Giving a Voice to Women in K-12 Educational Leadership:

A Narrative Analysis

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to obtain a deeper understanding of the experiences of female educational leaders in K-12 school districts. This qualitative study examined three such leaders using a series of semi-structured interviews to uncover their experiences. The narratives collected through these interviews were analyzed in order to understand their experiences and perceptions.

Five themes emerged from this study. They included: *The executive boys network*, which talked about the influence of the other dominant male educational leaders working with the women; *When I look at my reflection who do I see?*, which talked about the self doubt, and reflection, that the three female educational leaders described; *The great balancing act*, which talked about their continuous struggle to balance both work life and family life; *You’re my buddy*, which described the important relationship between leader and mentor; and *It’s a marathon not a sprint*, which described the determination that each female educational leader continued to possess.

The findings showed that women do experience gender barriers as educational leaders, but that these barriers have evolved. Instead of being outright and transparent, they have shifted to become subtler, subliminal, and hard to directly pinpoint. As a result, they are often hard for female educators to recognize or fight against. The experiences of these educational leaders showed both the positive and the negative aspects of women’s experience today as leaders in the K-12 system.

*Keywords:* Female Educational Leader, Gender Stratification, Invisible Barrier, Mentor
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Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... 2
Acknowledgments .......................................................................................................................... 3
Chapter 1: Statement of the Problem ............................................................................................. 6
  Justification for the Research Problem .................................................................................. 7
  Deficiencies in the Evidence ........................................................................................................ 11
  Audiences .................................................................................................................................... 12
  Significance of the Problem ........................................................................................................ 12
  Positionality Statement ............................................................................................................... 15
  My Background ........................................................................................................................... 15
  Biases, Marginalization, and Beliefs .......................................................................................... 16
  Challenges ................................................................................................................................... 17
Conclusion ....................................................................................................................................... 17
Research Questions ....................................................................................................................... 18
Problem of Practice ....................................................................................................................... 18
Central Question ............................................................................................................................. 18
Rationale for the Question .............................................................................................................. 18
Theoretical Framework ................................................................................................................... 19
Feminist Standpoint Theory .......................................................................................................... 19
Theoretical Summary ..................................................................................................................... 20
Summary ......................................................................................................................................... 21
Chapter 2: Literature Review ........................................................................................................ 22
  The Current State of Women in Leadership ............................................................................. 23
  Historical Perceptions ............................................................................................................... 24
  Outside Perceptions .................................................................................................................. 28
    Social Construction ................................................................................................................... 28
    Gender Socialization ................................................................................................................ 29
    Leadership Traits ...................................................................................................................... 30
  Self Perceptions ......................................................................................................................... 35
    Family Life ................................................................................................................................ 36
    Glass Ceiling ............................................................................................................................ 37
  Mentors ......................................................................................................................................... 38
    Finding the Right Mentor ......................................................................................................... 39
    Mentor Pushback ....................................................................................................................... 42
Summation ........................................................................................................................................ 42
Chapter 3: Research Design ........................................................................................................... 44
Methodology .................................................................................................................................... 44
  Qualitative Approach .................................................................................................................. 44
  Constructivist Paradigm .............................................................................................................. 45
Research Design ............................................................................................................................... 45
Research Tradition .......................................................................................................................... 46
  Narrative Inquiry ......................................................................................................................... 46
  Critique of Narrative Study ......................................................................................................... 48
Chapter One

Statement of Problem

As I am writing this, I can say I am very lucky to be a woman today. I do not live in the world of my mother or my grandmother, when choices for women were so limited. However, gender equality has not yet been achieved for women in the workplace (Anderson & Klofstad, 2012). While I may not be facing the exact same struggles as past generations, as a woman looking for an educational leadership position, I have been facing many limitations due to my gender. My experience is not uncommon. In fact, there is a significant gender gap in educational leadership today. K-12 school districts in the United States have a notable and growing absence of women in educational administrative leadership positions (Glass, 2000; Litmanovitz, 2011). While female educators have come a long way in society, they have not come far enough.

Sadly, while women predominate in the teaching force, they remain marginally represented in top-level positions in K-12 school districts, where most of the authority and the best salaries lie (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). For example, of America’s almost 14,000 school district superintendents, roughly 15 percent (approximately 2,000) are women (Glass, 2000). More specifically, high school and middle schools have the fewest female principals, as approximately 44 percent of public school principal positions are filled by women (Snyder & Dillow, 2011; Litmanovitz, 2011). It is evident that as the “leadership positions rise in stature and power, the number of women leaders declines” (Arlton & Davis, 1993, p. 95).

The fact that women are not represented in educational leadership does not mean they are not qualified. In fact, a multitude of evidence indicates women are capable, resilient leaders, effective teachers and administrators, hard workers, knowledgeable, and interested in the professional development of holding leadership positions (Grogan & Brunner 2005; Shakeshaft,
1989; Tallerico & Tingley, 2001). Moreover, statistics show that 67% of doctoral degrees in educational leadership are earned by women (Branch-Brioso, 2009). The disparity between who is leading schools and who is teaching the students is clear, as most teachers (72%) are women (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The profession “most occupied by, and known as a ‘women’s profession’ continues to be led by men” (Glass, 2000). Women may be leaders in their own classrooms as teachers, but they are not getting the administrative roles that allow them to advance further into the educational leadership stratosphere. Men continue to control the most coveted leadership positions throughout the profession of education.

This discrepancy signifies that more research is needed in order to understand why women are so underrepresented in the educational leadership sector, and learn from the few women who are leaders in the profession. The gender gap in educational leadership needs to be understood on a deeper level, as the gap is increasing. Educators are often looked at as role models. Therefore, the educational system needs to set the tone and show society, especially young people, that women and men deserve an equal place at the head of the metaphorical educational leadership table.

Thus the purpose of this study was to understand the stories of female educational leaders in a particular school district in order to uncover their experiences as women in K-12 leadership positions.

**Justification for the Research Problem**

Research that examines gender-related issues that arise for women in educational leadership positions provides insight into the reasons behind this gender stratification. The absence of women leaders in education truly hinders the educational system on many levels. There is also a loss for women on personal, professional, and financial levels (Blount, 1998,
Women who deserve to be leaders in education suffer because the district will not hire them, and when they do, they find it difficult to withstand the obstacles that are attached to being a woman in a leadership role.

A recent study explained that when women have little chance of being hired over men, and when a woman is the only candidate in a pool of men, “her odds of being hired is statistically zero.” (Johnson, Hekman, & Chan, 2016). Women do not even get a chance to prove their effectiveness or show off their qualifications, as they cannot get hired.

Women are not the only people who feel the impact of gender bias in education. The communities and school districts also suffer when they have an unspoken expectation of selecting a male candidate, as it limits their pool of possible leaders (Blount, 1999; Coleman, 2005; Meier, 2002; Tallerico & Blount, 2004). Instead, the community could be benefitting from the contribution of exceptionally qualified female representatives, giving districts more options and diversity (Björk, 2000; Blount, 1998, 1999; Criswell & Betz, 1995).

Gender bias in educational leadership also impedes students’ education, as they learn about gender through communities that replicate stereotypical career and leadership norms (Barnett, 2004; Eckman, 2004; Gilbert & Rader, 2001; Ridgeway, 2001; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Whitaker & Lane, 1990). In general, when school districts abide by stereotypical gender norms in educational administration, society suffers deeply by limiting influences on our civilization (Adkison, 1981; Blount, 1999; Grogan, 1999, 2000; Ridgeway, 2001; Whitaker & Lane, 1990; Young & McLeod, 2001). Students need to see people of both genders in power positions, as gender balance in leadership not only expands perspectives and styles in schools, it also provides opportunities for students to witness men and women working together to lead the school. Before
students enter the work force and become members of society, it is vital for both genders to experience this balance in order to give them “leverage to challenge the gender structure of the workplace” (Gilbert & Rader, 2001, p. 162). In order to start this paradigm shift, greater understanding of the dynamics that female leaders encounter is critical. One way to create this understanding is to document the histories of female leaders. Providing information about the nature of their careers and personal narratives allows for empathy.

The need for research that represents women and is from the perspective of women is not a new phenomenon. Even though significant research explores gender discrepancy in educational leadership, it continues to be an issue on a national level (Bahn, 2014). The literature has illustrated that corporate women are overrepresented at the bottom and underrepresented at the top (Kellerman & Rhode, 2004). In fact, despite their educational qualifications, the best-trained women are still in inferior positions compared to their male counterparts. They are in jobs with less pay, status, and power (Kellerman & Rhode, 2004). In addition, various studies have demonstrated how women and men are treated differently in leadership roles. Multiple studies have shown that women are held to a higher standard and judged more harshly than men, and when it comes to leadership, women have to work twice as hard to prove themselves and that their performance is based on ability (Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997).

Studies also have shown that individuals give varying judgments about identical leadership behaviors depending on whether those behaviors come from a man or a woman (Boldry, Wood, & Kashy, 2001). However, these studies also showed that when asked directly, both men and women deny or do not realize the bias that is present (Boldry et al., 2001). While previous studies provided insight into factors contributing to the barriers women face, there is still a need to go into greater depth in order to gain a better, more detailed understanding.
Therefore, there clearly is a need for more research to be conducted, as the gender bias in this situation has not changed. Society needs to be able to visualize and picture in real detail what women leaders encounter so it can grasp the reality of the situation. Kellerman and Rhode (2004) explained that generalizing the struggles of women leaders using sweeping statistics may not reach every person, but showing the injustice on a small level, showing one person’s struggles or story, will have more impact as it provides details that appeal to humanity.

This narrative study sought to provide the deeper analysis that was missing from research, as it gave female participants the opportunity to tell their experiences in leadership positions. The narratives exposed the human side of a difficult phenomenon that plagues so many women in education. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) stated that a narrative study shows “how human beings make meaning of experience by endlessly telling and retelling stories about themselves that both refigure the past and create purpose in the future” (p. 24). This study aimed to provide rich information that may better describe the journey of educational leadership for women. The goal of this study was to illustrate the success of female leaders in education, as well as to illuminate some of the challenges they face. As a result, this study may have an impact on the future of women leaders.

This narrative study was important to conduct because it may help change the gender imbalance in educational leadership. Changing this gender imbalance will ultimately benefit not only women who wish to be administrators, but also the students and community members who benefit from diverse leadership. The narrative stories gained from this study may connect with other leaders and future leaders and suggest ways other districts can improve their environment and training programs. Moreover, it may also inspire society by putting a face to the statistics. For example, when readers see examples of what happened to these specific women and what
they went through as women and educational leaders, it may start to create a better understanding, which will ultimately benefit future female educational leaders.

**Deficiencies in the Evidence**

The world has been studied from the perspectives of men, who have often ignored the way women see and experience the world (Bernard, 1973; Neuman, 2000; Smith, 1998). Women have essentially been second-class citizens when it comes to research, and there is little examination of how gender-specific issues influence the lives of women (Maynard, 1994). According to Grogan (1996), more studies need to be conducted from a perspective that focuses on our understanding of the meaning of leadership experiences to the women involved. This means that narrative stories which detail the experiences of women need to be heard, thereby giving female leaders a voice. The women who were interviewed in this study were experts in their own stories, and in educational leadership, and as a result they were able to detail their accomplishments, their barriers, and truly show what it is like to be a woman in educational leadership today and over time.

Moreover, they were able to capture the experiences, feelings, and perspectives of women in educational leadership in the most realistic way. One way to create change and tolerance is for the educational realm to understand what female educational leaders go through. After these women detailed their narratives, their lives, and their experiences, there will perhaps be a more open discussion in the future. More specifically, narrative studies allow the researcher to capture a more detailed description so audiences can understand the experiences of these women through specific examples. For example, these educational leaders were able to speak about their lives in great detail from childhood through their current experiences in a district, which allowed the reader to view the entire picture and narrative of a woman in educational
leadership. As a result, the research connected to audiences as they are able to go through the experiences and imagine what it would be like to be in the participants’ situation. Using anecdotal data brought relatability to a significant problem.

**Audiences**

The audiences for this study were the stakeholders in the educational realm, such as other administrators (both female and male), teachers and future teachers, administration educators, and even students. This data this research generated is important for current and future administrators well as for any programs that promote educational leadership. Educational leadership programs may institute new training initiatives and districts may make new policies based on the findings or experiences that female leaders discussed. This may also affect students, as they may benefit from diverse leadership. Education sets the tone for real life, and when students see women leading the district, they can see them as models for future endeavors. This research may improve female leaders’ self-perception, as well as the perceptions of others on a national, state, and local level.

**Significance of the Problem**

The data generated from this research could start to allow women to voice their self-perception and outside biases. As other female leaders read the participants’ narratives, they may be inspired to describe and celebrate their own journeys and discuss any barriers that they face as women in leadership positions, just like the participants were able to do. Women leaders may start to feel a connection with the participants’ stories, and it may give them hope and a feeling of recognition. In addition, the results of this narrative study can help other leaders (female and male) with stereotypical societal perceptions. Interestingly, many women often do not even recognize when they are victims of gender bias because of the subliminal nature of the inequality
that exists within society (Ely, Ibarra, & Holb, 2011). However, after they listen to the experiences of another female educational leader, they may start to recognize the situations as familiar to themselves. We need to increase our understanding of these women and their experiences in order to better interpret the role of women in leadership positions.

