary, men overwhelmingly opt for the path of the business mainstream where women are few and far between. “While there are indeed women who have reached high management positions, they are often viewed, given their scarcity, as simply “tokens” that corporate management cannot be accused of discrimination” (Jakobsh, 2012).

Work and Family Obligations

Along with the well-established and documented effects of the glass ceiling, other sociological and cultural factors may be at work against women administrators. Women are far more likely to be asked about and judged for their family commitments. Facing both explicit and implicit biases during the interview process, females may be asked in both overt and subtle ways about their family status and obligation in the household.

“One woman leader who requested anonymity described what happened when she was a finalist for a city school district search in 2020. After several rounds of strong interviews, board members’ attitudes changed almost immediately after the

candidate mentioned that she would be driving home on weekends to visit her daughter, who was completing high school in another district about 200 miles away” (Sawchuck, 2022).

Such an arrangement would be commonplace for a man, yet this female candidate was further questioned, and the board members implied that this arrangement might mean she would not be fully committed to the position. To make matters worse, her daughter was watching the interview on television and was horrified to have become the focus of the conversation. It is doubtful such an interrogation would have occurred to a male candidate. Sharon Contreras, former superintendent of Guilford County Schools in North Carolina, urges boards and hiring organizations to reconsider such long-standing traditions for superintendent selection which tend to disfavor women. “In her view, the process of parading superintendent finalists in front of the board in successive public meetings amounts to a big popularity contest that doesn’t actually do much to illuminate the specific skills and strengths candidates bring to the job” (Sawchuck, 2022).

The concept of male hegemony is frequently asserted as a prevailing reason why women end up in the apex seat of the school district at a ratio of 1:4 as compared to men. Hegemony refers to leadership or dominance, especially by one or social group over others. This appears to be a paradoxical situation for female administrators, as illustrated by one study in the Greater Toronto Area school system wherein multiple elementary principalships were analyzed along with input from faculty. Ironically, even though female elementary teachers far outnumber males, women as principals were not as widely accepted as males. This opens an interesting set of questions as to whether the female teachers are more comfortable being led by a man (MacKinnon, 2024).

Another prominent reason for dwindling numbers of female leaders as we climb the employment pyramid is the obvious tension women experience while endeavoring to master the precarious balance of family obligations and work commitment. In an article in the Harvard Business Review, authors Robin Ely and Irene Padavic discuss what they term the “psychic tensions” women experience in the workplace. According to the work/family narrative and broader cultural notions, a woman’s commitment to family is primary by nature, so her commitment to her work has to become secondary (Ely and Padavic, 2020). The author duo worked with a specific legal firm for 18 months to immerse themselves into the culture of the firm and further study the phenomenon of underrepresentation of females in high-level positions. Out of 107 interviews conducted with individuals in all departments and levels, virtually every conversation reverted in some way back to the work/family narrative and when attempting to explain the dearth of female partners (Ely & Padavic, 2020). While the issue is multi-faceted, for this company a great deal of the problem had to do with the general overwhelm both men and women experience in today’s culture. While both genders were overworked, the women were encouraged and given the opportunity to take accommodations such as going part-time and shifting to “internally facing roles” which in turn ended up derailing their careers.

In general, the very real phenomenon exists wherein women may work full-time and beyond, yet are still largely responsible for home management concerns. Even with high-profile roles in the workplace, “in addition to the roles they hold at their companies, they remain the primary caretakers for their families” (Elmuti, D., Jia, H., & Davis, H., 2009). As the constraints and responsibilities of work life and home life further squeeze the female professional, she often finds herself having to choose between family obligations and career aspirations. Childcare and family needs are typically at their apex precisely during women’s peak years of opportunity in

the professional world, and women may experience great conflict about leaving family during these years (Ho & Hallman, 2016).

Women who do successfully pursue the superintendency experience challenges and barriers with respect to work-life and work-relationship balance. According to Reed & Patterson, there is evidence that women superintendents are more likely to be single or unmarried (widowed or divorced) than their male counterparts (2007). Nicole White, PhD candidate at Marquette University in 2017, conducted a very interesting study involving the work-life balance of female superintendents with children. Her dissertation included interviews with the aforementioned female superintendents using the lens of Catherine Hakim's *Preference Theory* wherein females' reproductive choices, and thereby career choices, actually represent a choice in the era of reproductive technology. Prior to conscious reproduction, women were often at the mercy of the reproductive rhythm of the family. Hakim categorizes women's paid work preferences into three areas: *home-centered* (about 20%), *adaptive*, (about 60%), and *work-centered* (about 20%). She cites lifestyle factors which influence market factors, thereby resulting in a specific woman's preference for unpaid home work or paid work, or somewhere on the continuum. The argument is centered upon the fact that when contraception allowed for large-scale control over fertility, women experienced a renaissance in their ability to choose and manage career paths. Even with women obtaining high-level accreditations and degrees at historical rates, men still fall into the work-centered category at far higher percentages than women. Three-quarters of women would prefer to work but work a part-time job, but few professional part-time jobs are available to them, therefore they find themselves in the full-time adaptive work category (Hakim, 2003). Based on Hakim's study, women who present preference for home-centered or adaptive lifestyles are more likely to remain married or cohabitate.

Academic criticism of Hakim's theory points out that there is little description of the role of societal preferences and gender bias in the fact that many women are "forced" into one of the three categories due to lack of choice. The bottom line is, even though choice exists for women in managing the work-life balance, it remains a limited choice at best.

Gender bias is alive and well among educational administrators, sometimes subtle and sometimes blatant. According to Jackie Blount's landmark work *Destined to Rule the Schools: Women and the Superintendency*,

Being good wives and mothers also meant that women generally needed to put their families' needs before their own. These expectations tended to limit married women's career possibilities outside the home because school boards and administrators held married women's family duties against them when considering candidates for promotion (Blount, 1998, p. 128).

While men were and still are able to conduct business and network outside of business hours, women are generally subject to a higher degree of scrutiny and marked difficulty cracking the "old boys network." Margaret Grogan sums up the bias neatly in stating, "What is revealed powerfully is that women aspirants to the superintendency are seen as women first and administrators second" (1996, p. 107).

White's study serves to further illuminate the perception disparity and gender bias at work in educational administration. For this research, four women superintendents were identified and given in-depth interviews in an attempt to further describe their approaches to work and family demands. The women all met the following criteria: licensed in the state of Wisconsin, in their first five years of the superintendency, female, and having children. All of the women were between the ages of 40 and 49 years, and their children ranged in age from a

preschooler to a young adult child. Three were married and one was engaged to be married after a divorce at an earlier age (White, 2017).

Although these women all took different career paths which eventually led to the superintendency, they all describe similar struggles and challenges. Three of them self-categorized as work-focused and acknowledged that not doing so may be tantamount to showing weakness, a trait which is not compatible with a high-level executive in education (White, 2017). Three of the women also gave credit to their spouses and family, pointing out that without their extreme support the accomplishments would not have been possible. One of the women, extremely driven to complete her doctorate while still allowing for quality time with her husband, recalls his lack of support for her and her professional endeavors. At one point, after a neighbor had congratulated her on the completion of her PhD, her husband pointed out to the neighbor that she “wasn’t a real doctor.” She ended up divorcing him and (as of the writing) is engaged to a fellow superintendent from another local district who understands her career path and devotion to work.

Institutionalized Patriarchal Structure and Gender-Based Harassment

Despite the recent *Me Too* movement and advancements in the status of female complainants in sexual harassment disputes, workplace harassment and sexual discrimination still persists for many candidates looking to advance in their fields (Ho & Hallman, 2016). Even though illegal, it is puzzling to believe that some companies advertise gender preference for some positions. A blatant example is an employment ad from 2015 indicating the open position “requires filling in the responsibilities of a receptionist, so female candidates are preferred” (Crockett, 2015). Additionally, according to 2015 data from the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the decision was settled in favor of the person who

initiated the charge in over 30,000 cases dealing with sex discrimination (2016). The institutionalized patriarchal value structure may permit men to believe that they can control women, and feminists argue that “preconceived notions of gender roles are central to this understanding; they lead to a wide range of rules pertaining to gender determined behaviors and expectations. Society’s acceptance of these rules sets up the rationale for male supremacy and potential for male harassment or violence against women” (Jakobsh, 2012).

Sex discrimination and harassment in the workplace can present at all levels yet become increasingly magnified and concentrated as females climb the power hierarchy. In the recent case of *King v. Acosta*, an employer blatantly identified in court that he paid a female executive half as much as her male counterparts even though they had commensurate sales numbers and these numbers were a key determinant in salary calculations (King v. Acosta, 2012). While laws exist for such cases, they frequently only have the opportunity to address the most egregious cases thereby allowing thousands of female workers existing in similar unaddressed circumstances (Ho & Hallman, 2016). In the political arena, media coverage of male versus female candidates frequently focuses on different elements such as trivial items for the women. In a cumulative effect, microaggressions may occur in the office setting which result in an overall hostile and unwelcoming environment for women. Microaggressions are low-level, sometimes barely perceptible actions and/or words directed at individuals which, over time, build up to cause discouragement and perceived unfair treatment.

The Leadership Style and Perception Paradox

Myriad studies and theories exist with respect to successful leadership. According to authors Yasir, Rabia, Muhammad, Noor, and Muhammed “Available literature provides evidence that the business environment is changing rapidly and becoming impulsive and volatile” (2016,

p.1). For this reason, a highly-desirable and efficacious leadership style in such an environment is one in which the leader will pivot and adapt to such change. Leaders must inspire trust from their followers, which will ultimately pave the way for organizational change. We know from previous research that leadership is a key factor for successful transformation of an organization (Kotter, 1995). Author Peter Northouse notes in his text *Leadership: Theory and Practice* that since the 1980s there has been a surge of research regarding the transformational approach to leadership. Transformational leadership is “concerned with emotions, values, ethics, standards, and long-term goals” (Northouse, 2019, p.163).

A subset of research dealing with the effectiveness of transformational leadership is the relatively new concept of Organizational Change Capacity (OCC). Author and researcher Richard Soparnot and colleagues “define organizational change capacity as an organization's ability to develop and implement appropriate organizational changes to constantly adapt to its environment” (2011). Although somewhat nebulous to define, OCC deals with an organization’s ability to adapt, pivot, and expand its competencies to allow the entity to survive the change process, whether internal or external. In the dynamic landscape of organizational environments today, strong OCC is associated with success and evolution (Yasir, *et al.*, 2016).

Professor William Q. Judge, Jr. is the E.V. Williams Chair of Strategic Leadership and Professor of Strategic Management in the Management Department at the College of Business & Public Administration at Old Dominion University. He, along with numerous colleagues, has done multitudinous research in the area of organizational change effectiveness and the most appropriate leadership style to facilitate it. Judge and fellow researcher Thomas Douglas have identified eight dimensions dealing with OCC-type leadership (2009). These dimensions are distinct yet interrelated, and include “issues of formal organizational processes, informational

organizational culture and human capabilities” (Yasir, *et al.*, 2016). The following dimensions were identified: trustworthy leadership, innovative culture, involved mid-management, trusting followers, capable champions, system thinking, effective communication, and accountable culture (Judge & Douglas, 2009). Based on research and theory asserted by Long & Mao (2008) as well as Northouse (2007), it is evident that the style of transformational leadership is the best suited for a situation requiring the change process. Leaders who embody transformational attributes are able to shepherd their followers through organizational change through an interactive leadership style. Transformational leadership is positively associated with high OCC competencies and it is suggested that leaders must incorporate and adopt the behaviors of transformational leadership style to experience success when implementing organizational change (Lutz Allen, Smith, & DaSilva., 2013).

Research into the alignment of leadership attributes across gender lines reveals that women demonstrate desirable leader-follower characteristics as suggested through the Organizational Change Capacity framework. A very recent study out of Pakistan looked into female leaders of advertising agencies, fashion businesses, and educational institutions, their relationships to followers, and followers’ perception of said leadership styles and outcomes. The authors interviewed 366 employees and through a survey-based questionnaire they were able to construct cross-sectional data. The results are positive and promising with respect to the potential of women leaders, citing “the results indicate that women’s transformational leadership fosters trust, connectivity and innovative behaviour in the employees. Further, the results supported that employees’ trust in their leader and connectivity mediate the relationship between women’s leadership and innovative behaviour of the employees” (Bilal, Ahmad, Muhammad, J & Ragif, 2021).

It is widely accepted that employees' trust in their leadership is a critical component in the overall effectiveness of an organization (Chughati, Byrne, & Flood, 2015). Earlier research into this vein of leadership efficacy shows that trust encompasses followers' assumptions and beliefs about possible positive outcomes of others' expected behavior. Subsequent studies have shown that "when employers act in a way that builds respect, pride, and confidence in their followers, they will be trusted" (Gillespie & Mann, 2004). Transformational leaders are defined by demonstrating support for individual employees and support for group goals. Employees who perceive their leaders to be demonstrating transformational characteristics are more likely to have a higher degree of trust, thereby promoting and supporting change (Yasir, *et al.*, 2016). Additionally, according to a 2021 online piece from the American Psychological Association, "women are slightly more likely to be 'transformational' leaders, serving as role models, helping employees develop their skills, and motivating them to be dedicated and creative" (American Psychological Association, 2023).

How do gender differences in leadership contribute to overall effectiveness? An examination of leaders with respect to gender roles yields numerous studies. A 2020 study published in the Harvard Business Review discusses "7 Leadership Lessons Men Can Learn from Women." While not intended to imply a "better" leadership style for either gender on holistic grounds, it examines situation-specific traits which may manifest in the leadership process which would be more beneficial in certain circumstances. The authors start with the common yet erroneous supposition that in order to be successful, women should begin to act like men in professional settings. They assert the common yet incorrect corollary: If men have the most top roles, they must be doing something right, so maybe women should act like them (Chamorro-Premuzic & Gallop, 2020). In discussion of the saturation of men in leadership roles

in the workplace, authors Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic and Cindy Gallop posit that “the problem is not lack of competent females; it is too few obstacles for incompetent males, which explains the surplus of overconfident, narcissistic, and unethical people in charge” (2020, para.2).

Chamorro-Premuzic and Gallop present several strategies which tend to be demonstrated by women leaders. When employed in the workplace, these methods and ways of leading contribute to increased effectiveness regardless of gender. First, it is suggested that leaders learn to know their own limitations. Studies show that women, although not as wildly insecure as sometimes portrayed in the media, do tend to be less *over*confident than men. This lack of blind overconfidence allows women (and men) to understand how other people see them and anticipate gaps in their work and relationships with others. This ability of self-reflection gives the individual “the capacity to spot gaps between where they want to be and where they actually are. People who see themselves in a more critical way than others do are better able to prepare, even if it means overpreparing” (Chamorro-Premuzic & Gallop, 2020). This preparedness and acuity in reflection is a known way to increase competence and achievement.

The power of transformational leadership is well-documented in literature, and the aforementioned article also bolsters this argument. “Academic studies show that women are more likely to lead through inspiration, transforming people’s attitudes and beliefs, and aligning people with meaning and purpose” (Chamorro-Premuzic & Gallop, 2020). Transformational leadership is strongly linked to higher levels across the board: team performance, productivity, and improving leaders’ performance. Inherent to the transformational leadership style is the concept of putting other people ahead of oneself in the workplace. If the leader views the leadership role simply as a higher paycheck or route to prestige, that person will likely be less motivated to help others be the best employee possible.

Even through various barriers, some women are rising through the ranks to managerial positions and beyond, and recent research suggests this can present a positive change for organizations. Parallel studies indicate that people still expect from women's behavior what cultural norms and former relegated roles have yielded for the female gender. During our most recent presidential election, there was much speculation about Kamala Harris-- her background, her gender, and her qualifications. At the time, it was asserted that she was at a disadvantage because "people are more uncertain about women's than men's abilities to be effective leaders" (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Recent research has focused on agentic versus communal leadership and organizational traits. "Even through the gradual evolution of women's roles, unfortunately these stereotypes still remain. According to American Psychological Association contributor Alice Eagly, "Worldwide, people expect women to be the more communal sex—warm, supportive, and kind—and men to be the more agentic sex—assertive, dominant, and authoritative" (Eagly, 2020). It is puzzling that although some women do rise to leadership roles in the workplace, these gender stereotypes remain strong. Part of the cultural incongruity between men and women and work is due to the fact that the expectations for women to be the more communal sex has actually risen in the 20th century and the expectation for men as the more agentic sex has remained the same (Eagly, Nater, Miller & Kaufmann, 2019). "While agentic content refers to qualities relevant for goal-attainment, such as assertiveness, competence or persistence, communal content refers to qualities relevant for the establishment and maintenance of social relationships, such as being friendly, helpful, or fair" (Abele, 2014). Women suffer a disadvantage from the start in pursuit of leadership positions as people tend to ascribe historically agentic qualities to their perception of effective leaders, thereby aligning positive leader qualities with stereotypical male attributes (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell & Ristikari, 2011).

These ascribed leadership attributes and cultural perceptions were further synthesized in the 1970s and 1980s through cultural research by Virginia Schein and colleagues. Schein surveyed a large group of management students in several countries in her “think manager, think male” experiments to elucidate the relationship between those traits seen as necessary for effective leadership and current sex-role stereotypes. Survey participants were asked to rate 92 characteristics as belonging to “men in general”, “women in general”, or “successful middle managers” (Eagly, 2020). A correlation analysis was performed on these results, showing that “the traits ascribed to managers were more similar to those ascribed to men than women” (Schein, 1996). According to a review of research from Eagly, recently a meta-analysis of 40 such studies dealing with the aforementioned Schein paradigm optimistically show that public perception of quality leadership traits may be starting to embrace more communal traits in tandem with agentic traits (Eagly, 2020). Even with this slight shift, public expectations for stereotypically masculine behavior still holds strong for positions of high power and in particular the offices of the presidency and vice-presidency (Dittmar, 2016).

Researchers Vial, Napier, and Brescoll approach the leadership gender discrepancy from the standpoint of legitimacy versus illegitimacy in terms of followers’ perceptions. Their hypothesis asserts that women experience a challenge in generating respect and admiration (components of perceived legitimate leadership) as compared to men. The power position held by the female then presents as less legitimate than the male powerholder, thereby resulting in reduced subordinate cooperation and negative subordinate behavior (Vial, Napier, & Brescoll, 2016). Then, as part of a negative feedback loop:

Subordinate rejection will likely put female leaders in a precarious mindset, and trigger negative responses toward subordinates; such behavior can confirm

negative expectations of female leaders and further undermine female authority in a self-reinforcing cycle of illegitimacy. Leader or organizational features that enhance status attributions and/or lower subordinates' perceptions of power differentials may increase legitimacy for women in leadership roles (Vial et al., 2016, p.1).

It seems that women may be caught in an untenable situation when dealing with subordinates' perceptions when aspiring to and holding leadership positions. The concept of vanguards helps to explain the cloud of illegitimacy which may envelop and constrain females in leadership roles. A vanguard is someone who disconforms to stereotypes within their group or groups (Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Glick & Phelan, 2012). While vanguards may be celebrated by history for their accomplishments (such as Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier in baseball) which does indicate society's underlying desire to remove barriers which unfairly limit its members, they are often ridiculed and experience social retribution immediately after the event. "Specifically, vanguards are at risk for backlash, defined as social and economic penalties for behaving counter-stereotypically" (Rudman, 1998). Women acting as vanguards in the realm of leadership, whether in business, education, politics, or other arenas, may experience the vanguard effect which contributes to the aforementioned cycle of illegitimacy. These gender roles are social constructs which are continuously reinforced and refined through the Western patriarchal classification schemes.

Conclusion

Regardless of the benefits of dual-gender leadership, women in the professional realm still experience myriad barriers. According to the Pew Research Center, "Americans widely believe that men have a better shot at leadership positions in business and politics, even as

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majorities say that men and women make equally good leaders” (2015). If the majority of Americans believe that the capacity for leadership is equal, why does the disparity persist? The issue is complex, multi-faceted, and cultural.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative research project uses a phenomenological approach to explore the internal and external factors that contribute to a female public school administrator's failure to achieve or pursue the highest two offices in the sector, the Superintendency and Assistant Superintendency. Participants will be sought from current administrator listings for public schools in Pennsylvania. Individual interviews will be scheduled and conducted either in person or via virtual means, depending on the locale of the participant. Specific as well as guiding questions will be presented to the subjects, and the interviews will be permitted to progress in an organic and authentic manner as the participants choose to reveal and discuss their careers as educational professionals. I believe the nuances of each participant's career, experiences, and associated choices make personal discussions the best option for revealing and describing the lived experience of each subject.

Bias

As a Pennsylvania public school administrator, I present an element of bias inherent in my decision to approach this research project. I have been an educator in Pennsylvania since the year 2000, first teaching science at the high school level, and then moving to administration. I became an Assistant Principal and ESOL Coordinator for a local school district in 2008, and eventually the Principal of the same building in 2019. In 2013, I had my twin boys, and in 2016, I gave birth to my youngest son. While on and returning from maternity leave, I continued my education and was able to earn my Superintendent's Letter of Eligibility in 2016. I have applied for various central office positions throughout my career in my own and other districts,

sometimes earning interviews and other times not, despite stellar performance reviews and credentials. At some point in my career, it became apparent to me I was no longer being seriously considered for the top two educational positions in the district where I had spent the vast majority of my years as an administrator, an issue I attribute to many factors as described herein.