Grogan (1996) explained that research needs to start focusing on women’s experiences, and hearing about experiences from the perspective of women leads to understanding. Grogan (1996) went on to say that so many women are trying to fit the role of male leader that they try to hide their difficult journeys instead of shining light on them. Only when women speak up will the societal paradigm start to shift as it recognizes a problem that so many women try to deny or hide. Therefore, hearing from women and learning from the participants’ stories may have created an open and authentic space for learning (Grogan, 1996).

While the number of women in the workforce is increasing on a national level, and more women than men are attending graduate school, earning 58.8% of graduate degrees, only 14% are corporate leaders and 2% are CEOs of Fortune 500 companies (Litmanovitz, 2011; Prime, Carter, & Welbourne, 2009). More specifically, in terms of women in educational leadership, there is still a large gap. Litmanovitz (2011) explained that only 44% of principals are women and only 17 women are state superintendents” (p. 76). Understanding women leaders in education is important in order to change these statistics. Women’s experiences need to be heard, and a light needs to be shinned on the barriers they face in order for society to gain a deeper understanding of the gender gap in educational leadership. The educational realm cannot help female leaders if it does not understand what is happening.

A narrative qualitative study that examined the stories of women who are currently leading a district may affect women struggling with their own identity. After reading the study,
people may be able to connect to these women and their stories and be able to put themselves in their shoes, creating empathy. In fact, it may help other female leaders or aspiring leaders gain and develop new techniques to overcome their own obstacles and isolation, as many female leaders feel as if “they are the only ones with these issues” and often feel “ashamed, secluded, and misunderstood” (Jones & Palmer, 2011).

Moreover, this study may affect perceptions in society. After hearing the experiences that these women leaders have gone through on a daily basis, both genders can come together to recognize the stigma that women leaders face. In fact, women who exhibited the same behaviors as men were judged less favorably than men (Boldry, 2001). There needs to be awareness of the fact that women in educational leadership roles face different barriers than men due to the outside perceptions that are causing this gender gap. In addition, many of these outside perceptions are ingrained in both women and men. Therefore, an inside glimpse into these struggles can help bring the issues to the forefront. Looking down the road, if these issues continue, there may be a need for new policies in order to help women continue to be successful in leadership positions, such as female mentors and leadership learning groups. Wendy Kopp, the founder and CEO of Teach For America, suggests that the gender gap is based on the fact that schools are shoving these issues under the rug rather than discussing them (Litmanovitz 2011).

New classes at the university level, and in masters programs, may be required in order to bring awareness to the concern.

This study may allow readers to gain a detailed understanding of the experiences that female leaders encountered, as well as how they overcame or coped with some of these obstacles. Readers can gain a new understanding of what it means to be a woman, a leader, and a
woman leader. As a result, readers will expand their understanding of the barriers these women leaders face, which may make a difference in leadership going forward.

**Positionality Statement**

Gender always interested me. Understanding the differences that gender plays in society motivated me on many levels. For example, as an English major I researched the ways that young adult literature portrayed female protagonists, and as a teacher it impacts the novels I read to my class and the discussions we have. As my research shifted to education, gender has been ever present in my daily life. For example, gender has now become an issue as I start to move into administration. As a young woman looking for a position in administration, my age is brought up often in interviews and amongst staff.

Therefore, gender and administration sparked my interest. Positionality is often grounded on the experiences of the researcher, and connected to past understandings that can include “demographic positioning within society, one’s ideological positioning” (Briscoe, 2005, p. 32). My personal experiences, interactions, background, and identity have led me to my research and inspired me to become a change agent in this area of study.

**My Background**

I am the epitome of the single white female. I grew up in an affluent town, in a loving single parent home where I received a quality education, and was given every advantage to pursue my dreams and goals. The main influence in my life has always been my mother, who afforded me every opportunity to explore sports, after school programs, camps, and even travel. Growing up she was a strong, independent woman, who personified courage and leadership. As a result, I grew up with a model of a female leader, which has been a source of inspiration. My household was very focused on education and exploration. Early on, I discovered my love of
literature, and majored in secondary education and English in college. I was able to get a
teaching job right out of college, go on to earn my master’s degree, and then pursue a doctoral
degree. Therefore I will obtain a doctorate at the young age of 28.

My upbringing and relationship with my mother allowed me many privileges and experiences. Yet, these experiences also create biases. Due to my background, I am very driven and passionate. I am outspoken, and being raised by a strong single mother, I often come from a feminist perspective, in which I am aware of the struggles and gender constructs that exist within our society. Even with my degrees and my experience, as a young woman striving to be in a leadership role I find it hard to be taken seriously. I am often overlooked and not afforded the same opportunities as my male counterparts. As a result, this study had some personal attachments.

**Biases, Marginalization, and Beliefs**

As a young female who has experienced bias in leadership, I have a personal attachment to this topic. Machi and McEvoy (2012) explained that having a personal stake in a topic can lead to bias, and that bias needs to be controlled by acknowledging it. Banks (1993) pointed out that total objectivity is an “unattainable goal,” and that “strong objectivity” is more realistic (p. 63). Understanding some of my personal feelings drawn from my experiences allowed me to help harness that bias.

Moreover, due to my upbringing and my personality, I had the opportunity to explore my identity, and have been rewarded for my own risks, determination, and dreams. As a result, I have failed often, but have learned that it is a part of a journey, which has allowed me to have a true sense of self. Therefore, it can be hard for me to understand someone who struggles with perseverance or self-perception, or who develops the imposter syndrome that often affects so
many female leaders (Bahn, 2014). Moreover, much research has stated that female administrators feel guilty leaving their children and not fulfilling the “female” wife role (Bahn, 2014). I am neither a wife nor a mother, and therefore did not want to bring any of my opinions into the process, which would misconstrue the data by making my participants the “other.” As Briscoe (2005) explained, “These misinterpretations occur because one always brings one’s history, experiences, and categories to bear when trying to understand new situations” (p. 5). In order to gain a true understanding of my data, I tried to remain as neutral as possible.

Challenges

Some of the challenges I faced with my study came from my own personal bias. In terms of the research questions, I had an idea of what I hoped my research would yield because I had my own answers to the questions I asked my participants. However, I realized that this was not my story, and that every female leader had her own personal story and vantage point. I could not in any way allow this to set the tone or twist the answers given by my participants. In fact, Machi and McEvoy (2012) explained that the researcher has to have no predetermined conclusions and rely on evidence. I kept this in mind when conducting my research.

Conclusion

Understanding what makes female leaders successful was an important undertaking. I wanted to make sure I handled it with care, and took the necessary steps to ensure that my research was thorough. Ravitch and Riggan (2012) explained that one’s personal experiences influence one’s decisions and are the motivation for seeking knowledge. In the end my own experiences led me to this study. The stories gained from this study have the power to inspire educators and future leaders and affected me on many levels. As Takacs (2002) explained, “we must understand how we are positioned in relation to others… and from this understanding we
have power to change ourselves (p. 169). This research aimed to help leaders and the educational community. In order to gain the best possible understanding, I had to be aware of my positionality throughout this process.

**Research Questions**

**Problem of Practice**

In education today, there is a significant gender gap for women in educational leadership positions (Cullen & Luna, 1993; Glass, 2000; Litmanovitz, 2011; Synder & Dillow, 2012). Therefore, this study sought to understand the stories of women leaders in a particular school district in order to uncover their experiences as women in K-12 leadership positions.

**Central Question**

- How do women, as women, understand their experiences in educational leadership?

**Rationale for the Question**

The gender gap in female leadership in the educational system is not closing, but rather is continuing to grow (Litmanovitz, 2011). As a result, it is imperative to learn about the experiences of successful female leaders in education in order to understand their perspectives on being a woman and an educational leader today. Hearing the stories of other female educational leaders may have many benefits such as understanding the issues that women face as female educational leaders, how female educational leaders handle barriers and even overcome them, and how those experiences now shape them going forward as a leader. The insight generated in this study could bring a deeper understanding of the gender gap in female administration, of the perception of female leaders, and also of how female leaders are treated and what inspired them to continue leading the district. The stories the female educational leaders shared could change education into a more balanced environment. As a result it may create workplaces to “lean into,”
where women work and learn in an environment conducive for advancement, one for growing leaders rather than stifling them (Sandberg, 2013). Female educational leaders will be able to share their accomplishments and detail their experiences so others can see their viewpoint, allowing new meaning to be formed.

The goal of the central question was to dig deep into the narratives of female educational leaders who currently held leadership positions, in order to learn about their experiences. In doing so, each woman was able to detail her journey as a female educational leader, which included positive experiences and obstacles, as well as some ways in which they were able to overcome those trials and tribulations. Understanding the stories of these female educational leaders may now allow other women to connect with them, and to make a change moving forward based on these narratives and experiences. This may give other women the mentor they never had, but needed, as they may today be facing issues similar to what these women faced and shared. When others read how leaders were successful, it will in turn motivate others (Dweck, 1986). Understanding both the positive and negative experiences, struggles, and obstacles of female leaders may help the educational realm create new interpretations, which may ultimately make the gender gap smaller.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Standpoint Theory

The study used the theoretical lens informed by feminist standpoint theory (Hartstock, 1983). The foundational theorists who encouraged the importance of women’s lived experiences (especially in the work place) include Butler (1990), Connell (1995, 2002), Harding (2004), Hartsock (1983), and Smith (1974 1990, 1998). There is a need to hear the stories of female educational leaders from the women themselves in order to truly experience and understand the
underrepresentation of women. Feminist standpoint theory had key elements that framed this research study: the knowledge is situated, the viewpoints from oppressed groups are more dependable and less biased than those from the dominant groups, and this perspective offers important understandings that would be overlooked by the dominant group (Harding, 2004; Hartsock, 1983).

Feminist research aims to understand the world in ways that may be obstructed by dominant conceptual frameworks in our culture (Harding, 2004) in order to then reconstruct a world where women are not secondary (Jaggar, 1983). As a result, this creates a shift in paradigm. In addition, feminist standpoint theory focuses on empowering the oppressed, while making them aware that their experiences are valued (Collins, 1989; Sandoval, 1991). Therefore, in relation to this study, it not only demonstrated that women have to live by different standards than their male counterparts, but it also promoted awareness of gender equality, and showed that women’s stories have value.

**Theoretical Summary**

Feminist standpoint theory aims to give oppressed groups a voice. This theory empowers women, understanding that when they are given a platform to speak, only then will oppression change. This theory realizes that knowledge is situated: oppressed groups (women leaders in this case) are more dependable in their observations and stories, as they are the ones experiencing these situations, and that their perspective offers important understandings that should be heard. This theory was used to guide the research, as the female educational leaders expressed their ideas, thoughts, and experiences, which then may give a voice to so many other women going through the same struggles. This study exposed many barriers that women leaders face, allowing the dominant group a bird’s eye view of what the oppressed group faces on a daily basis.
Summary

This chapter focused on the problem of practice, positionality statement, research questions, and theoretical framework in regards to the gender struggles of women in educational leadership. Qualitative research, from a feminist standpoint, created new and deeper findings and understandings of female leaders that can be applied to educational leadership programs.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

The world of education is in a constant state of transformation and improvement. Adapting to change makes education more effective. The education of women, who comprise half of the population and have a key role in raising future generations, is a significant prerequisite for adapting to these changes (Kosar, Altunay, & Yalcinkaya 2014). At all levels of society, from past to present, when women and men have been working together the contributions women have made have not been valued to the same extent (Kosar, Altunay, & Yalcinkaya 2014). The gender gap for women in higher-level positions in education is currently increasing rather than declining, and is expected to only grow (Litmanovitz, 2011). Moreover, successful female leaders face tremendous gender-specific obstacles in their profession.

Research has suggested that gender-related factors affect women’s entry and advancement within school leadership to the point that they often hinder their ability to be effective leaders in a district (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Grogan & Brunner 2005; Shakeshaft, 1999; Valian, 1999). In fact, literature has demonstrated that gender stratification among administrators is exemplified by comparing the high number of female teachers to the low number of female administrators (Ortiz & Marshall, 1988). More specifically, the issue is illustrated in K-12 leadership, where women comprise only 15 percent of the nation’s superintendents (Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Synder & Dillow, 2012) while being 75 percent of the nation’s teaching force (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Even though women are appointed to administrator positions and, on average, are more qualified and experienced than men (Tabin & Coleman, 1993), women remain underrepresented in leadership roles, particularly as high school principals and superintendents (Grogan & Brunner 2005; Shakeshaft, 1999).
The gender gap is a significant problem in K-12 leadership because women feel that they are inferior and, more importantly, when women do step into the leadership role they are isolated rather than supported (Litmanovitz, 2011). However, despite the knowledge, research, and studies done on the factors that have led to this gender gap, it continues to be an issue on a national level. Cullen and Luna (1993) suggested that the gender gap in educational administration may have seemed like it is getting better, but it was actually continuing to increase and get more difficult for women. Therefore, hearing from current female leaders who went through obstacles and have experience in overcoming gender bias will be valuable for the educational leadership realm.

The goal of this study was to understand the stories of female educational leaders in a particular school district in order to uncover their experiences as female leaders in the K-12 educational system. Specific themes emerged from the literature review that shows there is a continuing need to study the stories of female leaders. This literature review is organized into these themes with the following streams: current state of women, historical influences, outside perceptions, self-perceptions, and mentors.

**The Current State of Women in Leadership**

The presence of women in the workforce has increased in the last 30 years, however their presence in educational leadership positions has only recently begun to rise and is still not on par with their percentage in the workplace (Litmanovitz 2011.) This is especially noticeable in education, as there are far more women educators than men, yet men still dominate educational leadership positions. While the number of women in the workforce is increasing and more women than men are enrolled in graduate school, “76% of teachers in the United States are women, but only 50% of women are principals and only fifteen women are state
superintendents” (Litmanovitz, 2011, p. 76). Also, while more women than men earn higher-level degrees, the average pay in academe for men is $42,629, but for women it is only $33,936 (Cullen & Luna, 1993). Munoz, Pankake, Ramalho, Mills, and Simonsson (2014) explained that although women tend to outnumber men significantly in the role of classroom teacher, women have fewer opportunities in leadership positions. Therefore, one might ask, why are women in education not hired into leadership positions?

While gender is not a predictor of success, research suggested that the gender gap in educational leadership comes down to historical influences, outside perceptions, and self-perception (Prime et al., 2009). These hinder women from pursuing leadership roles, which makes the gender gap wider. Addressing and debunking these misconceptions may help change this issue.

**Historical Perceptions**

In order to understand the inequalities that exist and affect women today, it is important to examine the historical context of women in teaching and administration. The history of women and women in teaching is critical to understanding the barriers that currently exist. Societal perceptions, along with previous historical beliefs, have led to the current gender bias in educational leadership. Women began taking on certain gender stereotypical roles early as the 19th century:

Women did not vote or hold public position, nor did they own property, as they transferred all inherited goods to their husbands. Of course, they were not allowed to trade or have their own business, or exercise many professions, or obtain credit. The civil and penal codes considered them minors before the law. (Chinchilla & Leon, 2005 p. 8)
Women were looked at as children, never allowed to make their own decisions. Thus, when women were afforded employment it was by default and not under equal or fair conditions. For example, in the early 1800s, ministers’ wives began teaching children from the ages of four to seven. However, these women were only paid one-fifth of what men earned because they were viewed as not equally qualified (Stern, 1973). Women were only able to teach due to a technicality.

Between 1820 and 1830, teaching was recognized as a profession, and therefore a certification was required (Shakeshaft, 1999). As a result, men started to leave the profession, as they did not want to go through that process. Thus, the teaching profession became available to women (Shakeshaft, 1999). Moreover, the rationale for women obtaining these positions was that society believed it was a natural place for women as it dealt with children and would prepare them for motherhood (Sklar, 1973). Women were allowed to work, as long as it was within the confines of the perceptions of appropriate gender roles.

As a result, women were mainly in the teaching profession, but that did not mean they could advance. In fact, between 1820 and 1900, there were only a few female administrators in the public education system. In many areas, women were restricted from being administrators, and those that were often had founded their own schools (Giddings, 1984; Solomon, 1985). This was because women were seen as incapable of using discipline to maintain order since they lacked strength and status (Shakeshaft, 1999). Next, the bureaucratization of schools created a hierarchy in the school system. Prior to this establishment, teachers were doing everything at the school. Once the hierarchy was in place, it would have made sense for women to get those positions, as they were the ones with the most experience. However, men took on the
administrative roles while the women remained teachers (Tyack, 1974). While teaching children was a suitable role for women, being leaders was not.

Ginn (1989) discussed this phenomenon, explaining that male administrators increased during the 1950s and 60s, and it was a natural progression as they were seen in society as war heroes who could handle leadership positions. While the bureaucratization of schools may have created some stability, it certainly did not allow women the option to move upward in the system (Ginn, 1989). At this time women were put into their domesticated place.

Women realized that they were not getting fair treatment and fought for their equal rights. The suffrage movement was a significant moment for women. In order to gain the right to vote, women worked very hard to be recognized, and anticipated gaining more responsibilities in the labor market. While women tried to make significant strides in gaining more administrative roles, it just did not happen. Women who were obtaining administrator positions at this time were only doing if that either a man did not want the job or boards wanted to pay less money (National Education Association, 1905). Cullen and Luna (1993) explained that women had been put into specific job-type categories based on their gender, and noted, “women have worked in sex-typed occupations such as teaching, nursing, and secretarial positions in substantial numbers since the early 1900s…advancement into the male hierarchy was non-existent” (Cullen & Luna, 1993, p.126). Even in the 1960s, when there were educational and legal reforms, women may have increased in the workforce but still were stuck at “lower and mid-managerial levels” and therefore it was hard for them to break that outside perception of where women should be in the workplace (Cullen & Luna, 1993, p.128). Women who were getting hired were not being respected, but rather were hired to keep the dominant group in place. Women’s groups fought
hard for their right to vote but without support and recognition from the dominant group, they suffered along with support for women in administration (Gribskov, 1980).

These historical influences impact female leadership today. Cunanan (1994) suggested that in the past, women had been inadequately prepared for administrative positions, which then hindered them for many generations. Within educational administrations of the past, women were neither recruited nor offered the financial support necessary to allow them to graduate, even though graduate education had been found to be essential for those women who aspired to be leaders in the field of education (Cunnan, 1994). Glass, Bjork, & Brunner (2000) concluded that advanced degrees were more important for women than for men wishing to achieve higher –level positions. Yet despite the increase, the number of women in administrator positions did not increase proportionately (Glass, Bjork, Brunner, 2000).

Ehrenreich and English (1978) explained that “The Woman Question” was ever-present in the educational realm and even though it was presented long ago, it still is relevant today:

The Woman Question in the end is not the question of women. It is not we who are the problem and it is not our needs, which are the mystery. From our subjective perspective (denied by centuries of masculinist “science” and analysis), the Woman Question becomes the question of how shall we all—women and children and men—organize our lives together. This is a question, which has no answer in the marketplace or among the throng of experts who sell their wisdom there. And this is the only question. (1978, p. 323)

The question “...how shall we all... organize our lives together?” explained that everyone needed to work together in order to understand that women were still being marginalized. Moreover, it
implied a collaborative approach to living together, one that conflicted with inequitable social and economic realities that were supported by our historical dominant gender traditions.

The historical struggles that women have faced clearly impact female administrators today. Women start at a historical disadvantage, and they are still catching up. The historical perception has not diminished, and continues to influence outside perceptions of women leaders today.

Outside Perceptions

Social Construction

The history of women has influenced current external perceptions of women in leadership today, as it has created a social construction of gender. The social construction of gender affects organizations and institutions. These are “concealed processes that subtly and latently produce and reproduce gender distinctions” (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998, p. 787). While sex (male vs. female) is defined biologically, society determines the characteristics of masculinity and femininity. Society decides who exemplifies these characteristics and how gender is expected to be expressed socially by each individual (Connell, 2002). The social construction of gender significantly affects women who pursue and advance in educational leadership roles because society has deemed femininity as not meant for leadership, while masculinity is (Connell, 2002). This means that women are seen to possess specific feminine traits that are not amenable to leadership.

Gilenstam, Karp, and Henriksson-Larsen (2008) discussed the influence of social constructions of gender using three different levels of society. The first is the symbolic level, which is a “set of qualities that we associate with a group of people” (p. 237). On this level, women are seen to have more nurturing traits associated with motherhood. The second level is
how personal experiences affect the formation of identity (Gilenstam et al., 2008). Often the first experience that people have with women is through their own experiences with their mother, so that shapes their thought process. Finally, the third level of society is the structural level, which is defined as “how power and social structure affect the distributions of resources and privileges of both sexes” (Gilenstam et al., 2008, p. 237). As already noted, men were always seen as the head of the household, providing for their families, and in the lead role of power. These three levels of how society views gender exemplify how right from the start women in leadership roles are set up to have barriers to overcome.

**Gender Socialization**

Social construction often comes from gender socialization as young children. For example, Heim (1992) researched the games children play and how these games help girls and boys develop social and leadership skills and how it structures society’s perceptions of men and women. She explained that when girls are young they play with dolls and other relational games that allow them to develop interdependence and relational skills at an early age. These games allow all participants to give their input. As a result, the way that little girls play games translates directly into their interactions with others, and ultimately affects their leadership style (Helgesen, 1990; Klenke, 1996). Women are socialized to achieve goals as a group and therefore, it is only when the group has achieved the goals that success is actualized in a woman’s brain (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997). This is another reason why women are socially constructed to have those motherly traits: they are raised to think of everyone, of nurturing everyone, and therefore society perceives them that way and they perceive themselves that way. This also means that women are more prone to looking for outside acceptance, and will act for
the “good of the group.” They are more likely to change themselves if it meant the group will be rewarded. These outside perceptions impact the way women lead.

Heim (1992) further observed that boys, on the other hand, grow up playing competitive games where there is a winner and a loser, allowing for clearly defined goals. Games such as war and even team sports are some examples of how men are socialized to be winners at the cost of others. As a result, men place greater reliance on their own abilities and their own goals. Even in team sports, individuals are rewarded for their own statistics. Often in male sports, the team may get the trophy, but the individual is rewarded for the best game (Heim, 1992). As a result, males are almost bred to think that they are the most effective leaders, and if they are not, they would compete to make sure they become the best.

In the United States, men were rewarded for their individual abilities and actions (Helgesen, 1990). This was due to the fact that men were socialized to achieve goals individually, which correlated with traditional leadership styles where men were the leaders who had the power (Nidiffer & Bashaw, 2001). This model of leadership persisted for decades and continued to present challenges for women leaders (Nidiffer & Bashaw, 2001; Litmanovitz 2011). Gender socialization trained children from a very young age about the norms of gender. Males were trained to take the lead and were rewarded for their leadership, while females were rewarded for their sharing behaviors. As a result, this created specific, distinct leadership traits that classified males as appropriate leaders, and females as appropriate caretakers.

**Leadership Traits**

Social construction led women to be categorized as having certain feminine traits that are not conducive to a traditional leader role, yet are believed to be associated with men: “task oriented, ability to take command/control, autocratic decision making” (Prime et al., 2009). As a
result, it is assumed that women cannot lead well, since they do not possess those natural masculine traits. Society created these specific gender perceptions about the roles men and women should play, which hinders women’s chances of getting into leadership positions (Prime, 2009). These specific gender roles allow individuals to develop gender schemata, which include expectations about how males and females are supposed to look, feel, and behave. These stereotypes present challenges for women leaders, as the characteristics associated with leadership were historically masculine (Nidiffer & Bashaw, 2001). A woman in a leadership role is incongruous with schemata. These outside perceptions then lead women to try and change their leadership style or their femininity.

For example, while leadership today is seen as more contextual, situational, and relationship based, stereotypical traits are still associated with women. When directly asked who the good leaders were in their workplace, the majority reverted to the old paradigm, choosing those individuals who had strong masculine traits (Kawakami, White, & Langer, 2000). This led to the gender role congruency hypothesis: when women try to embody “masculine” traits as leaders, they are not trusted because they are perceived as not being authentic (Kawakami et al., 2000). Kimmel (2004) agreed, stating that “workplaces are both gender conforming and confirming for males but nonconforming and disconfirming for women” (p. 185). Men thrived in professional organizations when they portrayed their masculine characteristics, whereas women tried to minimize their feminine characteristics and adopt male values to achieve gender equality and hope of advancing in leadership roles (Bell & Chase, 1995). Yet this caused women to be seen as fake or unlikeable because they were not “themselves.”

Trying to flip the stereotypical gender roles often caused issues because women were then seen as violating the respective roles (Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, 1995). Eagly and Karau
(2002) explained that society expects each gender to play a very specific part—this is called congruity theory. This theory specifically applies to female leaders, stating that “social role theorists argue that leaders occupy roles defined by their specific position in a hierarchy and simultaneously function under the constraints of their gender roles” (p. 574). Society expects women to have certain characteristics, and men to portray certain characters. If they are not playing within their prescriptive roles outside society, does not react kindly.

Role congruity theory explains that there are acceptable gender roles to be played by males and females. Men, especially in leadership positions, are expected to be aggressive and firm. Yet, women are expected to be collaborative and caring (Eagly and Karau 2002). Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt (2001) defined these two role descriptions as agentic and communal. Agentic refers to the male attributes of leadership, and communal refers to the female attributes. Therefore, when female leaders try to go against their prescriptive role, such as by exhibiting the agentic leadership characteristics of males, they are often perceived in a negative way.

This is especially the case when it comes to women in male dominated positions. Kronsell (2005) explained that “women who have taken on leadership roles in hegemonic masculine institutions, such as becoming military leaders or heads of states, often have downplayed their femininity” (p. 292). Female leaders, especially those in school districts, face a difficult journey because they are surrounded by female teachers who fit those prescriptive roles, but they must lead outside them. Eagly (2005) explained this phenomenon in detail:

not only do people doubt that women possess the appropriate competencies, but also they may resent the overturning of the expected and usual hierarchical relation between the sexes. Therefore, people may react negatively to such women, especially if they behave in a clearly authoritative manner. (p. 466)
For women, it is extremely difficult to lead. When women have a more feminine quality about them, they are seen as too “soft,” but when women do take on a more masculine decision making style, they are seen as violating their gender specific roles. How can a woman lead when outside perceptions will not let her make decisions about her own identity?

Ely et al. (2011) suggested that effective leaders develop a sense of purpose by pursuing goals that “align with their personal values and advance the collective good” (p. 49). This gives leaders a reason to take action despite personal fears or insecurities. Such leaders are seen as “authentic” and “trustworthy” because they are willing to take risks in the service of shared goals. Yet integrating these leadership aspects is more challenging for women, who must establish credibility in a “culture that is deeply conflicted about whether, when, and how they should exercise authority” (Ely et al., 2011, p. 50). Therefore, women leaders are often not seen as authentic leaders.