In the interest of full disclosure regarding my potential biases in this study, after the decision to devote my research on this dissertation to the experiences of women on their path to the superintendency, I decided to pursue a superintendent position in another desirable local district. This time, I was selected as the candidate of choice and I am currently serving in the Superintendent role in this school district. My current situation, although beneficial for me, does not change my commitment to further explore the lived experiences and commonalities among women in educational administration regarding their career mobility experiences, nor does it negate the importance of further exploration into why barriers still persist for many women in the field of educational administration.

Participants

This study will use a non-random purposive technique to recruit female educational administrators who have obtained their Superintendent's Letter of Eligibility through an institution of higher education authorized to grant this endorsement for employment in Pennsylvania public schools. Ideally, 15-20 women from districts categorized as suburban from a variety of counties across Pennsylvania will be recruited and consent to an individual interview.

My subjects will be selected from a very specific group of individuals: female leaders in education from Pennsylvania who hold the office of Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Director of Curriculum & Instruction, or another central office cabinet-level position or a

building-level administrative position. The Pennsylvania Department of Education maintains and publishes a handy database entitled Educational Names and Addresses (EDNA for short).

Administrators use this database frequently when seeking information from other districts on specific issues. It will also function as a consolidated subject pool for selection of subjects for this study.

Inclusion criteria

Participants must be biologically female as assigned at birth. Participants must hold an initial teaching certificate from the Pennsylvania Department of Education and have earned a Pennsylvania Superintendent Letter of Eligibility. Participants must be employed in or retired from a position of administration within the field of educational leadership in a Pennsylvania public school district.

Recruitment

Please see Appendix A for the steps taken to arrive at the list of potential participants.

The Recruitment process will be as follows:

- Randomly select 40-50 suburban school districts from a variety of counties across various demographic regions in Pennsylvania.
- Review the Pennsylvania Department of Education's Educational Names and Addresses (EDNA) website to identify current women administrators in the selected suburban school districts who are serving in the capacity of building administrator, superintendent, assistant superintendent, or other district-level administrative positions.
- Using the Pennsylvania Department of Education's Teacher Information Management System database, ascertain that the identified female administrators do indeed possess a valid Pennsylvania Superintendent Letter of Eligibility.

- Using the pool of potential participants gathered via the aforementioned steps, send an email to their district-issued account explaining the scope of this research project and requesting their voluntary participation in the interview process (see Appendix B).
- From the group of potential participants who respond in the affirmative, randomly select 15 individuals who have attained the superintendency or assistant superintendency, and 15 who did not.
- Obtain informed consent (see Appendix C) prior to the interview process.

Instruments

Training and practice of researcher

I will be the sole researcher in this project. No other observers or researchers will be involved in the interpretation and analysis of information received through the interview process of participants. My training in this area is extensive, with 24 years of experience in the field of education ranging from classroom teacher, Assistant Principal, ESOL Director, Principal, Director of Personnel, and Superintendent of Schools. I have worked in schools classified from urban to suburban and mixed demographic, and I have taught and been an administrator in direct contact with students in grades K through 12. Additionally, I currently serve all school staff in an executive administrative role as Superintendent and I hold advanced degrees in the field of education. My various positions and broad experience in the educational realm have afforded me the opportunity to work with both male and female administrators across all levels.

This study was originally conceived with a plan for a combined approach of qualitative and quantitative. This researcher had planned to attempt a two-pronged approach for the study, including an interview portion as well as a Likert-type scale wherein subjects would rate descriptors relating to the topic, followed by an attempt by the subjects to assign a value in years

to time lost due to the factors described both during the interview and the rating scale. Upon further reflection, I believe the scope of the original plan is too vast to be accomplished in one study. Therefore, I have made the decision to reduce the original plan to a qualitative approach using interviews and discussion. My hope is that there is an opportunity for further research after the completion of the first study.

For this research, I originally started with 30 questions on the topic which I thought would draw out the conclusions I am searching for in this research. After reflection, I have reduced the protocol set to 10 questions of a more open-ended nature which are now more likely to elicit conversation and discussion of personal experiences, with the addition of an eleventh question consisting of simply, “Is there anything else you would like to share?”

The questions are crafted to attempt to derive information about the impact of both internal and external gender-focused issues that women in educational administration may experience. The themes of the questions include issues with working in a male-centric, or “boys’ club” environment, exclusion in the workplace due to male-centric interactions and exclusion behavior, and factors in one’s personal life which may interfere with the ability to attain the office.

I will include a question to allow the respondents to identify basic demographic information that will be used to inform any resulting themes, such as age, marital status, and number of children. This research will not differentiate between subjects based on race, sexual orientation or sexual identity. A complete list of interview questions used may be found in Appendix C.

Benefits of such a technique for data collection include the fact that interviews may allow for an in-depth understanding of the subjects and their experiences. Qualitative interviews allow

researchers to delve deeply into participants' lived experiences, perspectives, and opinions using open-ended questions and probing techniques to allow for the uncovering of rich and detailed information. This method also enhances research flexibility, in that researchers can adapt their questions and approach during the interview based on the participant's responses, potentially promoting a more natural and exploratory conversation. Personal interviews allow for the researcher to touch upon complex issues. Qualitative interviews are well-suited for understanding the nuances of human behavior and social phenomena through natural conversation. Additionally, richer data may be collected through encouraging discussion to provide valuable insights that may not be captured through other research methods.

Drawbacks of qualitative data collection through personal interviews may include time constraints. Qualitative interviews can be time-consuming to conduct, transcribe, and analyze, requiring significant resources and effort which may extend beyond the researcher him- or herself. There is also the potential for bias as the researcher's presence and interpretation of data can introduce elements of personal opinion and leanings, allowing the researcher's own experiences and knowledge to influence observations and conclusions. Qualitative interviews are frequently restricted to smaller sample sizes as this research often involves smaller, non-randomized participants which can limit the generalizability of the findings. Difficulty in replication may occur due to the unique nature of qualitative research and it can be challenging to replicate studies and verify the information obtained through the study. Lastly, the quality of the overall data may be dependent on whether or not the moderator is skilled at directing the interview and allowing for open, natural conversation.

Procedure

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The first step in this process is to obtain permission from the Institutional Review Board through Marywood University. After said permission is obtained, I am allotting one semester and one summer to notify participants, select participants, schedule and conduct interviews, and analyze the information collected. My goal is to begin to contact participants during the spring of 2025, and schedule interviews for the summer months. The workload for administrators tends to be at its yearly lowest point during the summer and perhaps participants will be more likely to consent to the interview without the stresses of the school year. Interviews will likely extend into the Fall of 2025 due to time constraints. Participants will then be scheduled for individual virtual or in-person interviews.

I would like to conduct at least fifteen interviews in each subgroup, those women who obtained the Letter of Eligibility and the Superintendency and/or Assistant Superintendency, and those that received a Letter of Eligibility but did not achieve either position either due to choice or circumstance.

When all participants have been selected and informed consent has been obtained, the interviews will be scheduled. While I plan to apply the exclusion criteria of administrators within my county of residence with whom I have worked, I may still have participants who are within a 60 to 75 mile radius for whom it is feasible to schedule an in-person meeting. Although I will not rule out participants who are geographically removed from my location, I will attempt an in-person interview if possible. For those participants who are located in an area of the Commonwealth requiring longer than a one-hour and 15-minute commute, I will schedule an appointment via Google Meet. Each interview will consist of thirteen scripted questions (see Appendix D for the full questionnaire) and an opportunity at the end to provide any information they wish.

For the interview protocol, I will start by expressing my appreciation for the participants taking the time to meet with me and provide a brief overview of my personal and professional background. I will work through the question set (see Appendix D for the full list of questions), allowing the participants to expand upon their answers as they wish. The question set was developed with the intent of being able to extract evidence from the lived experiences of the participants with the goal of developing a theme or themes which informs the essential question of the study. The questions are based on themes identified throughout the review of literature on this topic. I will begin by asking the participants about their experiences, if any, working in a male-centric administrative team and possible feelings of exclusion or overt gender discrimination, as in being treated unfairly or unequally based on characteristics associated with gender.

The following steps were taken to prepare for and conduct this research:

1. The project proposal was created and consent to proceed with contacting the potential interview subjects was obtained through Marywood University.
2. The list of potential participants was created using the steps outlined in Appendix A.
3. Potential participants were sent emails to elicit interest (Appendices B-1 or B-2) based on employment status.
4. Informed Consent Forms (Appendix D) were sent to participants after final selection.
5. Interviews were scheduled with participants through email communication. All participants were sent a confirmation link to a Google Meet through a Google Calendar invitation.
6. Instructions for the interview were sent to the participants via email.
7. Interviews were conducted virtually or via Google Form (see Appendix C).

8. Files of recorded interviews were stored in a Google folder on the researcher's Google Drive which is by nature password protected. No additional accounts were given view or edit access to the files.
9. Names of the participants were coded to protect anonymity.
10. The content of the interviews was transcribed by the researcher into Google documents and stored on the researcher's Google Drive.

Analysis

After reviewing the four main methods of data analysis in qualitative research (Grounded Theory Analysis, Content Analysis, Narrative Analysis, and Discourse Analysis), I feel the Content Analysis approach is most appropriate for my Results Section. After all interviews are completed, transcribed, and reviewed, the overarching goal of this research is to look for commonalities in the personal stories of these women relating to their careers and attempt to draw conclusions about the world through their spoken content about their lives. I will be attempting to classify, summarize, and identify patterns through coding analysis. Part of the analysis will include identifying similar patterns of language and description of events, as well as commonalities in career trajectories.

Content Analysis in qualitative research is a method for systematically analyzing the content of qualitative data, focusing on the occurrence and relationships between words and phrases, themes, and/or concepts. One must first clearly define the research question and state what phenomena you seek to investigate. One should next create a set of categories or codes to identify relevant elements in the data and coalesce them into a specific coding scheme. Codes are then assigned codes to the raw data based on the components of the scheme. Language and descriptions used by the participants will be compiled into a matrix and coded to identify

common themes. The coded data is then analyzed to identify patterns and relationships between codes. This method allows for a somewhat systematic approach to categorize and quantify patterns which may otherwise be subjective in nature.