Authenticity is defined as being true to oneself (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, & May, 2005; George, 2003) rather than acting according to others’ expectations (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). However, this may be very hard for women leaders, as when they do act authentic they are not seen as having the core nature of a leader. Endrissat, Müller, and Kaudela-Baum (2007) further defined authenticity as “the successful alignment of one’s inner values, beliefs and convictions with one’s behavior” (p. 208). There is a disconnect between being an authentic leader and society’s view of being a woman.

In addition, individuals were found to give varying judgments about identical leadership behaviors depending on whether those behaviors came from a man or a woman. Women who exhibited the same behaviors as men were judged less favorably than them. (Boldry et al., 2001) Additionally, Biernat and Kobrynowicz (1997) have shown that individuals often apply lower
standards when evaluating the leadership ability of men compared to that of women. Scott and Brown (2006) agreed with this idea, noting that research has “demonstrated that gender differences do exist, to varying degrees, in leadership emergence, effectiveness, evaluation, and style, most notably when the leadership position is defined to be clearly masculine” (p. 231).

These outside perceptions have a large impact on the success of female leaders, showing that they are not viewed as acceptable candidates for leadership positions, and if they do gain these leadership positions they are often evaluated in a prejudicial manner. Moreover, these outside perceptions show that female leaders need to overcome societal constraints that may not affect other leaders. Understanding the obstacles that female leaders have to overcome will start to change outside perceptions of them, even though it is so ingrained in society.

In fact, external gender bias is so ingrained in society that many women and men do not even realize it is taking place, creating “second generation bias” (Ely, Ibarra Holb, 2011). Second generation bias is defined as “powerful but subtle and often invisible barriers for women that arise from cultural assumptions and organizational structures, practices, and patterns of integration that inadvertently benefit men while putting women at a disadvantage” (Ely Ibarra & Holb, 2011, p. 51). For example, Oplatka & Hertz-Lararowitz, (2006) highlighted how male dominated leadership positions will likely be filled by new principals, “who resemble their sponsors in philosophy, deeds, appearances, and hobbies” (p. 19). In other words, men in these leadership positions will hire those candidates who most resemble themselves, reproducing male dominance within educational administration (Oplatka & Hertz-Lararowitz, 2006, p. 19). If these gender issues are not talked about, this pattern will repeat, leaving women leaders to continue to suffer the external gender barriers of the past.
The subliminal restrictions placed on women throughout history continue today. This may not be intentional, but is nevertheless true, and has been conditioned in individuals throughout time. Interestingly, many women may be unaware of having personally been victims of gender discrimination or deny it even when it is objectively true and they see what women in general experience. (Ely, Ibarra, Holb, 2011, p. 52). This is because women have worked hard to take gender out of the equation in order to try to diminish the bias and be recognized for their own skills and talents.

However, research has shown that in fact the bias continues if it is not talked about and recognized (Ely, Ibarra, Holb, 2011, p. 53). When women deny their feminine side, they unintentionally confirm that women do not possess qualities needed to succeed as a leader. In fact, they contribute to the ongoing cycle of gender inequalities by hiding their own femininity and conforming to masculinity. Women tried to fit into these male dominated institutions. Yet, in trying to meet these unrealistic standards, women did not further the cause but rather strengthened the idea which oppresses them (Smith, 1974) Therefore, understanding the experiences and narratives of women who face outside barriers will bring voice and awareness to this issue, which can then allow it to be recognized, and then mitigated.

**Self-Perceptions**

While external perceptions are a factor, self-perceptions also hinder women from becoming leaders in education. Often women feel that they are not equipped to be leaders or never “considered themselves fit for leadership positions” (Litmanovitz, 2011, p. 27). In fact, studies showed that men were up to 60 percent more likely to evaluate themselves as “very qualified” for various leadership positions (Sandberg, 2013). Often, women do not have supportive role models or mentors to support them or explain some of the similar obstacles they
have faced. Cullen and Luna (1993) suggested that if women had a network of women working in the same position to mentor them, or serve as role models, their self-perceptions might be altered.

**Family Life**

Women feel that in regards to their own perceptions of the female role, they must “be a stay at home mom” (Litmanovitz, 2011, p. 27) in order to be the best wife or mother. Sandberg (2013) agreed, stating that when considering possible future family obligations, women often “leave before they leave” by passing on opportunities for advancement within their organization. Women, more often than men, were also choosing between leadership careers and being a good parent, and were often unwilling to take the chance to try and pursue both.

Even today, women are seen as the primary care takers for their families. The “ideal mother” was seen as someone who was always there for her children (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004), while the ideal worker put her career first, thus making it difficult for women to feel that they could balance the two. However, women were still expected to do many of the domestic duties at home. Statistics showed that women spent an average of 4.4 hours per day on housework while men spent on average 2.4 hours per day. In terms of childcare, women spent 2.4 hours per day and men spent on average 1.8 hours per day (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). As a result, women had to make the decision whether to be a good leader or a good mother, while men could be seen as doing both. These decisions create an inner turmoil called “imposter syndrome” which is a feeling of being unworthy of their position within their professional career (Bahn, 2014). Women must feel that they can become leaders: “Becoming a leader involves much more than being put in a leadership role, acquiring new skills, and adapting one’s style to the
requirements of that role… it involves a fundamental identity shift” (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011, p. 478).

This identity shift is often the cause of conflict. Loden (1985) indicated that men and women differed in basic values, which could cause women to struggle with their self perception. A values survey indicated men and women differed significantly in the priority they placed on several basic values. Men were motivated by a search for power and influence. Moreover, they were able to rationalize that their leadership was part of taking care of their families. On the other hand, women placed a high priority on harmony and a concern for people. They seemed to be motivated by a desire to help and care for others. (Loden, 1985). Gilligan (1993) reported that while men viewed work through logic and law, women viewed it through relationships. Men were able to compartmentalize the fact that they were working and had to care for their family because of how they placed their values. Yet for women, their values created a true clash in their ideals. By working, they were not placing value on being a mother, wife, and caretaker, which disrupted the harmony they desired.

Glass Ceiling

The “glass ceiling” metaphor was created in 1984 to explain the gender inequities faced by women in institutional contexts (Da Costa Barreto, Barreto, Ryan, & Schmidt, 2009). The term emphasizes the notion that invisible and unseen structural patterns of gender discrimination prevent women from rising into prestigious, well-paying, high-level, leadership positions (Kellerman & Rhode, 2007). There are numerous examples of how the glass ceiling limits women’s potential, showing that women have lower earnings, fewer academically based awards, and less representation in top-tier leadership positions (Valian, 2005).
In terms of self-perceptions and women leaders, researchers have found that women may also experience a “psychological glass ceiling” (Kellerman & Rhode, 2007). This refers to the way women themselves have internalized a patriarchal gender ideology, which then undermines their own chances at securing leadership positions. This stems from outside perceptions or gender constructs, but then seeps its way into the subconscious brain. It is indoctrination from childhood. Women are so used to being told that they are not meant to lead that they eventually believe it. In contrast to their male counterparts, women appeared less willing to engage in self-promoting or assertive behaviors, seemed less willing to take risks that would propel their leadership roles, and had a greater fear of failure (Kellerman & Rhode, 2007). Self-perception has had a large impact on the gender gap in leadership. Examining the stories of female leaders can help women change their self-perception and help both genders support each other in struggling against outside perceptions.

Research has shown that women have to face both external and internal perceptions about educational leadership, which lead fewer women to pursue or stay with administrator roles. The literature has also shown that many of these biases are not brought to the forefront: they are hidden within. It is imperative to discuss these biases and detail how women overcame the gender discrimination they struggled against and became successful. This will lead us to question what factors it takes for women to beat those obstacles, and how current female leaders deal with their own self-perceptions and outside perceptions.

**Mentors**

Litmanovitz (2011) suggested that one of the common characteristics of successful women in leadership is that they had mentors or role models to look up to and guide them. One of the reasons that women were not successful was that they did not have role models at home,
or in the work force to help mentor them. (Ward & Eddy, 2013). Women were often excluded from the informal networks of organizations, which may have translated to being excluded from decision making (Astin, 1991; DiGeorgio-Lutz, 2002; Klenke, 1996). Women were often not included in these “all boy networks”, and their viewpoints were not heard. As a result, it is imperative to connect women together, especially because educational leadership has so few women. Women’s access to resources focuses primarily on the deficiency of career advice, resources, mentoring, and socialization of women in academic leadership positions (Paludi, 2008). There needs to be access in the workplace.

Furthermore, literature suggests that women were excluded from social networks, which is one of the most significant aspects of organizational power (Timberlake, 2005). Women’s lack of access to workplace social capital, as well as its associated benefits, can have detrimental effects on leadership, such as lack of knowledge sharing, higher turnover rates, fewer resources, fewer contacts that lead to power and advancement, and lower levels of trust and cooperative spirit among coworkers (Timberlake, 2005).

**Finding the Right Mentor**

Previous studies have shown that women aspiring to superintendent positions stressed the negative impact they felt due to a lack of influential mentoring. The key term here is “influential.” In terms of mentors or role models, Cullen and Luna (1993) explained that female leaders need to have different levels of mentors. The first level is role model: “projecting behavior and skills to the protégé that demonstrated a professional identity” (Cullen and Luna, 1993). The next level of mentoring is counseling: “acceptance and confirmation, and friendship represent a higher hierarchical order than role-modeling” (Cullen and Luna, 1993). The highest level of mentoring is the *offer of friendship*: “establishing a friendship, a common interest, a
common idea, common goals….working back and forth in a two-way relationship” (Cullen and Luna, 1993). Each level grows on those before it, and gets more sophisticated. Each level of mentorship is equally important for women. Connecting with other leaders going through the same experiences (both local and global) can “bolster women’s self-esteem by providing safe spaces for discussion and affirmation that yes, they do belong in academe” (Bahn, 2014, p. 1). Therefore, making sure that women not only have mentors, but have the right level of mentor, is a crucial concern. Women especially need that mentorship in order to overcome societal barriers.

Searby and Tripses (2006) explained that while most educational administrators felt some sense of loneliness or isolation, female administrators experienced loneliness on a higher level, as they were required to work in a typically male centered culture.

While it may seem that both women and men have an equal opportunity for mentorship, in reality that is not the case. Men establish deeper levels of mentorship that shift over to sponsorship (Hewlett, 2013). Sponsors will advocate for people and open doors for them, while a surface level mentor only guides and teaches as a one-way street. Leadership groups, mentors, and sponsors allow connections to be made, obstacles to be recognized, experiences to be shared, and opportunities to be developed. In these leadership and mentor meetings (which can be in person or through technology), women can share how they handled situations, give suggestions and “recognize and promote their own accomplishments on a personal and professional level” (Bahn, 2014, p. 1). Lastly, connections can be made so that new opportunities can be suggested and doors can be opened.

The lack of mentorship is why women need to read about other women like them. In essence, it helps to fill the void that currently exists. When female leaders are able to read about similar experiences, and hear about obstacles that other women had to overcome, it will allow
them to improve their own self-perception and perseverance. Previous research and studies conducted with children have shown that when students are exposed to, and hear stories about, other motivated, persistent, successful people, they are more likely to model that behavior. For example, Goodwin and Miller (2013a) concluded that when students were shown that it took Walt Disney sixteen years to produce Mary Poppins, or that Helen Keller overcame her struggles and went to college, they re-directed their goals towards long term achievement. This is analogous to female leaders who need to be exposed to other leaders who are successful and persistent, and do not back down in the face of the common gender struggles.

In fact, when it comes to self-perception, the women who were successful said it was due to “persistence, talent and time” (Litmanovitz, 2011, p. 27): their inner determination and self-perception is what made them successful. Understanding what makes other women successful may ignite aspiring leaders’ own motivation. Sandberg (2013) explained that it is necessary to foster not only the development of individual women, but to create healthy workplaces to “lean into.” There needs to be a network created where women can learn from each other, discuss their daily obstacles, and support their own motivation (Ward & Eddy, 2013). Connecting with local and global leaders going through the same experiences can “bolster women's self-esteem and persistence by providing safe spaces for discussion and affirmation that yes, they do belong in academe” (Bahn, 2014, p. 1).

**Mentor Pushback**

While it is important for women leaders to build a network, women’s relationships can be another barrier. It can be difficult for women to work together and not see each other as competition, since there are so few women in leadership positions. The conflict between women in the workplace, especially when competing for a single position (e.g., principal, superintendent
or director of a school board), has been attributed to the powerlessness that people in subordinated groups experience when they internalize the negative stereotypes of the dominant culture (Kanter, 1977a; as cited in Litwin, 2011). Freire (2000) called this “horizontal violence.” Horizontal violence is a way of acting out the negative stereotypes placed upon the oppressed individual by the dominant group, in an attempt to regain a sense of power. This can result in coworkers or other leaders not wanting to help each other in any way (Jones & Palmer, 2011).

Moreover, women do not want to be seen as exhibiting feminine friendship behaviors, but instead want to dominate the workplace using male competitive behavior (Litwin, 2011). As a result, it can be hard for women to create a network or learning group. However, this makes it that much more crucial for women to share their stories, so that expectations are made public. Once shared, women will start to understand the negative effects they have on their own leadership, and on female leaders in general. In return, women may start to view themselves and their actions in a way that changes the paradigm.