Triangulation includes the use of multiple data sources to support or confirm a theory. I suspect I will amass many interview participants who are willing to speak to me on this topic, thereby allowing for varying sources of contextual personal stories. Additionally, the acknowledgment of this researcher's subjectivity is inherent in the process as I myself have been subject to the internal and external barriers which are the topic of the study. Finally, my goal is to certainly allow for and thoughtfully consider disconfirming evidence as perhaps the issue is not as pervasive as it seems in my realm of interaction professionally. In general, the goal is to keep an open mind in all interpretations of interview transcripts.

Ethics

As I reflect on my study idea, relating to females in educational administration, I believe it fits smoothly into the required tenets and three core ethical principles of the Belmont Report: *Respect for Persons, Beneficence, and Justice* (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Fortunately, studies in education, particularly those involving feelings, career paths, or other issues specific to educational administrators, do not involve health-related situations which could result in physical harm to individuals. The greatest level of harm that I can anticipate with this type of research would be the potential for emotional harm, either fleeting or longer-lasting, as a result of discussing sensitive issues related to unrealized aspirations in the workplace. This study could also cause a resurgence of emotion related to any possible sexual harassment or misconduct which any female research subjects may have experienced during their careers.

The concept of *Respect for Persons* should be easy to satisfy in the proposed research. As educational administrators, the assumption is that they are being treated as autonomous agents who are participating in the questions of their own free will. Respect is satisfied as, by virtue of the fact that they are district office and building administrators, they must have the cognitive and contextual ability to understand the scope of the study and the questions being asked.

Additionally, the only barrier I can identify with respect to obtaining consent is the possibility of a language barrier which can be remedied with a certified professional translator and interpreter present for the informed consent discussion.

In terms of meeting the second tenet of *Beneficence*, I believe I can effectively minimize any potential for harm in this case. By nature it is not an invasive study in the physical sense, nor does it require the ingestion or topical application of any substance which could cause issues or adverse effects. In essence, the only possible sources of harm are a resurgence of emotions brought on by the questions. Clearly, in such a study, the benefit in information to be obtained outweighs any chance of harm. After an assessment of risks and benefits, there is no reason not to proceed with such research.

The concept of *Justice* as described in the Belmont Report is a little more nebulous than the other two components. Why should women administrators bear the burden of serving as a research subject on a topic and systemic problem for which they are not responsible, but rather conversely are the victims of? It is a complex ethical issue. In the case of this proposal, female educational administrators will both bear the burden and reap the benefits of such a study. Scrutinization of subjects is not critical, as subjects will qualify by meeting two criteria: being a female (biologically and identifying as female), and being a current or recent executive-level

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[superintendent, assistant superintendent, cabinet-level director] or building-level [principal, assistant principal, dean of students].

I feel I should disclose to the participants that I am a female educational administrator and this topic is of high importance to me both from a personal perspective due to my own experiences and from a professional perspective. Although I am intensely interested in this subject, it will not influence my ability to be an impartial researcher or conduct valid research.

Chapter 4

Results

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to examine the internal (arising from within the workplace) and external (associated with family life outside of work) barriers, supports, and lived experiences that apply pressure to shape the professional trajectories of women aspiring to and serving as superintendents. Although each participant's story and career path was unique to her, like circumstances and common struggles can be identified, illustrating the complex relationship between gender, leadership, and systematized organizational culture in public education. Data were analyzed through the technique of thematic coding in which transcripts and written responses were reviewed, categorized, and clustered into patterns that revealed consistent themes across participants. Open coding was performed initially to identify recurring ideas, patterns, and concepts common to each participant's narrative. Axial coding was then performed to coalesce the information identified from the open coding process, to identify relationships and connections between the discrete codes and organize them into broader, hierarchical categories. From this point the categories identified through the axial coding process were applied to a thematic analysis to develop the seven central themes to be discussed herein.

The technique employed for this analysis followed the principles of grounded theory coding, beginning with open coding, then narrowing the concepts through axial coding and finally identifying the development of major themes. The open coding portion of the analysis was performed via a line-by-line review of participant interviews and written responses, resulting in the identification of linguistic codes that captured specific lived experiences, feelings, observations and situations of the administrators. These open codes were then organized into

broader axial categories, which revealed connections between the participants' experiences across various contexts. Finally, categories were synthesized into seven overarching themes that form the basis of the findings presented in this chapter.

Demographics

The study included interviews and written responses from thirty female administrators in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, all currently serving in school districts with a suburban classification according to the Pennsylvania Department of Education Urban Centric and Metro Centric Locale Codes database. The participants represented a range of administrative positions within the network of educational leadership, including Directors of Curriculum and Instruction, Directors of Pupil Services, Coordinators of various departments, Principals, and Superintendents (see Table 1). Their ages range from early forties to late fifties with the mean age being 47.13 (SD=7.02) and the median age being 46 (range = 66 - 39). Most were married with children either still in the home or adult-aged. Of these participants, fifteen were sitting superintendents at the time of the interview or response, while the other fifteen were central office administrators who had earned the Pennsylvania Superintendent Letter of Eligibility but had not yet advanced to the superintendency either by their own choice or by circumstance. The inclusion of both those administrators who attained the office of the superintendency and those who have not yet done so seeks to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the superintendent pipeline for women and the associated challenges and barriers both within the workplace and in their personal lives outside of work. This balance of perspectives allows for a comparison of lived experiences across different positions within the network of leadership and career stages and allows the factors to emerge, specific to females, that enable or hinder career advancement in the field of educational administration.

Demographics		
Position	N	%
Superintendent	15	50
Assistant Superintendent	1	3.3
Director/Coordinator of Curriculum & Instruction	10	33
Director of Pupil/Student Services	3	3.3
Principal	1	3.3
TOTAL	30	100
Marital Status	N	%
Married- first	22	73.4
Married- remarried	1	3.3
Divorced and unmarried	4	13.3
Never married	3	10
TOTAL	30	100
Children	N	%
In home	17	56.7
Adult	7	23.3
No Children	6	20
TOTAL	30	100

Table 1

Demographic breakdown of participants

Open Coding

As part of the open coding process, each transcript and written response was reviewed multiple times. Short descriptive labels were applied to meaningful excerpts, often preserving participants' own words. These codes reflected observable phenomena such as exclusion, bias, pressures of caregiving, or internalized self-doubt. Examples of open codes included:

- “You wouldn’t understand; you weren’t a coach,” → *Exclusion from athletic conversations.*
- “The board said they would only interview males” → *Gender exclusion in hiring.*
- “I didn’t take off as long as I wanted to [after giving birth] because I was afraid of losing my place” → *Pressure to shorten maternity leave.*
- “We can’t do it all, and if we try to, we accept being tired and overworked all the time” → *Second-shift burden at home.*
- “I feel like I fell out of the cool kids club after maternity leave” → *Loss of visibility and belonging.*
- “I’ve been told I’m qualified but not the right fit at this time” → *Subjective hiring criteria tied to gendered expectations.*
- “My female mentors encouraged me to keep trying when I doubted myself” → *Positive influence of mentorship.*

In the early stages of coding dozens of distinct codes were identified. Although some reflected very individual experiences, clear patterns also began to surface across interviews, pointing to common challenges and shared experiences among women at different points along the pathway of access to the superintendency.

Axial Coding

During the axial coding phase of the analysis process, open codes were clustered by relatedness into broader categories that illustrated common experiences. After generating many detailed codes during the open coding process, the data was reviewed for commonalities, overlaps, and recurring ideas identifying shared experiences among participants. These related codes were then grouped into categories that explained how different pieces of data fit together conceptually. Examples include:→

- Language such as “excluded from sports talk,” “asked to leave a meeting for guy talk,” and “need to adopt masculine persona” → *informal exclusion and male-centric culture*.
- “Board only interviewed males,” “qualified but not the right fit,” and “men evaluated less, women scrutinized” → *biased hiring and evaluation practices*.
- Experiences like “maternity leave penalties,” “pressure to return early,” and “second-shift burden” → *caregiving conflicts and work-life imbalance*.

Lastly, the categories served as the structure for the identification of seven larger themes that flowed throughout the findings (see Table 2).

Themes Identified Through Coding Analysis	
Theme 1	<i>Male-Dominated Culture and “Boys’ Club” Dynamics</i>
Theme 2	<i>Gender Bias in Hiring and Promotion</i>
Theme 3	<i>Motherhood, Caregiving, and Work-Life Imbalance</i>
Theme 4	<i>Lack of Structural and Cultural Support</i>
Theme 5	<i>Emotional and Psychological Impacts</i>

Theme 6	<i>Internal versus External Barriers</i>
Theme 7	<i>Perceptions of Readiness and “Fit”</i>

Table 2

A list of themes identified through open coding, axial coding, and theme grouping analysis

Theme 1- Male-Dominated Culture and “Boys’ Club” Dynamics

A common theme across all interviews was the participants’ description of encountering a male-centric culture embedded in administrative and school board settings. A pronounced aspect of this was exclusion from informal spaces. One participant, a sitting superintendent, recalled being told, “You wouldn’t understand; you weren’t a coach,” a statement that made her feel immediately positioned and informally identified as an outsider in the typically male-dominated milieu of athletics and athletics-driven decision-making. Another woman described meetings during the workday where “sports talk” dominated the conversation, and yet another aspiring superintendent recalled with great clarity being “asked to leave one meeting so they could have guy talk.”

These informal male networks frequently extended beyond business hours into golf outings, school sporting events, or other athletic-based activities where key district stakeholders are often present and the seeds of future decisions are planted. Many participants felt that they were either not invited or not welcomed at these events, and if they did attend they felt peripheral. As one participant observed, “Sports talk is the default language of men in education.”

This cultural sidelining persisted even within central office environments, as some participants felt that their departments (such as curriculum, instruction, or pupil services) were

undervalued in comparison to finance and athletics, thereby reinforcing gendered hierarchies in the leadership structure. The axial category of *informal exclusion and male-centric culture* emerged from these codes, highlighting the structural ways in which women's contributions were sidelined.

Theme 2- Gender Bias in Hiring and Promotion

A second theme emerged, centered on the inequities present regarding gender-based hiring and promotion. A number of participants recalled instances of being passed over for less-qualified male candidates. One woman, in the early stages of the application process for a superintendent position, recalled that "the board said they would only interview males." Another participant reflected, also after participation in a superintendent search, "the board chose a male candidate with less experience and no doctorate."

Feedback provided by search committees to several participants revealed coded language, including phrases such as "not the right fit" or, in the case of one female candidate, that she was lacking the desired "presence" that the board sought for the position. As one superintendent explained during an unsuccessful candidacy, "It was stated that the district needed a strong presence... which is code for a large, middle-aged, handsome male superintendent."

Participants serving in the administrative roles involving curriculum, instruction, and pupil services, positions often held by female administrators, were especially likely to feel dismissed and as though their positions are "terminal" employment tracks that lacked the pipeline to the superintendency that some other central office positions experience. This is in contrast to men from athletic or operations backgrounds who were fast-tracked into leadership positions. This theme illustrates the persistence of gender bias in superintendent hiring and

promotion decisions either stemming from biases of the school board or other sitting administrators involved in the selection process.

Theme 3- Motherhood, Caregiving, and Work-Life Imbalance

The caregiving responsibilities of motherhood and family management surfaced as consistent external barriers across participant interviews. Multiple women described penalties, either overt or subtle, tied to maternity leave, including having their projects reassigned or the feeling of losing visibility and one's status in the administrative hierarchy of the organization. One woman admitted, "I didn't take off as long as I wanted [after the birth of my child] because I was afraid of losing my place."

Most reflected on the unspoken "second shift" of domestic expectations that inevitably follow a full workday. The two single mothers in the respondent group described particularly acute struggles in balancing workplace leadership duties and limited institutional support and/or flexibility in education with being the sole parent. As one superintendent noted, "We can't do it all, and if we try to, we accept being tired and overworked all the time."

Even women administrators without children faced stigmatization in the category of caregiving: non-mothers were at risk of being perceived as "cold" or "overly ambitious" as perceived by the subject as wielded with a negative connotation. These nuanced interactions were grouped along with the more overt assumptions about one's family obligations into the axial category of Caregiving Conflicts and Cultural Expectations, illustrating how family obligations, whether real or assumed, have the potential to shape a woman's career path.

Theme 4- Lack of Structural and Cultural Support

The participants overwhelmingly emphasized the lack of institutional support for women in leadership roles. Many cited the absence of any type of flexibility in scheduling or the

possibility of a temporary modified workload, despite the ebb and flow of external barriers such as caregiving demands. As one superintendent remarked, “The world is structured around the male career, it’s that simple.”

Respondents report the lack of mentorship opportunities from female leaders. Many relied on informal networks or the support of male supervisors as mentors but expressed a desire for a more formalized, structured system of guidance, especially from other women leaders who experience similar setbacks and biases. A common internal barrier surfaced in many narratives, that of the fact that networking opportunities often occur at athletic or evening events, further excluding women with family responsibilities.

The thread of insufficient support and flexibility is woven throughout participants’ responses within this theme as well. One woman, not yet a superintendent, reflected “The hours can be unpredictable and there’s often an unspoken expectation to always be available. If I had access to any type of flexible scheduling or even better childcare, I might have started pursuing other roles earlier.” Her sentiments emphasize how institutional inflexibility and lack of any means of formalized support structures constrict some women’s opportunities for advancement and align with the need for greater interventions to mitigate these structural and cultural barriers. These open codes were coalesced into the axial category of Systemic Inflexibility and Limited Support Structures, elucidating how institutional male-centric cultures often fail to accommodate the needs of all leaders.

Theme 5- Emotional and Psychological Impacts

The cumulative emotional burden of exclusion, biases internal to the workplace, and structural inflexibility produced a significant psychological burden for many participants. These women leaders repeatedly described exhaustion, pervasive fatigue, and sustained self-doubt. One

participant, having already earned a superintendency, recalls altering her actions during meetings early in her career to make her voice heard. “I often feel like I have to put on a fake ‘I’m one of the guys’ persona to have my voice recognized in some settings. I don’t feel I would have to do this as a man. It can feel like a full-time job.” Her experiences illustrate the internal exhaustion which may ensue through constant management of one’s impression and identity negotiation, a common byproduct of gendered leadership navigation.

After having her first child, one participant who has not yet attained a position as a superintendent but still aspired to do so, reflected, “I feel like I fell out of the cool kids’ club after maternity leave.” Another woman, a Director of Pupil Services, felt stifled by the “invisible ceiling” that she cannot break through despite outstanding qualifications.

A theme among administrators who have not begun a serious pursuit of the superintendency is the delay of applications until their children were older or until they felt as though enough credibility had been accrued to counteract doubts. These sentiments were clustered under Internalized Barriers and Emotional Fatigue, shedding light on the psychological debt of leadership for many women when faced with navigating systemic inequities in the realm of public educational leadership.

Theme 6- Internal versus External Barriers

In general, all participants referenced and differentiated between the internal, systemic barriers within the leadership strand of Pennsylvania public school systems and the external, personal barriers associated with family obligations and/or societal pressures. Internal barriers frequently referenced include the “boys’ club” culture, hiring practices slanted toward male candidates, and the pervasive undervaluing of female-coded leadership characteristics. The external barriers frequently cited included general household management and spousal

expectations, responsibilities of childcare, and geographic immobility tied to extended family locations and roots. Respondents' own words provide powerful examples of the interplay between external, systemic biases and internal self-expectations, as women frequently are forced to contend with systemic and institutional inequities while they themselves have institutionalized societal norms to some degree. A divorced curriculum director recalls, "The biggest factor for me has been the timing of things. I have had to make choices to prioritize my daughter when she needed me more at home. I feel guilty saying that was a setback but it did influence the timing of my career."

One aspiring superintendent remarked, "There's no flexibility in education administration. We can't work from home. We're here when the kids are here." These sentiments underscored the complex nature of barriers women encounter as female administrators and reinforced the distinction between systemic workplace inequality and familial or personal challenges and obligations.

Theme 7- Perceptions of Readiness and "Fit"

Finally, participants revealed a pervasive sense of being viewed by others or viewing themselves as "almost ready." Through hiring processes often favoring archetypal male leadership profiles, these women administrators were left to question their "readiness" for the role even when boasting high-level qualifications and job experience. As one administrator put it, "I've been told I'm qualified but not the right fit." Another added, "I suspect 'community presence' was code for a male candidate with coaching experience."

Repetitions of these experiences of coded feedback engendered impostor syndrome in several participants and magnified existing internal self-doubt. These sentiments were

formulated into an axial category of Subjective Readiness Criteria, exemplifying how internalized feelings of personal insufficiency may result from actions related to systemic bias.

Figure 1 below depicts the interconnectedness of the initial open coding method, the subsequent axial categories, and the overarching themes developed therefrom and illustrates the complexity and interrelated nature of the leadership experiences of women in Pennsylvania public school administration. This diagram represents the individual participants' insights (initial open codes) converged into broader conceptual categories (secondary axial codes) which then coalesced into seven general, sweeping themes as presented in this chapter.

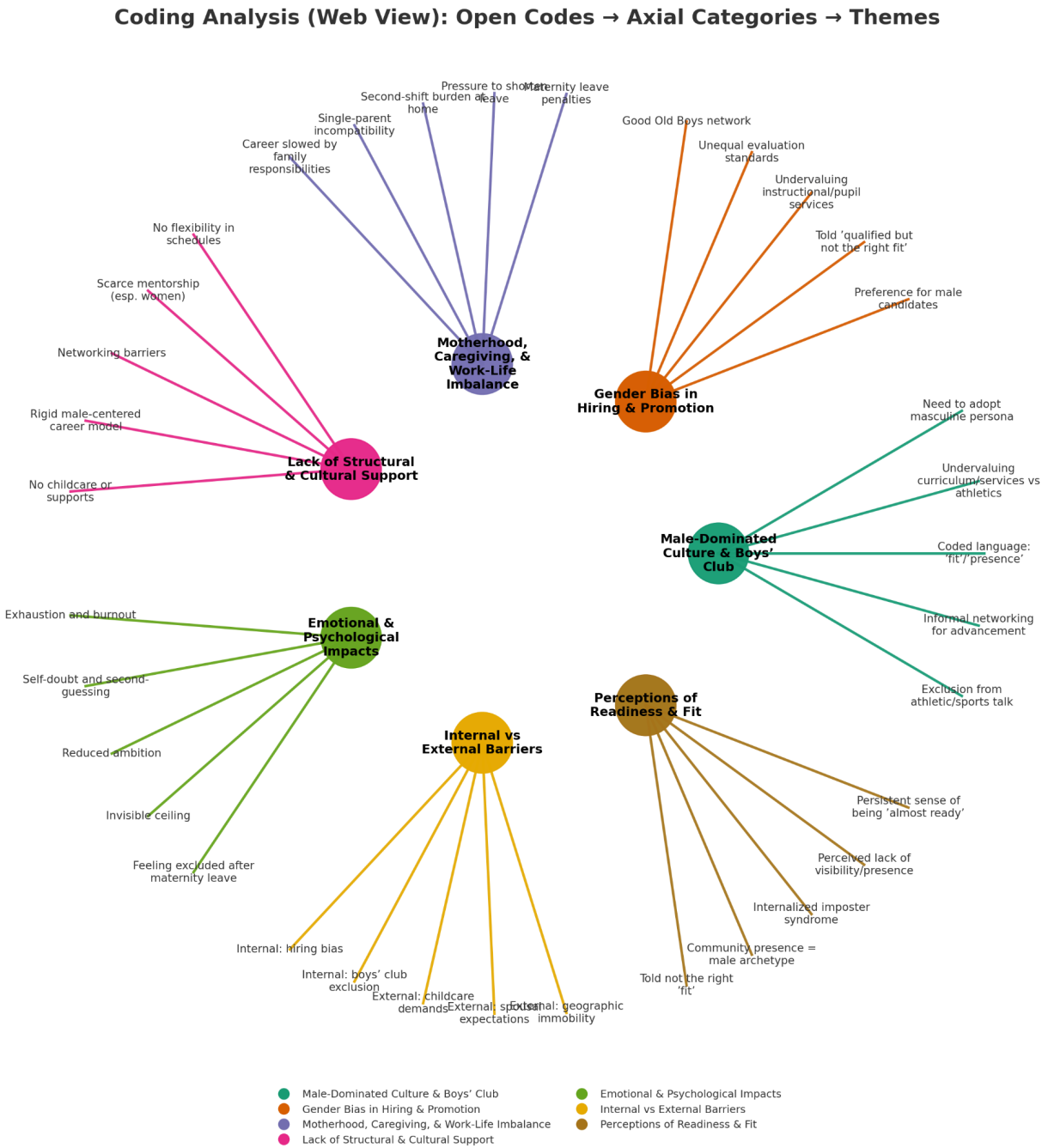


Figure 1

Coding Analysis (Web View): Open Codes → Axial Categories → Themes

This figure illustrates the relationships among open codes, axial categories, and overarching themes derived from participant interviews. Each colored node represents one of the seven major themes identified in the study.