**Summation**

After looking at the literature on the gender gap in education, it is evident that there are specific themes, and also some specific gaps in the literature that need to be filled. It is clear that if the gender gap in education is not addressed and researched, it will continue to grow and get worse. It is also clear that more research needs to be done in order to understand what it takes for a woman to be successful in leadership. More specifically, there is a gap in qualitative research that will give insight into why and how leaders develop skills to overcome gender barriers. There is a need to hear these women’s stories in order to get a true sense of their lives, the struggles they encountered, and how they have been able to deal with those issues and lead their current district. Quantitative studies have allowed researchers to prove that there is a correlation between
the gender gap and the barriers they face, but now it is time to focus on the human narrative in order to answer the deeper questions (Grogan, 1996).

Conducting more research and studies allows the paradigm to shift, such that both female leaders and institutions would not only recognize that there is a gender gap, but also address ways to close this gap. Only then will women will get the support they require. In addition, women may gain support without feeling embarrassed or isolated. For example, mentors, learning groups, and communities may be formed, leadership training altered, and programs put into place without hesitation or question. Qualitative studies allow the educational realm to hear the trials and tribulations (relating to both self-perception and outside perception) that women experience, resulting in eye-opening understanding, discussion, and empathy. Further study on women in leadership helps not only female leaders, but also the educational system as a whole.
Chapter 3

Research Design

Methodology

Qualitative Approach

The goal of this study was to explore how women understand and make meaning of their experiences as educational leaders in a K-12 school district. In order to achieve that goal, this study employed a qualitative methodology. A qualitative approach can build complete pictures of participants’ words and views, thereby creating a more complex and accurate interpretation (Patton, 2002). In addition, qualitative research takes place in people’s natural environments, allowing rich information and data to be obtained (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research embodies specific characteristics that permit a researcher to be the primary tool for gaining the data. Qualitative research also allows information to be gained through multiple types of data, which can be analyzed thematically or inductively (Creswell, 2007). In addition, there may be some personal influence when the data is analyzed, which makes this approach well-rounded (Creswell, 2012).

Qualitative research is used when there is a need to “study a group or population, or hear silenced voices” (Creswell, 2007, p. 40), such as women in educational leadership positions. As a result, this study matched the goals of a qualitative study, as it sought to hear the narratives of participants who represented an oppressed group. Narrative inquiry allowed the researcher to gain rich information, and also allowed the participants to share their experiences in great depth and detail.
Constructivist Paradigm

This study utilized a constructivist paradigm. This paradigm is the belief that each person’s experience is unique and valuable as such, instead of treating them in a generalized manner as positivism does (Fraser, 2004; Josselson & Lieblich, 2001). As a result, language is seen as a carrier of subjective meaning that is construed in interaction with others, and then shaped by cultural and historical processes (Fraser, 2004). Therefore, it is not value free, nor is it an objective representation of reality. Most qualitative researchers agree that it is impossible to objectively capture another person’s actual subjective experience.

In this light, narrative researchers make room for multiple truths and acknowledge that the very act of representation prevents complete transparency (Riessman, 1993). The narratives of female leaders were constructed around core life events. The role of the researcher was to value the participants’ individual reality, and remain intent on getting a close-up view of their lived experiences. Similarly, narrative researchers do not regard themselves as objective observers, but see themselves as engaged in a passionate quest for insight and understanding (Creswell, 2007, p. 19). This narrative researcher’s goal was to do justice to the meanings derived by research participants from their own direct experiences. This qualitative approach using the narrative tradition and intertwined with a constructivist paradigm created an in-depth and personalized study from which emerged the most comprehensive understanding.

Research Design

This study used narrative inquiry in order to hear the narratives of female leaders. The objective of this study was for people in the educational world, and in the leadership world, to start to understand the journeys and experiences that female leaders go through and the barriers that they encounter while doing their jobs effectively. Narrative inquiry allowed the people
reading this study a peek inside the lives of female educational leaders. Women described their experiences in great detail, as well as explained what they needed to do in order to overcome any obstacles put before them. It was a looking glass into the world of female leaders. Hearing specific stories from women allowed people who may not have been familiar with educational leadership, or familiar with what it is like to be a woman, to have more understanding and empathy. Analyzing and understanding what allowed these female leaders to excel will ultimately help changes occur.

**Research Tradition**

**Narrative Inquiry**

While the practice of storytelling has a long tradition, the practice of carefully studying narratives emerged in the 1960s and flourished in the 1980s (Elliott, 2005). Narrative research is applied to a life story that emerges out of interviews, observations, and relevant documentation. Therefore, narrative methodology focuses on the lived experience that is communicated by individual narrators and transforms it into a story (Chase, 2005, 2011; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 2008). In telling the individual’s story, a researcher connects the events into sequences that have meaning. This leads to specific themes, archetypes, and understandings about a particular culture, event, or phenomenon (Riessman, 2008, p. 3). These narratives emerge out of real-life encounters between researcher and participant. Narrative interviews allow the interaction between researcher and participants to be a two-way conversation where information and stories flow freely. Additionally, this type of research requires a willingness to enter the narrator’s world with care (Riessman, 2008; Zilber et al., 2008). This type of conversation is free flowing and natural instead of a series of one-way questions. Therefore, more detailed information can be gained, as the participant does not have many limitations or
restraints upon them. A researcher may gain valuable information that was not originally expected due to the open-ended nature of the conversational narratives.

Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998) explained that a narrative study can be used to represent the character or lifestyle of subgroups in society, including race, religion, and gender. These minorities are often discriminated against, not understood, or just not given a voice. Conducting a narrative study allows a researcher to interact with participants in order to obtain responses that are rich in nature, but also allows a researcher to ask follow up questions to gain a better understanding for the specific research questions. In essence, this is a deep conversation that peeks inside someone’s life, allowing a researcher to also have a connection with the person who is telling the story. These narratives provide access to people’s identities and personalities, as they describe their human experience as it unfolded through time (Lieblich et al., 1998). Unfolding these stories provides a guide for future experiential understanding (Clandinin, 2007, p. 41). The goal is that through narrative inquiry both researcher and participant will learn (Clandinin, 2007).

Riessman (1993) explained that there are various levels or steps in the process of conducting a narrative inquiry. It starts with the raw experience of storytelling between researcher and participant. After the story has been told, it must be translated. This translation gives another dimension to the lived narrative, reshaping it into a “hybrid story” (p. 13) because it calls for “self-awareness and self-discipline in the ongoing examination of text against interpretation” (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 10). The last step takes place when the reader brings her own understanding and interpretive process to her engagement with the text, which allows the story to have a specific meaning in the realm of the study (Lieblich et al., 1998).
In addition, Riessman (1993) suggested several other aspects of a narrative study. A narrative study is usually for a specific audience and must be understood in that context. It allows the narrator to argue and interact with the stories as the participants tell them. Also, a narrative study can persuade others through the information presented. Persuasion can also happen as a narrative inquiry allows the audience to enter into the experience through the anecdotal data. However, a narrative study can also be used to entertain, mislead, or enact change. Therefore, it is important for the researcher to understand how all these aspects of a narrative study help it reach its full purpose and potential.

Similarly, Webster and Mertova (2007) explained that there are several key reasons for creating stories. These key reasons include looking for consequences, recurring themes, lessons, what worked, vulnerability, and building future experiences. The goal is to gain some deeper understanding of an issue or group of people through these personalized stories. In terms of this study, the researcher wanted to understand the stories of female leaders and the barriers they face. Narrative inquiry allows this research to go under the surface, digging deep into the lives of the participants in order to put a face to statistics about the gender bias that is plaguing women in educational leadership. Narrative inquiry allows the researcher to address almost all of the previously mentioned functions.

**Critique of Narrative Study**

One of the benefits of a narrative study is that it is not so structured, and it allows more freedom while the participants are telling their stories. However, this can also be seen as a negative aspect of narrative inquiry. Unstructured data can often be chaotic. As a result, the role of the researcher is complex and “research involving this level of human interaction and human relationship is going to feel messy” (Connolly, 2007, p. 453).
Moreover, there are arguments about creditability, because storytelling as a narrative of a personal experience is not a clear route into “the truth,” either about the reported events or of the teller’s private experience (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006, p. 166). However, this can be also be seen as a positive aspect since a constructivist paradigm looks at the truth through multiple realities. This research aimed to gain the truth as seen through the eyes of the women participating; what they constructed as the truth was crucial because they were the people living their struggles every day. Therefore, while many of these critiques were important to recognize, they did not interfere with the choice of approach.

**Participants**

This study included three female leaders in one district: a principal, a vice principal, and a business administrator. The interviews took place in a location of the participants’ choice, which for each participant was her office. The school district was an urban middle school with about 400 students in Grades 6 through 8. The school was considered to be Title I, District Factor Group B, where 60 percent of the students have free and reduced lunches. This study targeted a small group of participants so it would not to “generalize the information” (Creswell, 2007, p. 126), but instead would gain the understanding of leaders as a collective, as well as their individual experiences. Therefore, hearing from leaders who had different leadership roles and different experience levels, but who all worked in the same leadership realm of K-12, allowed meaningful and diversified information to be gathered. Moreover, these participants also had detailed knowledge of what it was like to have had various jobs within leadership, including each other’s positions. This research allowed audiences to see the similarities among their experiences as women in leadership, while getting to hear each individual female leader’s specific journey as well.
According to Merriam (2009) the needs of qualitative research are best met by non-probability sampling. Purposive sampling was used to select these participants. Purposive sampling is also referred to as judgment or selective sampling, which is a non-probability sampling method characterized by a deliberate effort to gain representative samples for a specific need or purpose by selecting a sample of group members (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) suggested that researches use this sampling as it encourages analysis that is “information rich” (p. 77). This method is based on the “assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 2009, p. 77).

In terms of this study, specific women were invited who fit the qualifications of female educational leaders who had various experience leading a district in a K-12 setting. The overall criteria for sample consideration included (a) female leaders who indicated a willingness to participate in multiple in-depth interviews and were comfortable sharing both their positive and negative experiences with gender bias and leadership; (b) female leaders who held a leadership position for at least one year, so they had plenty of information to share on this topic; and (c) female leaders who were diverse in their age, race, and experience levels. Each woman who was asked was a leader who wanted to tell her story and was comfortable expressing her truthful opinions on the topic. Moreover, each needed to be adamant about her willingness to lead the district as a female educational leader.

While this sample was chosen for a specific purpose, there were limitations to this sample. Only three participants were interviewed. While deep analysis through multiple in-depth interviews was conducted, this narrative study explored the experiences of a small number of women who were currently employed in leadership positions. In addition, because these leaders
were all in the same geographic region and school district, there may have been some characteristics present that may not have been present if they were from different regions or schools. As a result, these narratives were specific to these women, and they may not be similar to the experiences of other women.

**Recruitment and Access:**

The three female leaders were contacted via email to request their participation in the study. Included in the email was a letter of invitation (see Appendix A). The letter included the researcher’s graduate student status, the rationale for the study, the participant’s role in the study, and the risks and rewards of participation in the study. Once all three participants agreed to the study, they were contacted again to set up times and locations for the interviews.

**Data Collection:**

The participants were asked to share their leadership experiences through a guided and recorded in-depth interview. Rubin and Rubin (2012) explained that these in-depth interviews allow researchers to explore “experiences, motives and opinions of others and their own” and “extend their intellectual and emotional reach across barriers (p. 3). Moreover, Rubin and Rubin (2012) suggested that semi-structured interviews permit a better-guided conversation, reduce off-topic discussions, and allow for follow-up questioning (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The participants were interviewed up to two times, which gave the participants ample time to detail their lives and allowed any follow-up stories, questions, or anecdotes to be answered and explained. Long-term observations were not necessary because the researcher wanted to understand what the participants perceived about their experiences through the telling of their stories, not everyday practices (Fetterman, 2010).
In addition to the interview, field notes and journaling were done directly after the interview in order to retain the researcher’s immediate thoughts (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Riessman (2008) advocated that interview transcripts, field notes, and personal memos be compiled in a research log and that the transcripts serve as the primary text, “preserved and treated analytically as units” (Riessman, 2008, p. 12). Field notes and summaries were used to allow the researcher to think beyond the surface of the text and gain a deeper analysis of the observations made during the interview.

**Data Storage**

The interview was audiotaped using an iPhone and a back up recorder. In addition, pseudonyms were used to assure confidentiality. The recordings were all stored on a computer in a password-protected file. The recordings and all other materials will be discarded one year after the study is complete. As confidentiality was important for both the researcher and the participants, the only person who had access to the data was the researcher.

**Data Analysis:**

Each interview was transcribed using a “Rev” dictation and transcriber interview app. Once the interview was transcribed, the study utilized a first cycle initial in vivo coding process to effectively code the data. Saldana (2009) explained that initial coding separates the qualitative data into specific parts, which allows for a thorough examination of each part in order to analyze the data for common themes and differences. The researcher looked for specific phrases, emotions, and words in order to categorize them into themes. The researcher also looked for these common themes in individual interviews, and then across all three interviews. Saldana (2009) suggested that initial coding is especially suitable for interview transcripts. Therefore, in vivo coding was appropriate for this study as it allowed the researcher to make meaning of the
interview transcripts and brought life to the educational leadership voices that were interviewed. In vivo coding uses “short words or phrases from the participants’ own language in the data record as code” (Saldana, 2009, p. 74). It was imperative that the participants’ actual words were used in order to provide accuracy and enhance understanding of the phenomenon.

In order to gain the most accurate results, the researcher used a second cycle axial coding method as well. This step allowed the researcher to reorganize, condense, and simplify any information that was gathered from the first cycle of coding. Saldana (2009) explained the objective for second cycle coding is to take the individual pieces from the first cycle and combine them into one theme that strengthens the overall picture of the research. More specifically, the researcher looked at each interview separately to come up with various themes and archetypes within it. Then the researcher explored the narratives to come up with overarching ideas about the participant to gain an understanding and make meaning of each experience. Once the individual analysis was completed, the researcher analyzed commonalities across all three participants, which then created understanding of similarities and differences on a generalized level. The goal was to understand both the individual and the collective experiences of these female leaders.

**Trustworthiness**

It is essential that the participants felt comfortable sharing their stories. Creating and building a mutual and trusting rapport with each participant was crucial (Adler & Adler, 1999; Neuman, 2000). In order to do this, the participants answered the questions to the best of their comfort level, and were assured that all names of the locations and people would not be disclosed. This was very important as the female leaders were still working in the district they were talking about -- anonymity was vital.
Moreover, the member-checking technique was used when sending each participant her transcript to review for accuracy after the interview took place (Creswell, 2012). As a result, each participant felt more comfortable during the interview that accurate information would be used: it felt more like collaboration. These women in particular had to feel comfortable that the information they gave would not be misconstrued in any way, and that their identities would be kept anonymous as they were still working female leaders and they talked about difficult situations that dealt with current ongoing struggles. Moreover, as this was an in-depth narrative study, they shared specific details that could identify them. As a result, it was important that the female leaders trusted the researcher and knew that the data would be used to create change on a positive level in education. Therefore, the participants were made aware that at any point they did not have to answer the question, and they could withdraw from the research and the data would be destroyed if they so wished. All details regarding their identity would be kept safe and confidential using pseudonyms.
Chapter 4

Data Analysis- Through the Looking Glass

I know who I WAS when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.

— Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

This chapter records the lived experiences of three women in order to understand the complexities of being a female educational leader in a K-12 school district. Multifaceted interviews with them provided a framework for discussing the journeys and lived experiences that female educational leaders encounter, and created an open dialogue or a looking glass into the world of female educational leaders today. The experiences were told from the perspective of women who were in educational leadership positions, therefore this is their perception, their reality, and their understandings from their own looking glass.

Data were collected through a series of semi-structured interviews with three female educational leaders, a principal, a vice principal, and a business administrator, who work in the same K-12 school district. The participants were asked to tell their leadership journeys, including how they became leaders, their past experiences with leadership, and any personal stories or encounters that got them to this point. While each had a different leadership role in the district, they all had experiences in various roles within the district and were the only women then leading the district.

The data were collected and analyzed in order to understand their experiences and perceptions about being female educational leaders in a K-12 school district. Riessman (2001) explained that many times participants:
negotiate how they want to be known by the stories they develop with their audiences.…

And that often they do not reveal an essential self as much as they perform a preferred
selected from the multiplicity of selves or personas…. that individuals switch among as
they go about their lives. (pp. 10-11).

These interpretations took into consideration the development of meaning by the participants at
the moment of the interview as well as field notes on non-verbal communication during the
interview.

This chapter begins with an introduction and description of each participant, an
explanation of her background, past and present experiences, and current position as an
educational leader in order to gain a full picture of the participant and how she recognizes her
leadership identity. The chapter then describes the five themes that emerged from the
interviews: The executive boys network, which talked about the influence of the dominant male
leaders working with the female educational leaders; When I look at my reflection who do I see?,
which talked about the self doubt, reflection, and criticism that the three female educational
leaders described; The great balancing act, which talked about the continuous struggle to
balance work and family life; You’re my buddy, which described the important relationship
between leader and mentor; and lastly, It’s a marathon not a sprint, which described the inner
determination that each female educational leader continued to possess..

District

While this is a narrative study about the individual lived experiences of three female
educational leaders, it is important to note that they all worked in the same district and to
understand their surroundings. The school district has two elementary schools and one middle
school. After graduating eighth grade, the students go to the local sending high school. This
The school district is diverse, with 40% of the students who attend being White, 37% Black, 18% Hispanic, and 2% Asian or other race. There is a high absentee rate as many students say that they need to take care of their siblings. While this is a narrative rather than a case study, it is still important to consider the place where these female educational leaders work, as it impacted them as women and leaders.

**Participants**

**Kate**

I don’t know maybe being a mom or maybe being a woman, I don’t know if a male would have made the same decisions…. but I had to go with my gut.

-- Kate

Kate had been a leader in the school district for about 17 years. She first worked as a principal in one of the elementary schools, then as a vice principal of the middle school, and was now the principal at the middle school. She was married with three children, one who was in high school and two who were in college. Her role as principal of the middle school consisted of duties such as overseeing the students and staff, scheduling, procedures and policy, teacher observations, hiring new staff, major discipline issues, and daily operations. Kate rarely got a quiet moment to herself; in fact, we were interrupted during the interview, and she had to have her walkie-talkie on in case of an emergency even though it was after school operational hours.
When asked about her journey as an educational leader, she started with her life as a teacher.

Before becoming an educational leader, Kate was a third grade teacher, which was her first experience working with underserved students:

When I became a third grade teacher, it was a big eye opener for me because my practicum and my student teaching were in a local affluent district, so this was a unique situation because I was literally the minority of my classroom…I had 23 kids and all but one of the children had already been retained from one grade or another.

Kate went on to explain that her first teaching job was a learning experience, as many of the teachers were set in their ways and not accepting of new ideas:

I came out of school all amped up and ready to change the world, but the grade level partners were more senior staff, and they sat at their desks. It was very much a community where it was ditto and they would say, “Open your math book to page and do these problems” and give them a worksheet. It was so different from anything I had seen where teachers were up on their feet and working with kids. I remember thinking, “This isn’t how I learn, and that’s not how I am going to teach.”

Kate’s first teaching experience really set her on her educational leadership journey, as she realized that something in the district needed to change, and she realized she could be the one to do this:

In seeing the way that these teachers taught and the commonplace complacency that they took towards all the kids, I was like, “We have to do something different. What can we do differently?” Then luckily we got a new principal and she decided to shake things up by getting the newer, younger teachers involved in everything and do committees, and she was trying to change the school. So I thought, “Why don’t I go to school and become
an administrator?” So I did. I went back to school to get my degree, switched jobs… and I got my first experience as a leader when the principal had a heart attack on the first day of school and they asked me to fill in.

The negative experience of Kate’s first job was the catalyst to her wanting to make a change in the educational community.

Her first experience also may have had an impact on her leadership style today. Kate shared her inner motivation to create change within schools and in the educational community. In fact, Kate frequently talked about “working just a little bit harder,” and her “continuous journey to always know your stuff,” such as “I am always reading policy, I am always reading law and how to run a school better.” This inner drive was apparent during her entire interview, as she wanted to prove that she was qualified and in control of her position. This showed the inner core of what was important to her as an educational leader.

Kate had many experiences as an educator and educational leader after the time she filled in for the principal who had the heart attack. She was a principal in a local school district for a few years, where she also took on the role of “curriculum director, affirmative action officer, and then principal of the building.” However, it just “wasn’t her cup of tea,” as she described how she had to work in unfair conditions and was expected to come to work from seven in the morning to seven at night, yet the other chief school administrator only had to work from ten in the morning to seven at night. She had just had her first child and explained that it was “really hard” and dabbled with the idea of becoming a stay at home mom. Throughout the interview, Kate consistently identified as a “mom first.” In fact, whenever she mentioned her children, her husband, or her family, her face lit up. She was a proud mother, and her children meant a great
deal to her. It was clear that she had very strong feelings about her role as a mother and wife to her family:

So first of all I am a mother until I walk in that door, and I am getting my kids out of the door and ready for school, and my husband works, so it is a team effort. It can be chaos in the morning trying to get three kids fed and make sure they have their stuff and out the door. No matter how organized you think you are the night before, crap happens. You know someone can’t find a shoe, the dog took it, or someone doesn’t feel good, or [my daughter] doesn’t like her hair.

Kate explained that being a mother and having a family correlated with how she led and the relationship she had with her staff. Her role as a mother and wife allowed her to see a different perspective, one that came from understanding and compassion. This was evident in the stories she told about her staff members and their families:

I feel that being a mom and a wife when people come to me and say, “Can I come in 15 minutes late, instead of taking the morning off,” or “My kid is sick”…. I understand, because I really truly believe that family should come first. Do I want you to be late every single day because of your kid? No. But when you have a three year old that doesn’t want to get dressed in the morning… I have been there and done that. And if you say to me, “Oh my God, my kid won’t get dressed in the morning it is this new thing going on in the last month and I don’t know what to do!” Fine. We will work it out. So I think as a mom and a working woman, a working professional woman, you have to take that into consideration because that is just part of our lives and I really understand that.

Kate’s identity as a mother and an educational leader often meshed. For example, when detailing some of the struggles she had as a leader, and in sharing stories about her current
leadership experiences, she referred to her struggle with leading the district as “getting the minutiae done,” and referred to her staff as “running to mommy” and wanting her to alleviate “sibling fighting” among them. She compared many of the issues in the school to those of a nuclear family, where she was the mother and the staff were her children:

We have a good staff but people still want to run to mommy and tell on the sister or brother… so I have to balance that, and know when to step in, and know when they are just sibling fighting and let it go…I think the struggle here is for me, trying to push people more, or give them more ownership to things… like this year with the class lists… it is hard because yes, it has always been done a certain way, so you try to follow that protocol for the more senior staff here, that you don’t want to turn off… you want to rock the boat but you don’t want to dump everyone off

Kate’s outlook on the balance between keeping the status quo and making new changes, such as giving staff more initiative, was comparable to how a family grows and changes when you give your children more freedom as they mature.

Moreover, Kate looked at student situations from the perspective of a wife and a mother, as she cared about her students and this helped her make executive decisions differently. For example, she told the story of a boy whose mother died right before school started, and he did not do well that year. Therefore, he would have had to go to summer school and would not have attended graduation. Kate decided to make an executive decision after talking to him:

I looked at his grades, and in talking to the kid he had just lost his mom, when I look at his whole school record, academically very successful young man, missed twice as many days this year, he was so sad, and it was just heartbreaking. When he came to my office he said “I really dropped the ball, and my mom would be so disappointed. I really
dropped the ball, and this wasn’t provoked, I really have to get my act together, and he is like I am going to come to summer school and work really hard, I just need to know where to sign up.” It just like ripped my heart out…. like take a knife and stab me in the heart, it was all I could do not to cry.

When Kate described this situation, she had a pained look on her face, like she was experiencing it firsthand. It was evident that she had immense empathy for this student, and that she not only put herself in his shoes, but also pictured what she would be feeling if she were his mother or relative:

I have never lost a parent, I mean I have seen my kids in going through a divorce, it takes a big chunk of your soul, I can’t imagine not seeing your parent anymore, like my kids don’t see their dad, and that is hard for them. So I called [the superintendent] and I’m like, “Listen, I am going to make this decision and I need your support. I don’t know how this is going to fly. I want him to participate in graduation. I know for a fact he will go but he has lost his mother.” I don’t know maybe being a mom or maybe being a girl, I don’t know if a male would have made the same decision, I don’t know, but I had to go with my gut.

Kate’s experience as a mother with her own children gave her a different perspective and contributed to this decision and others that she made as an administrator when dealing with students in her school. Kate understood what it was like for her children to have loss in their life due to her family situation and her divorce, and therefore she was able to relate on a different level, and it impacted her decision making about this student.
Yet, children also can get mad at their mom. Kate’s identification as a mother figure may have had some impact on how others perceived and reacted to her. For example, Kate explained that after this decision, she received some negative feedback from her staff:

So I made that decision, and there is a particular person that has not spoken to me since I told her that. Totally disagrees, thinks it is ridiculous because he hasn’t done any work, did nothing in my class. And I said, “I understand, but I think this is a different circumstance,” and in being an administrator I have to make these hard decisions. As teachers and educators we are rule followers, but sometimes you have to have shades of gray.

Throughout the interview, Kate described this push-pull balance with her staff and her leadership decisions, as she wanted her staff (or her children) to grow and take on more responsibility, yet she wanted to make sure that it would be fair and gradual – much like teaching a child to ride a bike by taking off its training wheels.

Kate was a very reflective participant throughout the interview, often analyzing herself and the situations around her. She understood that the struggle of being a female educational leader is real, explaining that it is still a “man world,” that it can be hard to get respect, and that women have to “work a little harder, read everything you can get your hands on, and know what you are talking about.” Kate openly reflected on her struggles and her accomplishments as a female educational leader, and explained that while there weren’t many female educational leaders in the district, she hoped that people look at her and say,

she is female that has been at this a long time, and has kids, and she can do it…. So I hope that people see that. You know if you can run a school you can really do anything, you really can.
Chloe

I went through heck to get where I am, and I got knocked down so many times, by people, by men… Everything that I went through in my life, it was worth it because of where I am today.

-- Chloe

Chloe had been the vice principal of the middle school for about four years. In her first year as vice principal, she also obtained her doctorate in education. Chloe’s job consisted of dealing with discipline, character education, and working with staff, students, and parents. She interacted with students on a daily basis. Chloe was married, and had a full family with her daughter and stepchildren. She was working on obtaining a pastoral license in order to be ordained, thereby joining her husband who also was a principal of a high school and a Minister.