Summary

The results presented here illuminate the complex and entwined barriers that impact the professional paths and shape the trajectories of leadership of women administrators in Pennsylvania's public suburban school districts. A grounded theory analysis was employed to uncover themes running through participants' responses, revealing seven central themes providing collective exposure to the pernicious cumulative effect of gender-based inequities woven into the leadership structures of educational institutions. The findings show that women continue to struggle to keep pace with male counterparts on the pathway to executive leadership positions even with commensurate competencies, qualifications, and experience, a truth that is heavily shaped by the prevalence of male-dominated workplace cultures and networks that prove exclusionary and the pervasive nature of subjective hiring practices centered around historically male-centric paradigms of leadership. These internal workplace challenges are amplified by external forces, gendered expectations, and an imbalance of obligations related to family and household responsibilities outside of the workplace. Under the pressure of these internal and external circumstances, the women respondents admit experiencing a physical and emotional toll either in their pursuit of the position or while serving in the position of superintendent.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Introduction

This qualitative study explores the lived experiences and associated barriers and supports encountered by thirty female administrators in the field of education within suburban school districts in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The research sought to identify the internal and external barriers, systemic inequities, and gender-based cultural expectations influencing women's progression, ability and/or desire to attain a position of superintendency.

Fifteen participants were current superintendents and fifteen were not superintendents but held another administrative position, either at the central office/cabinet level or at the building level. All respondents had earned a Pennsylvania Superintendent Letter of Eligibility making them qualified to attain a superintendency. Layering upon the themes developed through analysis in Chapter 4, this chapter moves beyond the description of their experiences to address the broader significance of the findings. Participants' descriptions of their experiences are situated within the wider context of genderized leadership and norms within the educational workplace to seek to answer the question: What do these findings mean for the profession and for the advancement of women in educational leadership? Implications for practice and recommendations for aspiring women leaders, boards of education, and policy makers are provided, followed by suggestions for future research and concluding reflections.

Discussion/Interpretation

The experiences of the women educational leaders in this study elucidate the pervasive and systemic gender disparity embedded in Pennsylvania public school administration. Although women have made some progress toward leveling the male/female ratio in the highest circles of

educational leadership, the findings indicate that pathways to the superintendency are still deeply hewn by barriers such as implicit bias and cultural gender-assigned expectations about family and responsibilities. Each of the seven themes (male-dominated culture, gender bias in hiring, motherhood and work-life balance, lack of institutional support, emotional and psychological impacts, internal and external barriers, and perceptions of readiness) reflect interwoven dimensions of a broader social narrative that continues to define leadership through a masculine lens. This study does not scratch the surface of the deeply-embedded social and cultural barriers women face in the professional arena.

An interesting repeated concept throughout the research was the acknowledgement of the presence of a “boys’ club” culture in the workplace. It should be noted that these women live and are employed in suburban school districts across the Commonwealth, representing 18 of Pennsylvania’s 67 counties. There is little reason to suspect that they even know one another let alone discussed this concept in advance of the questioning as the range of distribution of participants is hundreds of miles, from the suburban Philadelphia area to school districts in counties bordering West Virginia. Still, recognition of this idea was prominent, acknowledged in 19 separate responses. The women went on to describe similar parallel experiences of informal networking between male colleagues, frequently including sports-related or other social connections from which they felt excluded. This networking was viewed as a primary mechanism through which advancement opportunities were exchanged and collisions with those in power occurred. All the women who used this phrase went on to describe a feeling of exclusion in these spaces and the milieu of masculine connection resulting in a limitation in access to influence within prominent school district stakeholders’ circles. These findings echo previous research by Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) and Tallerico (2000), emphasizing how

gender-based organizational cultures persist despite commitments to equality. This idea poses the inquiry that if men's culture is the default social arrangement of an organization, how does a woman attempt to infiltrate this gender-wired social fabric in a way that does not feel artificial and forced? In addition to generalized male-centric dynamics, the pervasive nature of "sports talk" was consistently mentioned throughout the responses. Many women felt exhausted by having to play the part to feel socially accepted and connected, and one respondent said she simply walked away from her male colleagues when they started down this conversation path. It was too much work, she said, to try to master yet another genre.

Participants described being judged by very subjective criteria, such as "fit," "presence," and "community expectations", highlighting the saturation of gender bias in the selection and promotion process as another defining feature of the female administrator's experience. Through exploration of coded terms across interviews, the concept of gatekeeper favorability for male-typical archetypes of leadership emerged as very much present in these women's stories, suggesting the possibility that this form of gender bias has evolved into a more subtle yet equally influential channel for exclusion. The suitability of any particular candidate by the standards of "fit" and "presence" are notoriously difficult to quantify, yet this reasoning persists in the hiring process according to many of the participants. Despite possessing equal or superior qualifications, experiences exist for these respondents wherein the male-favored perception of leadership prevailed during hiring decisions. This phenomenon, identified and described by Wiggins and Coggins in 1986, remains to this day. Their classic study used hypothetical candidate profiles to assess whether school boards showed a pattern of preference for male-centric archetypes through the superintendent selection process. Indeed, their results produced empirical evidence of board-level gender bias in selection of applicants for the

executive seat (Wiggins & Coggins, 1986). Recent research suggests this gatekeeping phenomenon persists, and this research supports the same (Von Dolen, Bellara, & Robinson, 2025; Jarrett, Tran, & Buckman, 2018).

A central repetitious theme to participants' experiences was the demand placed on them for motherhood and caregiving, in obvious addition to the responsibilities in the workplace. The feeling of having to "do it all" at a personal cost was prominent, forcing women to balance administrative duties with household obligations. Unspoken penalties or subtle changes resulting in reduced responsibility and/or influence were perceived by a number of respondents subsequent to maternity leave or temporary family prioritization. For some of the women, this tension resulted in a delay of their pursuit of advancement, or it derailed it altogether. These findings strongly suggest that current pathways to leadership in the field of education remain largely incompatible with traditional, female-centric caregiving and household management expectations. This very real dynamic continues to disadvantage women who desire the position of Chief Administrative Officer in a school district. Even the research participants who said they had a supportive spouse also expressed wistful longing for more free time, as they remained the primary physical and emotional attendants of the household. In the words of one superintendent, "My weekends are filled with grocery shopping, laundry, and cleaning and I have just about zero free time for myself."

A generalized lack of structural support within educational institutions magnifies these inequities. Participants emphasized that, in their districts, there were no options for remote work or flexible schedules. Most did not have access to formal mentorship programming at all, let alone being paired with a female mentor. It seems as though these omissions not only reflect a system that is replete with antiquated conventions, but whose systemic rigidity reveals the needs

of whom it was designed to serve— men of privileged families. Educational administration, in its male-centered design, only serves to reinforce the traditional patterns of female exclusion and, in the words of one research participant, “It’s structured around the male career.”

It was apparent to this researcher that, for these women, the cumulative impacts of their experiences extended beyond any barriers to actual workplace advancement and career trajectory and swelled to include their emotional and psychological well-being. Repeated expressions of self-doubt, invisibility in the company of colleagues, and exhaustion permeating both professional and innate personas were noted. A striking feature of this data is the fact that even successful superintendents described the fatigue and emotional burden of constantly proving their legitimacy, whether self-imposed or via stakeholder pressure. This underscores the very real status of female administrators as a marginalized group in the highest circles of educational leadership and the internalized consequences of systemic inequities. Several participants noted a similar feeling, albeit phrased differently by each, that they must wear their resilience as armor lest any chink expose them as not worthy of the position.

The participants consistently drew distinctions between the internal and external barriers they have experienced, highlighting the intersection of systemic, organizational shortcomings in the form of institutionalized biases and their own personal circumstances. When comprehending these barriers and reflecting on how the interplay of both internal and external forces may impact the career mobility of any particular female educational administrator, one wonders how any individual woman in the field can sustain the fortitude required to carve a lengthy career in this arena. Recent research on such revealed a national trend toward female administrators’ perceptions of unconscious gender-bias in the superintendency, a concept that is well-supported by this study (Drake, 2023). The oppressive weight of societal expectations that are still very

much tied to gender, coupled with the inescapable institutional bias in the workplace, serve to create a reinforcing cycle that may easily truncate a woman's career mobility and advancement.

This research emphasizes not only the inarguable presence of both internal and external barriers for women with aspirations of the superintendency, but it exposes how the cultural and structural fabric of the process of attaining the highest level of leadership continues to shape who is perceived as capable of leading. When individuals are restricted through characteristics not based on merit or credentials, public schools are denied access to a more comprehensive range of leadership experiences and perspectives that may better serve increasingly diverse communities and even serve as role models for young women themselves. Alma Harris and her team of academics conducted a ten-year review of female educational leaders, highlighting how women tend to employ collaborative, relational, and inclusive styles which are largely congruent with beneficial student/community relationships and positive organizational culture (Harris et al., 2024). It is critical to understand that imposing gender-based barriers does not merely impede an individual woman, but likely results in a limitation of the adaptability and effectiveness of the leadership sector of public education as a whole.

Nebulous coded expectations related to "fit" and the enduring specter of boys' club workplace norms confirm that in many areas the decision-makers within the field of education still assess leadership capacity through a narrow, masculinized lens. Through this gatekeeping practice, a self-perpetuating cycle emerges wherein those future leaders who conform to traditional male-centric administrative archetypes are given the opportunity to advance, and those who don't are eliminated regardless of aptitude or ability. This Gatekeeper phenomenon is well-documented in education specifically, where gatekeepers (school board directors and existing administrators) have biases concerning their definition of leadership potential that is

rooted in stereotypical images of the superintendency (Bernal, 2019; Boyette, 2019). The overall result for these restrictive screening and hiring practices lies, again, not only with the individual woman who is overlooked for a specific position, but in the totality of missed opportunities for diversified leadership styles and collaborative reform industry-wide. Many participants in this study were self-confident in their strengths as leaders, yet still felt undervalued by hiring teams which manifested in a delay or dismissal of their career aspirations.

A pervasive theme in this research is the fact that the educational system in the United States for employees is still largely structured around antiquated male-centric family dynamics, calibrated around defunct career models that are forced to reflect leaders with around-the-clock availability and long periods of uninterrupted time devoted to work, all with the benefit of immense spousal support in the home. Work-life imbalance, societal expectations for caregiving and household management, and gender bias in the professional realm are not just personal challenges for these women; rather, they represent internal and external barriers that are no doubt institutionalized design flaws. Absent structural change in leadership expectations for Cabinet-level positions in education, many of our best and brightest female administrators will be forced to bear leadership as a crucible of endurance rather than an enjoyable, sustainable career path. Further negative implications for recruitment and retention of female superintendents may emerge from this status quo.

Many respondents, through their own determination, demonstrated notable persistence and a desire for advancement despite experiencing some or all of the barriers discussed. The troubling point here is that their success frequently came at great personal cost— guilt, emotional and physical fatigue, and in two cases divorce— further elucidating the pattern of female normalization of overextension where women simply adapt to systems that are not designed to

engender success for them but to exclude them. These findings also posit that resilience alone is not an adequate solution, and true reform will require more than simply women networking but a true transformation of inequity-producing cultural and institutional norms.