Chloe described her journey to becoming an educational leader as a “true struggle.” Chloe explained that as a young child she always felt that she was meant to lead, and this had a lot to do with having a younger sister and being “always the one to take care of her…always led her and guided her” and as a result leadership became “part of my temperament and who I was.” Chloe talked about the fact that she always knew “she was special” and had a desire to do something great with her life. Chloe’s personal trials and tribulations had a large impact on the leader she became. Chloe’s journey seemed to be one of redemption, one of proving people wrong, and proving herself right.

Unlike many 20 year olds, when Chloe went to college to obtain her bachelor’s degree she already had a child, and by graduation she was married with three children. She described the heavy responsibility she had while getting her degree:
When I went for my bachelor’s degree I had had a baby at this point, so by the time I started my bachelor’s she was one years old, I still was a parent even though I didn’t live with her anymore because I lived on campus…I still had to go home. I would go home every, I would try to go home at least every two weeks and getting home was a challenge, because I didn’t have a car… my parents they were not able to pick me up. I would have to take several buses back home. So I would have to take my laundry, my things, and take a bus from my school to [one city], then to [another city], to [home city] where my parents live. So just getting home was a struggle.

As Chloe described the continuous responsibility she had as both a college student and a mother, she had mixed emotions. On the one hand it was apparent that the long journey to get home to her family was not easy, but on the other hand there was a sense of peace and pride, as if she knew that stage of her life was past her, and she now recognized that she had overcome so many tough times. Chloe explained how her situation was not a typical college student experience:

I was still responsible for paying babysitting so I was part of a program, called the [Title] program which was a part of the welfare program; so what they would do is they would pay my babysitting as long as I would get my sheet signed by my professors. So I was still responsible for that. I was still responsible for making sure my daughter had what she needed like diapers, and um formula and all of that, and food, and stuff so…I still had to report to the welfare office when I needed to, and again it was a challenge to get there, because I didn’t have a car. But I would take a bus to get there, I had to make sure she had her vouchers because I was on the [Title] program as well, so I took advantage of everything that the government had to offer me, as a young single mother and being
responsible because she was still my daughter. So I made sure that when I was away she was there. By the time I finished my bachelor’s degree I had already had three kids, and was married at this point.

When Chloe was going through college, she was also going through motherhood, and having responsibilities as a wife. Even so, Chloe obtained her bachelor’s degree and graduated from college. This was just the first step to showing her determination and inner spirit. Moreover, she explained that she was going through personal struggles from her past as well. Chloe told a very personal story, almost as if she were telling the story about someone else. When Chloe was five years old, she had been molested by her babysitter’s husband, which had a huge impact on her personal life and her identity. Her past started to catch up to her as she graduated college, was married, and had three children. As she told this story, she recalled how this incident impacted her life:

I didn’t know what it was at the time I was five, so that was very traumatic for me to the point where when I became older I didn’t understand it and it became a flashback in my head when I was married because now I am in an intimate relationship with someone that I really loved and it really caused me to um have problems sexually and it caused a lot of problems in my marriage, I didn’t want to be touched, and in my head I was just so angry, at him for what he did, and at the time because I was so angry my heart, was so hard, that I couldn’t love, anymore, so a few years later, I ended up getting divorced, and the day I left I will never forget I had a penny, one cent, I didn’t have anything, I didn’t have any money. I remember my girlfriend, wiring me money she was in California and she wired me money, and I think she sent me 50 dollars, and I was about to get my car repossessed because I hadn’t paid my car payment, and I lost my job, my kids were in the
car… I had three kids, I packed it up and I went to my parents’ house, and I was working and this is crazy, I had a bachelor’s degree…. I had a teacher’s certification and I had no job. I was working at a daycare center, $7.50 an hour with all that education.

Chloe detailed that she was destitute, and had hit rock bottom.

These past experiences had an impact on her personality and the leader she became. For example, Chloe explained that as a vice principal she could relate to the struggles that the parents of students at her middle school go through:

A lot of times, you can relate to the kids because of what I have been through with my own kids, but even with the parents, it is easy for me to relate to the parents because I know, because I am so transparent in sharing like my own life story, and the challenges that I had with my kids, and how I was able to overcome those challenges… sharing that it is just temporary, you can get through it so I do feel that I inspire a lot of the parents especially the single mothers because we have a lot of single mothers. I think just my story, on its own, gives hope to a lot of the parents and a lot of the kids.

Chloe explained that she uses her story to help others, and that she hoped that all the struggles she went through could be of use. It is clear that Chloe wanted to be able to make sense of her past, and hoped her story could help others. In essence this is another part of her redemption and validation: if her story can help people, then she can make the negative experiences worthwhile and have some larger meaning.

She talked about a specific time she was able to use her past to help others in the district:

I shared a story [with a parent] about my daughter when she was a teenager. She was about 16 years old and I was sharing with a parent that one of the big things about girls at this age is that they like to lie a lot [chuckles] and they are not very open with their
parents about what they are doing after school or where they are going. So I shared with a parent this story, about my daughter when she was about 16 or 17 years old, um she started getting involved with a boy, and she starting lying about where she was going and what she was doing… the texts to this young man. I always trusted my kids and I was always like oh my kids are so good they will never do anything wrong…. And it just hurt me. And after that it was just like a web of lies and my during that period in her life my daughter was just not honest with me, you know I found out all these things from you know some of…the guy that she was dating I ran into his mother in the store, and she was telling me all these things! I was like “Oh my God, not my daughter!” So when I approached my daughter about it, she still wasn’t honest with me and too and I found out all this stuff. I was able to share you know some of those things about my daughter with this parent, to let them know yes your daughter is not perfect, she is going to try to keep things away from you because she doesn’t want you to see her in that light but it will get better it is just a phase. Because now my daughter and I have a good relationship, she has gotten past that and she open with me and honest and that is because she is an adult now! But going through that is was difficult because I raised them to be honest and have integrity and values so that was big to me, and to know that she is human and makes mistakes that hurt me, but it is a part of life.

When Chloe talked about her daughter’s struggles to parents, it made her more human to them, creating a connection and building trust.

Chloe recognized that her story could help so many parents in her school district, as they may be going through the same struggles:
Everyone goes through that…. So I want parents to understand that you were young before too, and now your kid is going through some of the same things and may be a little different because of social media we didn’t have that, but it is still similar…. and to validate how they feel… Often times at the end of the year the parents do come back and are appreciative, because a lot of times parents look at leaders in a school like we are perfect and have this perfect life, they see the outer part where we are, and what we drive and what we wear, and where we live, but they don’t always understand the struggles and that we have issues and kids and problems too… so it is important to let them in.

While Chloe’s personal life was not easy, she was able to take those struggles and use them to help people as a leader. Her past seemed to be a large motivational factor in her leadership identity. Helping others seemed to be a part of the healing process for Chloe, as every time something positive came out of her story, a burden was lifted from her.

Yet, Chloe’s past still yielded some negative impacts on her life as a leader. Throughout the interview, Chloe talked about often lacking confidence in herself, which led her to many poor relationship choices, and also led her to define herself as a “perfectionist,” one who was looking for approval:

My dad had seven kids, they are not all from my mom but out of seven kids I am the only one who went to college, the only one. I always felt, it was like a high for me, it was like a drug, and every time there was something I could do to be better, I would do it. I was looking for him to love me. You know, and a lot of girls go through that -- if you are not affirmed and I never felt affirmed when I was younger. I was abused at five, I was looking for attention from my dad, so for me, if I did good, I could get all the attention so that is what pushed me so much even in spite of having kids, and working, and going to
school. And you know I always got A’s, I was a perfectionist, I wanted to be perfect, and when my marriage failed that hurt me so much because I was a failure and I didn’t know why, and it was because of all the problems I never dealt with. You know and when I went to school, I felt good about something, you know it was that void.

As a result, Chloe was consistently reflecting on the decisions that she makes, and she wanted to “always learn from [her] mistakes.” Her desire to progress further was evident as she continued with her education to get her master’s degree and her doctorate, and was pursuing another degree so she could get ordained. This feeling of accomplishment motivated her.

Chloe also described some of the negative feelings from when she got her job at the middle school.

So when I first became a leader, I don’t think that I was always approachable, I think I was afraid. I was afraid to really let people see me for who I was. I put up a wall. That was the biggest thing: I was afraid. I was afraid to say or do anything, because I didn’t know how I was going to be received, and I had gotten so much backlash from everyone.

Chloe’s inner drive for acceptance and perfection led her to be closed off during the first year of teaching, and she described that after that first year she “didn’t want to be here.” Therefore, Chloe’s past experiences impacted her leadership style. Due to her past, she wanted to make changes to the school that the students, parents, and the community could benefit from so that they may not have to go through the same struggles that she once did as a young teenager.

However, on the other hand, she struggled with the criticism from the other staff and administrators and her need for approval and lack of confidence held her back from making those large changes. She explained that every time she received constructive criticism she was
“internalizing it,” and that it took some time to grow from the experience, learn to communicate, and establish relationships.

Moreover, Chloe’s relationships with people were very valuable to her. She credited much of her success not only to her inner motivation but also to her mentor and her relationship with her family. While early on she was in an abusive relationship where a man controlled what she wore and what she ate, and didn’t like that she was gaining more leadership power, she credited her current husband as a support system. When Chloe explained the relationship she has with her husband she couldn’t help but smile:

My husband is an African American male, he is a principal, and he is a pastor too, and the one thing I like about my husband is that he respects me, he treats me as an equal, whenever he is faced with something, he shares it with me and he wants my opinion… and he really takes into consideration what I say and what makes me so happy is that he uses that, he validates me. And a lot of time when you are with men, they look down on you because maybe you are smart, they think, they can be intimidated by you. And I can say he is not intimidated by me, maybe in the beginning he may have been but now we have such a good relationship.

Chloe also said that because her husband is a principal and an educational leader, they were able to share in the responsibility, and that having the support and advice of her husband was a great asset to her leadership. Her relationship with her husband added to the validation and redemption of her past. She was fueled by the fact that her past has allowed her to redefine her future.

She also valued her relationship with her children, especially her daughter. She explained the need to be a role model for her children, that she wanted them to say, “Well if Mommy did it so can I” and that need to succeed for her children motivated her perseverance:
When I had my daughter at 18 she saved me, she saved me because my parents couldn’t afford for me to go to college, so if I didn’t have my daughter, I probably would not have gone to college. So having her, I qualified for financial aid and they paid for the whole thing…my dad made too much money, so I didn’t qualify, but then my daughter saved me. Having her it put me in a position to go to school, and because of her, I needed to do something with my life, I didn’t want my daughter to grow up on welfare.

Even today, Chloe said that she continues to grow, learn, and strive to be better not just for herself but also for her daughter and her other children so they can look at her as a role model.

While personal relationships were very important to Chloe as a leader, so were her professional ones. Chloe explained that having a mentor was crucial to her journey as a leader. After experiencing a low point in her life during her divorce and move back home, the turning point in her career was a chance encounter with a mentor that would forever change her life.

After moving home, Chloe had often heard her niece talk about a wonderful educational leader, and Chloe took the step to meet her, which inspired her to kick-start her life:

I had recently went through a divorce, and I had moved to town … and my niece went to the school, and my niece would always talk about [a certain woman], so I wanted to meet this [woman]. So I got to meet her and from the moment I met her I was like you know what, one-day I am going to be just like [her] because I was so impressed. You know she was an African American woman, a very strong leader, with very good principles and kids loved her. So from that moment, I had my teaching credentials, but I just, I wasn’t doing anything…I was in a slump. So then I met her in the summer, so that fall I ended up getting a position in the same district… at her school! I became a teacher of third
grade. So I ended up having her. I went through the alternate route program and I ended up having her as my instructor!

Chloe explained that this woman was the mentor she needed in order to gain confidence, and that she was not only a role model, but was also the support and sponsor that she needed:

She was in the process of completing her doctorate program… So that is when I kind of connected with her, and she took me on as kind of her mentee. So from there, I finished the alternate route program, and I went back to school to get my master’s. She pushed me to get my master’s, so I got my master’s in educational leadership, and I was there for a couple of years. I actually ended up moving to her school; a year later I was transferred to her school. At this point, I started my master’s program, and I was transferred, I finished my master’s, I took my test for my principal’s license, and I passed it, got my credentials for that, all the while I was teaching third grade. I want to say about three years ago, … she got her doctorate, she became the assistant superintendent and at this point she was like you need to really pursue being a vice principal, So from there, I want to say within a year I got a job as a vice principal, and um I had also had entered the doctorate program, about a year after I finished my master’s I just went right into the doctorate program, and it was all because of her, she really pushed me.

Chloe said that even to this day she still kept in touch with her mentor, and that having a mentor inspired her to keep going. Her words showed just how vital a mentor and role model could be, as she experienced such growth and a quick turnaround in her life. The impact that Chloe’s mentor had on her is evident, and it also reflected on the way she led. She hoped that she could one day be a role model for other people like her mentor had for her.
Both her husband and her mentor had a large impact also on the way she leads today as an African American educational leader. When discussing her identity not just as a female educational leader, but also as an African American female educational leader, she noted that many students in her district have never seen an African American in a leadership position and acknowledged that it is important for students to see people who “look like them” because in their environment they see “a lot of Blacks struggle” and that she hoped to be a role model. However, she also observed that while growing up in such a diverse home with many different races from White to Asian to Indian, her father always told her she was “American” and that it was her responsibility to be fair, and that the way she was raised and her mentor have allowed her to remain that way as an educational leader:

And sometimes it is difficult because you still have to be fair, and it should never be because “Oh, she is Black she is going to do this” and I think we get caught up…. So I think that sometimes it is challenging and it is difficult being African American in a leadership position where in my school half the population are minority and the other half are Caucasian so it can be difficult sometimes because you have some kids feel you know “Because she is Black she is going to be this way with the Black kids and this way with the White kids” so it can be hard sometimes. I think for me I am fair regardless and that is because of the way I was raised.