These findings are significant in their revelation about the interplay of leadership equity and organizational justice. It is one thing for school systems and leadership stakeholders to profess a commitment to workplace equity and it is quite another to actually move the needle in terms of hiring practices and access. If our school systems honestly value student well-being, strive for excellence in instruction, and promote a trusting relationship with our communities, then the same compact must be extended to gender-based equality efforts at the top of the organization. A failure at such enshrines a constrained and narrow applicant pool for leadership, thereby compromising the very values and mission of public education.

Implications for Practice

Important implications for proactive change in educational leadership governance can be extracted from this study and supporting research, both at the district, state, and national levels. Increasing the number of female applicants in the leadership pipeline will not suffice to ameliorate the gender disparity issue as the constriction of access occurs not in the preparation of candidates, but in the hiring process. Policymakers, school boards, and professional organizations must undertake a critical analysis of the existing procedures and norms that perpetuate the issue, in particular those that feed the current standards of work-life balance for women specifically as well as hiring practices and mentorship programs. The goal must be to align the perception of leadership with the evolving realities of the talent of our educational workforce and the needs of our communities. Suggestions toward this goal are below:

Emphasize Mentorship and Networking Opportunities for Women

Efforts at the creation of mentorship opportunities specifically geared toward women in or aspiring to positions of leadership can help to foster the professional networks for upcoming superintendents that are currently largely enjoyed by our male counterparts. Female-only superintendent cohorts or statewide collaboration events may provide a path of professional guidance and an outlet for emotional support with like colleagues. Absent formal mentorship programming, female leaders may find themselves at the mercy of chance collisions and connections when studies are clear about the benefit of deliberate mentorship for women and its ability to enrich retention and advancement (Howard, Msengi, & Harris, 2017). A 2023 study by Colvard and Zaharis provides clear evidence that aspiring and new leaders' time with experienced mentors through an intentionally-structured program has the potential to transform cultures in education and ultimately break the cyclical pattern of gender-based exclusion (2023).

Qualitative research on the professional development of female superintendents illuminates the essential nature of career coaching and psychosocial guidance to help women take command of their careers within a realm of potential isolation, role ambiguity, and gender bias in male-dominated leadership structures (Kuss-Cybula, 2023). A study out of Texas included interviews with ten women superintendents who had served at least one year in their districts, focusing on the intersection of mentorship and transformational leadership qualities. Results indicated that there is a substantial contribution of mentoring opportunities toward the effective application of a transformational leadership style (Howard et al., 2017).

Female educational leaders who have access to robust mentorship pairings also enjoy the advantage of an increase in confidence, resilience, and a sense of belonging in the workplace and within the larger milieu of educational leaders, attributes which align with a leader's persistence and ultimate success (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Properly structured mentorship experiences

lead directly to the establishment of a network of professional contacts, thereby contributing to not only advancement opportunities but enhancing protective factors and stamina to counteract the effects of systemic barriers. Districts should take efforts at establishing cross-district programming for multi-year mentor partnerships.

Support Pipelines for Career Development for Female Administrators

Internal career support and intentional talent development pipelines geared toward women aspiring to Cabinet-level positions in education are a key aspect to leveling the playing field and represent direct action that can be taken by preparatory institutions and professional organizations. Targeted succession planning and meaningful access to leadership preparation are indicated by research as significant predictors of female ascension to superintendent positions and other central office leadership roles (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). This being said, there is an emerging theme in this research as well as other studies cataloging lived experiences of women in educational administration, that of the career path truncated by taking a leadership position in the areas of curriculum and instruction. A number of aspiring female leaders report subtle encouragement during their careers to pursue central office roles in the area of curriculum development and instructional practices, roles often viewed as inferior to fiscal, operational, and building-level expertise that is so frequently sought by school boards during superintendent searches (Sharp, Malone, Walter, & Supley, 2004). Of the fifteen participants in this study who possessed a Letter of Eligibility and were not superintendents, ten of them were in curriculum positions. This is supported by research from Brunner and Kim indicating that women leaders in education tend to cluster in curriculum while men tend to cluster in operations and finance (2010). Systemic “sorting” as described serves to perpetuate

gender-specific career trajectories which filters access to competencies frequently sought after in candidates for the superintendency.

Strategic partnerships between universities, state education departments, and professional associations must collaborate to ensure that women are not only prepared for the central office roles, but intentionally positioned to acquire them. Coaching programs and female-only leadership academies can work to counter the effects of the filters of bias and equip women with the necessary technical skills and interpersonal networks to attain the position (Brunner & Kim, 2010). Deliberate leadership preparation, when fused with mentoring, reveals that subjects are better adjusted to navigate the dynamics of the board and the confidence to command their roles in spite of gender bias (Howard et al., 2017).

Redefine Norms of Leadership and Reduce Subjective Hiring Practices

As long as “fit” and “presence” are accepted as valid explanations for superintendent selection, the subjective opacity of these reasons will permit male-centric hiring decisions to remain in place. A mitigation strategy for this is for school boards and hiring agencies to employ transparent, evidence-based selection criteria from applicant screening to candidate selection. There is consistent research-based evidence that subjective hiring language at every stage of the process (in particular, words such as “strong,” “visible,” and “assertive”) indicate alignment with traditionally masculine archetypes of leadership and serve to support inequity in seemingly neutral evaluations (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Wiggins & Coggins, 1986). Women candidates are at a disadvantage based on these coded judgements as they serve to validate the perception of the efficacy of historically male-favored patterns of leadership. Employing less vague and more explicit criteria will reduce the risk of reproducing hiring biases.

A study by Karla Atkinson indicts the concept of “fit” as a gatekeeping mechanism which permits and sustains systemic biases in superintendent searches. Her research and findings explicitly frame “fit” as an unconscious form of exclusion, disguised as vague terms like “professionalism” or “community alignment,” effectively eliminating candidates who do not conform to an unspoken prototype (Atkinson, 2021). Formalized, quantifiable selection rubrics with explicit criteria, protocols consisting of blind and nameless screening, and training for search teams to recognize implicit biases may help illuminate these practices and create a more mindful and inclusive selection process based on merit rather than personal comfort or alignment. Additionally, diversification of search committees to include more women and other underrepresented groups is shown to elevate fairness and redefine the norms of what competent leaders look like. Tony Bush’s research on access to the principalship with implications for the superintendency pipeline confirmed that search committees that are male-dominated tend to produce candidates that reinforce archetypal leadership paradigms, while the addition of minority groups (including females) yields a more expansive understanding of leadership competence (Bush 2022).

Enacting True Efforts at Work-Life Integration and Balance

The intense demands of school administration such as long hours, community expectations, emotional fatigue and requirements for visibility, particularly for those individuals at the top of the field, disproportionately impact women (Calegari Torres, A. J., Barbosa-Silva, L., Oliveira-Silva, L., Pérez, O., Rodrigues Guahy, U., & Fisher, A., 2024; Drake, 2023). Women who cannot conform to these rigid work structures are consistently penalized, and these systems specifically disadvantage mothers and those in advanced positions of leadership (Calegari Torres et al., 2024).

Implementation of flexible schedule options for administrators is a simple and effective way to mitigate these balance challenges and costs school districts nothing. With a cohesive administrative team, physical district and/or building coverage can be organized internally to allow for adjustments to daily work schedules as needed. Districts may also examine the feasibility of allowing hybrid or remote work options at increments and re-examining requirements for extensive after-school and evening events. School leaders should be encouraged to honor their off-duty family time and not experience pressure to answer emails and texts after the close of the workday unless an emergency situation emerges. Grogan and Shakeshaft have shown that when family-friendly practices and work-life balance are emphasized and publicly supported by school boards and high-level administrators, these priorities are seen as legitimized within the workplace culture and contribute to advancement and a sense of belonging for women (2011). When flexibility is reframed as an effort at strategic employee recruitment and retention as opposed to a convenient and unnecessary personal accommodation, meaningful organizational and cultural change can take place.

Limitations

- The identified results may only be applicable to Pennsylvania administrators and their experiences in the general area where they are currently employed or seeking employment.
- There may be a lack of generalizability to schools either not in Pennsylvania or that do not share the same demographics as the districts of the interview subjects.
- The subject of the research may have been appealing for women who are experiencing such biases, therefore potentially narrowing the respondent pool based on the strong personal feelings of prospective participants.

- This researcher is employed in the field and may have a bias based on personal experiences. This is further discussed in Chapter 3.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study shines light on the lived experiences of women in educational leadership roles within Pennsylvania public, suburban school districts, further research may expand upon this concept and widen the scope of respondents thereby enhancing the application of the aforementioned themes, namely:

- The concept could be expanded to include similar demographic regions in other states. The results of this study do not indicate patterns that span geographic areas; for example, the question remains as to whether suburban school districts of Pennsylvania (the Northeast region of the United States) share commonalities with suburban school districts in other regions of the country.
- Research comparing school districts of varied demography within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania is a logical next step in this line of inquiry. An extension of this study would be to gather respondents from multiple sectors of the PDE Urban Centric and Metro Centric Locale Codes database (those LEAs with City, Town, and Rural designations) and compare/contrast those responses with the Suburban locale code participants to gather themes about female leaders' advancement patterns in these areas.
- Opportunities exist to supplement this research by conducting intersectional analyses to delve into how identifiers such as sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic history impact career trajectory. Cross-tabbing opportunities to identify relationships between qualitative variables to determine how overlapping variables impact the aforementioned themes may help to further define areas for improvement.

- A longitudinal approach to monitoring career paths could be employed to determine if the respondents holding a SLE who were not superintendents at the time of the study do, indeed, eventually pursue and attain a superintendent position.
- There are myriad opportunities in this line of research to track career progression and associated variables including participation in a mentorship program while cataloging the gender of the mentor, as well as efficacy of preparation programming as tied to the likelihood of pursuing and attaining a superintendent position.
- This work could be extended to a two-pronged approach including an interview portion as well as a Likert-type scale wherein subjects would rate descriptors relating to the topic, followed by an attempt by the subjects to assign a value in years to time lost due to the factors described both during the interview and the rating scale.
- Related research including examining the perceptions of boards of education and other participants in the superintendent hiring process to ascertain their understanding of leadership “fit” would also benefit the larger conversation on this topic.

Conclusion

This research is intended to enhance and augment the emerging body of knowledge developing to help explain disparity in women’s leadership paths in educational administration as partially compounded by gendered systemic barriers and traditional cultural expectations. Through analysis of the lived experiences of thirty female administrators across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in their own voices, the results exposed the prevalence of inequities still entrenched in the administrative employment pipeline, the workplace experience, and off-duty obligations of home and family management. Seven themes are identified which confirm the presence of implicit gender bias, rigid institutional expectations, and a systemic preference for male-centric

career norms and leadership archetypes. Such narrowing of the superintendent applicant channels serves to impede career progression for many women and has the secondary negative effect of limiting diversity in leadership in districts' top positions.

The personal cost of career advancement for women in education is described by the prevalence of emotional fatigue, lingering self-doubt, and a work-life imbalance which favors hours spent at work in an arena which currently has few options for flexibility. Reform of these inequities will require action toward the establishment of robust mentorship programming and hiring practices based on clear expectations and not just historical vague ideas of what qualities constitute good leadership, as well as the creation of opportunities for women to develop networks of their own to promote pathways to advancement.

Appendix A

The following steps were taken to arrive at the list of potential participants:

1. The Pennsylvania Department of Education's *School Locale* page was used to locate and access the National Center for Education Statistics' "Urban/Rural Classification of Schools and LEAs" at <https://www.pa.gov/agencies/education/data-and-reporting/school-climate/school-locale.html>.
2. This document, originally accessed as an Excel sheet, was uploaded into Google Sheets to allow for easier manipulation of the information. The original list of educational entities in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania was 788 school entities prior to sorting.
3. The document was sorted alphabetically by district size classification.
4. A new tab was created with Suburban-classified only schools.
5. All non-school district entities (all CTCs, IUs, charters) were removed from the list.
6. This reduced the list to 239 school districts.
7. Using the district websites as listed, the name of the superintendent, assistant superintendent, other central office administrator(s), the high school principal, and the MS/Jr. High principals were determined.
8. Based on the names of the individual and their likely association with either the male or female gender, a preliminary determination was made as to the gender of the administrator.
9. Using the remaining names on the list, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Teacher Information Management System was accessed to search an educator's certification to determine which of the female administrators who were not listed as a superintendent or assistant superintendent actually possess a Letter of Eligibility.
10. A list was compiled of potential participants who possess a Letter of Eligibility who became a Superintendent or Assistant Superintendent and those who possess a Letter of Eligibility who are not currently employed in either of the aforementioned positions.
11. Recruitment emails were sent to the potential research subject pool depending on employment status (see Appendices B-1 and B-2).
12. Candidates were selected and interviews were scheduled and conducted.

Appendix B-1

Sample email to prospective participants currently serving in the capacity of Superintendent of Schools or Assistant Superintendent:

To: femaleadministrator@PApublicschool

Subject: Recruitment for doctoral research

Dear _____,

My name is Angela Friebohn and I am a doctoral candidate at Marywood University in Scranton, Pennsylvania in Strategic Leadership & Administrative Studies. My doctoral research will be focused on the lived experiences of women administrators in Pennsylvania suburban public school districts, specifically those who have earned a Superintendent Letter of Eligibility as endorsed by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. This research will seek to examine the internal and external barriers experienced by women in leadership and the effect these barriers have on their ability or desire to attain a position of superintendent or assistant superintendent. The working title of the study is *Women in Educational Administration: The Professional Effects of External Obligations and Internal Prejudices in the Workplace on Their Attainment of the Superintendency or Assistant Superintendency*.

The research will require two groups of women administrators holding Letters of Eligibility: those that attained the office of superintendent or assistant superintendent, and those who did not (either by choice or by circumstance). As a sitting female Superintendent of Schools or Assistant Superintendent in a public school district in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, your insight is invaluable to this area of research and your willingness to lend information about your experiences professionally related to this topic would serve to expand the current body of knowledge and understanding in this area. Should you wish to participate, kindly respond to this email in the affirmative and your name will be added to the list of potential interview subjects. Fifteen (15) women in both aforementioned categories will be selected to participate in an interview. The interview may be in-person or virtual, depending on your location in Pennsylvania.

Thank you for taking the time to read this email, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Angela Friebohn
Doctoral Candidate in SLAS
Marywood University

Appendix B-2

Sample email to prospective participants not currently serving in the capacity of Superintendent of Schools or Assistant Superintendent:

To: femaleadministrator@PApublicschool

Subject: Recruitment for doctoral research

Dear _____,

My name is Angela Friebolin and I am a doctoral candidate at Marywood University in Scranton, Pennsylvania in Strategic Leadership & Administrative Studies. My doctoral research will be focused on the lived experiences of women administrators in Pennsylvania suburban public school districts, specifically those who have earned a Superintendent Letter of Eligibility as endorsed by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. This research will seek to examine the internal and external barriers experienced by women in leadership and the effect these barriers have on their ability or desire to attain a position of superintendent or assistant superintendent. The working title of the study is *Women in Educational Administration: The Professional Effects of External Obligations and Internal Prejudices in the Workplace on Their Attainment of the Superintendency or Assistant Superintendency*.

The research will require two groups of women administrators holding Letters of Eligibility: those that attained the office of superintendent or assistant superintendent, and those who did not (either by choice or by circumstance). As a female administrator in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania who possesses your Superintendent Letter of Eligibility and is not currently serving as a Superintendent of Schools or Assistant Superintendent whether by choice or by circumstance, your willingness to lend information about your experiences professionally related to this topic would serve to expand the current body of knowledge and understanding in this area. Should you wish to participate, kindly respond to this email in the affirmative and your name will be added to the list of potential interview subjects. Fifteen (15) women in both aforementioned categories will be selected to participate in an interview. The interview may be in-person or virtual, depending on your location in Pennsylvania.

Thank you for taking the time to read this email, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Angela Friebolin
Doctoral Candidate in SLAS
Marywood University

Appendix C

Interview Questions/Protocol

These questions are structured in an open-ended format with question types from several main categories.

1. Please describe your educational background and career path, including all current and former positions held in Pennsylvania public schools.
2. Please provide demographic information about yourself, including age, marital status, and number of children if applicable.
3. Discuss and explain if/when you have worked in or with a male-centric administrative team of board of education and experienced treatment of a less respectful or accepting manner as compared to male colleagues, or if you have experienced the “boys’ club” office culture.
4. In your professional activities, discuss instances where you have felt excluded in conversations with male colleagues about historically male-centric issues, such as sports, or experienced overt gender discrimination.
5. Discuss any instances where you have been passed over for a promotion in favor of a male colleague with equal or lesser qualifications, or experienced overt gender discrimination or harassment of a gender/sexually-based nature.
6. Discuss any time when you have been asked to or made the decision to leave or discontinue working due to family obligations outside of the workplace or internal issues inside the workplace. This would encompass a reduction in hours, re-entering the

teaching field from administrative employment, or opting for a break in employment altogether because of work-life balance concerns or barriers internal to the profession.

7. Discuss any experiences which may have had a negative effect on your job or position from factors/individuals originating inside your work environment due to pregnancy, childbirth, maternity leave, or child rearing leave, or any negative interactions or effects on your job or position from the school board of education in my district subsequent to pregnancy, childbirth, maternity leave, or child rearing leave.
8. Discuss your belief as to whether or not there is sufficient time to manage the responsibilities of a position in educational administration along with your obligations to your partner, children (if applicable), and home management. This may include situations where your partner or family member has discussed your workload with you, or asked you to reduce the number of hours worked per week.
9. In general, how do you feel your career has been affected by your status as a female and your role (if applicable) as a mother and partner? Please discuss any issues where you feel gender has been a factor in your career movement.
10. Please discuss as to whether or not you feel there is adequate support for females, specifically working mothers, in the education sector. How might your career have been different if greater supports existed? What, in summary, were/are the major internal and external factors which present as barriers to career development for women?
11. Please speak openly about how you feel the internal and external barriers and factors have influenced your career path.
12. Please discuss the following: If you were able to become a Superintendent or Assistant Superintendent, why do you believe you were successful? If you did not become a

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Superintendent or Assistant Superintendent, why did you not (choice, pressure of barriers, etc.)?

13. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Appendix D



Informed Consent Form

Title: Women in Educational Administration: The Professional Effects of External Obligations and Internal Prejudices in the Workplace on Their Attainment of the Superintendency

Research Question: *What are the internal and external factors which impact women's choices and ability to obtain central office positions in educational administration, and how do those factors negatively impact women's advancement in their careers?*

Principal Investigator: Angela M. Friebolin, Doctoral Candidate at Marywood University

Principal Investigator Contact Information: **Phone** 610.248.6905

Email amfriebolin@m.marywood.edu

Research Advisor: Dr. Alan M. Levine

Email levine@maryu.marywood.edu

Invitation for a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study about the effects of external and internal factors on a female's career paths within the field of educational administration. You were chosen because you are a female administrator either at the executive district level or building level. Please read this form. Ask any questions you might have before agreeing to participate in this study.

You were identified using the Pennsylvania Department of Education's EDNA database (Educational Names and Addresses) and because you are a female administrator at either the district or building level.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to attempt to describe the effects of and influence of external factors (such as home and family obligations and uneven workload in the domicile) and internal factors (such as negative female bias as demonstrated by male leaders in the workplace) and describe the overall effects on the percentage of women in educational leadership positions.

Procedures

You will be scheduled for a personal interview where you will be asked to reflect on external and internal organizational factors which have influenced your career aspirations and upward mobility within the field of education. You will be asked to describe the impact these factors have had on your career mobility.

Risks and Benefits

The risks are no greater than the risks in daily life or activities. An unlikely risk may be that you experience unpleasant feelings or memories when recounting your experiences as a female administrator. A benefit may be that you experience a sense of relief and solidarity in the knowledge that you are not alone in experiencing workplace gender bias.

Payment or Other Rewards

You will not receive direct payment or reward for your participation in this study. All participants will have the option of having their name entered into a raffle for a gift card at the conclusion of the study. The raffle will be for a \$50 Amazon gift card and the winner will be drawn after all interviews are complete.

Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept private and confidential. Information used in any written or presented report will not make it possible to identify you. Only myself and my research advisor will have access to the research records. Records will be kept in a locked file, kept for seven years, then destroyed by combustion.

Taking Part is Voluntary

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with investigators. It will not affect your relationship with Marywood University. You may withdraw from this study at any time. There will be no penalty. To withdraw from this study, please contact the principal investigator.

Contacts and Questions

If you have any questions about this study at any time, contact the principal investigator or the advisor at the information contained herein.

Statement of Consent

By proceeding:

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

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I have read the information contained within this consent form. I have received answers to any questions if I have them. I consent to take part in this study.

Your Signature: _____ Date: _____

Your Name (printed): _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent: _____

This consent form will be kept by the researcher for five years beyond the end of the study.

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