An important part of Chloe’s identity was that her struggle allowed her to connect to many different people on many different levels. She was able to connect with both Caucasian and African American students. She saw her story as colorless, as all people can go through troubling times, and she hoped that she could lift them up and make some sort of impact in their lives. However, there did seem to be some struggle between her perception of how she should act
within her community and what she thinks is right. She explained that students expect her to act one way due to the color of her skin, and she was consistently fighting that perception.

Chloe’s story of leadership was one of many ups and downs. She was extremely forthcoming in telling her story. Throughout the entire interview process she remained calm, even-keeled, and soft-spoken, even when talking about very tough issues. It was almost as if it was therapeutic for her to share her experiences. Even the tough ones were healing for her, as she has come so far. She spoke often of “her purpose,” and there were undertones of her spiritual beliefs which allowed her comfort and inner peace. As someone who was a Minister, and someone who was getting ordained, she may have felt that her story had a larger purpose, which was why she continued to tell it in ways that will help people.

One story that Chloe shared sums up her journey. She talked about a tenth grade geometry teacher she once had who told her she would not be successful because she struggled so much in math. She explained that years later she saw her:

I think that when I was in high school I had a teacher that she was just very cruel…a math teacher. I struggled in math. But she always, because I struggled so much and because I didn’t so as well, she always felt like you will never do anything and you will never be anything. I took that negative experience, and I used it… I was like you know what just because I am having difficulties does not mean that I am not going to be successful…Looking back, I saw that same teacher, right after I graduated with my master’s degree, I saw her… I was a teacher’s convention in Washington DC and I don’t know if she remembered me, and I wanted so badly to go up to her and to say “you remember me, I was in your tenth grade geometry class, and I will never be anything? Well I have a master’s degree now and I am about to work on my doctorate!” But I
didn’t… because you know what just seeing her, and being in that position, to me that was self-gratification, you know I didn’t have to rub it in her face…. it just motivated me and it really inspired me.

This story summed up the fact that Chloe’s journey often came full circle. She had many negative experiences; in those experiences she sought redemption, inspiration, and confidence that she could spread with others. This has had a large impact on her identity as a woman in educational leadership.

Erica

It is an ownership and a pride thing knowing that everything you did makes you who you are. I wouldn’t change that for the world. I would never just want something handed to me…then I wouldn’t appreciate anything. I don’t think I would be who I am today without those experiences like the love in my family.

-- Erica

Erica had been the business administrator for about six years for the School district. As business administrator she dealt with the district’s finances, budgets, community projects, board members, and higher administration such as the superintendent. Before becoming a business administrator she was a certified public accountant. She worked not only for this school district, but also part time helping another school district with its budget, and she co-owned a spa as well. She had a husband and two sons.

Erica’s journey and her identity were heavily tied to her culture and her family. Right away she explained that she was raised by two Greek immigrant parents who had come to America in the 1970s, five years before she was born. Her parents did not know one word of English, so Greek was her first language. When talking about her parents, Erica often got
emotional, with tears in her eyes but a smile on her face. It was clear that she cared deeply about them, and that her parents were a large part of her life. Erica explained that much of her journey is based on her experiences with her family, and on the cultural values that they instilled:

They instilled those values, the hard work, ethics, morals, they were just hardworking people, always, and they didn’t have much. They had nothing. My mom and dad were always like college is really important to them; I didn’t have a choice…I was going no matter what… So they always pushed me and because I saw how they suffered ([ause] not necessarily suffered but struggled it almost motivated me.

Erica mentioned that seeing her parents struggle both motivated and scared her. It motivated her to go to college, to be wise with her money, and to be self-sufficient. For example, at the age of 14 she remembered getting a job so she could pay for things she wanted:

My first job, oh my gosh let me see…my first job was when I was 14 years old, can you believe that? I was bussing tables at my uncle’s restaurant. Fourteen years old, I would get up at five in the morning, because I would do the breakfast shift, and he would drive me in with him, so I didn’t really have a choice, my mom wasn’t driving me so he would drive me into work and she would pick me up at two. But I would do the breakfast shift from seven to two, my goodness busing tables. I remember being in high school and I guess I would sit there in my bed and take my money and say this is for that [shows separation with her hands] and this is for this, and this is for jeans that I want, and this for my car because my mom and dad can’t afford one.…

While the struggle of Erica’s parents allowed motivated her to be a “go-getter” as she explained, it also forced her to have pressure as a young woman. Early on the struggle of her parents pushed her to focus on money and numbers, and to have a steady job in order to be self-sufficient.
In fact, Erica explained that when it came to pursuing a degree and a career, she had to do much of it on her own. She paid for college herself, and went for three years instead of four to save money. She also explained that she went to a local college in order to stay with her parents and save money. She observed that those experiences were not easy:

It was difficult because I had to do everything myself, I had to fill out the financial aid form and I had to figure it all out figure out how I was going to pay for this and how was my family going to pay for this… and it isn’t like they weren’t involved but they would say XYZ just go a scholarship what are you doing, you should look into that. So I would have to go to the bursar’s office… and I was like these are the cards I am dealt so just deal with it, and now I am like I can’t believe I ever did that stuff.

Erica’s path through college was based upon her family situation, as she needed to be responsible early on.

While she had support from her family, she also had pressure because she needed to make sure that she made the right choices not just for her, but for her family as well. While her family was a consistent motivator to get a good job, it was also a reminder that she needed to “do better.” She explained that she often looked at her parents and wanted to make sure she didn’t have to struggle like they did:

My family, and knowing that they didn’t or my gosh, they still don’t have anything. It is an ownership and a pride thing knowing that everything you did -- and of course I had support and love from my family, and that I know you can do it attitude, all that stuff makes you who you are. I wouldn’t change that for the world. I would never just want something handed to me…then I wouldn’t appreciate anything. I don’t think I would be who I am today without those experiences like the love in my family, the motivation and
support of my parents or seeing how hard they worked and wanting it all. There is good and bad…. I saw them and appreciated everything they did for me but at the same time I didn’t want to struggle like they did. In my head I was like I don’t want to be like my parents, I want to be able to be like I want to go out to eat tonight, I am tired and don’t feel like cooking whereas my mom would be nickel and diming everything. I remember I didn’t want to be like that.

Erica’s decisions for college and a career were heavily based upon her family situation and her upbringing. Moreover, Erica’s family experiences played heavily into her mindset and leadership identity on many levels. For example, the values her parents instilled in her were extremely important to her as a leader and when hiring someone. When Erica explained what she valued in her employees was very similar to the values that her parents instilled in her as a young adult and growing up:

For example, my leadership style is that I do not like to micromanage, and I have to trust the people that I hire. I will not hire you if I don’t trust you because to me trust and loyalty are very important…. And so is work ethic. Part of my interview process is trying to get a feel for somebody, I want someone that comes in here every day and I always say to them gives 110 percent. I am not saying 100 percent, I want 110 percent, I give 110 percent and I expect that from you. If I start to see people looking at the clock and say, “Oh it is 4 o’clock, it is time to go,” no. Although I know there are days where they have worked their butts off and they just need to leave, and I get that. But, if someone is always looking at a clock I just can’t work with people like that.

Erica’s cultural family values matched her leadership style. In fact, she even acknowledged that her upbringing had an impact on the way she led and her perceptions of hard
work. In fact, she said that it can sometimes make her a bit “cold-hearted” and “up front” when it comes to dealing with other people, especially sometimes other women because she knows how hard she worked, and how hard her struggle was and therefore, it made it hard for her to empathize with others. She shared that when dealing with co-workers, she supports them, and they know that they “have each other’s backs” yet, she expects for them to “get the job done” and that they need to work. Erica had a clear vision on what she expected from other people in the district:

Integrity, honesty, and hardworking. I expect that from everyone, and that could be because of my background and the fact that I started working so young, I am not very sympathetic to people who say to me, “I am just so tired.” We are all tired, who doesn’t have a career, who doesn’t have a family…. it could be your own family or your immediate parents whoever it is. I feel that everyone can be having a bad day, but it is your attitude towards it, you could be having a bad day, but thank the Lord I am alive and I am healthy, and my kids are healthy and you know what I am going to be a good person today and I am going to make someone smile or I am going to give it my all -- that at the end of the day is so important…I know what I went through, and if I can do it, so can you. Doing that all pushed me and I felt like it made me a tougher person, so when I hear people say, oh man I have this and this to say, or if they are sick, I do want to help out but then I am like suck it up. There are always people out there that have it worse than you.

Erica acknowledged that her experiences have made her a “tougher person,” and it was clear that she has a very stern attitude when it comes to others’ work ethic. Her past shaped her leadership personality and her values as a woman in educational leadership.
Erica mentioned that she often voices her opinion and “fights for justice” and gets upset if she see something unjust going on: it is hard for her to keep silent. She even recalled that when she was little she would want to “call the police if anyone did anything wrong.” Yet the fact that she was self-aware of the impact that her upbringing had on her allowed her to also rein it in at work and balance that lack of sympathy and toughness she talks about:

There may be an emergency or someone needs money now, and there is part of me that says why does your urgency have to become my priority, but you can’t say that. Sometimes you have to accommodate people, and be flexible and accommodate your surroundings. You have to find that even balance of organization and going with the flow.

Erica knew that while she had specific values, she also needed to find balance in order to lead effectively.

Interestingly, while Erica explained that her background often made her a stern leader with less compassion, it was also evident that due to her upbringing she related to many of the students in the district. She explained that the students were one reason she loved working in this district and continued to stay in her position:

The best thing about working in this environment though is I enjoy seeing the kids. I may not be out there every day seeing them, but when I do walk the halls, and you see their eyes, or when I go into the classrooms to read, I love going into the classrooms to read, and you see them and they ask questions. Although I do not have direct contact with the kids, I mean in some way I have an influence because I help to pay the electric bill and I make sure their classrooms are clean, and I make sure there is food for the cafeteria and stuff.
As this district is in an underserved community where many of the parents struggle to get their children through school, keep food on the table, and juggle work and family life, Erica felt pride that she can help in any way. She told an emotional story about going to graduation:

I love going to graduation and seeing how proud these families are. I am going to cry [gets emotional] that is not always something you get working at other schools that are more affluent districts…[clears throat]…. I mean I grew up in [home town] we were not that wealthy family, and we didn’t have much. It is so nice to see these kids and I feel like they are so appreciative, and the families…. when they call their kids’ names for the eighth grade graduation, they are so proud. You feel that the kids are so proud and the families are so proud, and maybe to some people, I hope not, but it may be their only graduation… you sense how proud they are. They deserve it. They raised their children and gave them everything that they had, and they deserve to celebrate…. those two minutes to feel like they are on top of the world…and there is nothing holding them back.

When Erica spoke about attending graduation, she was very emotional, even having to stop and get some tissues to wipe her eyes. The emotional bond she created with students perhaps stems back to her family ties. When she stated that “these parents raised their children and gave them everything they had,” she might as well have been talking about her own family and her parents. Just as she witnessed her parents work so hard, she was now able to give back to other people who were once in her parents’ position, and she was now able to help. Therefore, she has an emotional bond that motivated her as a business administrator in this type of district.

During the interview, when she would mention the way she was raised she would often compare that to students today or how she was raising her children. She often struggled with the dichotomy between how she was raised and how she was raising her children. When explaining
how she had to work at a very young age, and she had to pay for her college on her own, she also
compared that to her children today, saying “I struggle personally because I know that I didn’t
have those things and I want to give my kids those opportunities but at the same time I think that
doing things yourself makes you appreciate thing a lot more.”

Erica understood that when she saw her parents struggle it motivated her, and that her
children were not getting that same motivational opportunity, and explained, “Sometimes that is
where they are missing out.” She explained that she could sometimes see the impact of this when
she spent time with her children. For example, she told a story about her son on vacation:

We were coming back from Aruba over spring break and my son was thirsty and he was
so dramatic like, “Oh my God, I am thirsty,” and I said, “Okay we will get to the water
fountain,” and he was like, “I am dying,” and I said “Do you know there are people in
other countries that do not have water!” They don’t get to see that. I saw my parents
struggle and having to do things on my own, and sometimes it is hard for me to do things
on my own… but they don’t get to see that.

Erica could see the impact of being raised differently on her children, and therefore she
explained that not only is this a constant struggle for her, but that it also impacted the way she
viewed her job. She explained that she gave the same advice to female educational leaders that
she did to her children. She offered a short story that described her leadership identity well:

This weekend, we were at a birthday party and the people there, it was time to eat, the
people were just cutting the pizza and then just putting it there and I got up and I started
handing out the pizza to my family and it wasn’t even my party, and I was asking the kids
what kind of pizza they wanted- pepperoni, sausage, and I cleaned it up and these two
girls were just sitting there, and I guess they expected the five-year-old kids to get up and
get their pizza? So I turned around to my son and I said how many times do I need to say, you don’t need to be the smartest at school but you need to give it 110 percent and do something different than the person before, what are these girls doing that are different? If these two girls took it to the next level and actually put a smile on their face, and handed out that pizza, then I would have handed them a large tip and it wasn’t even my party! Yeah I worked and waitressed, I knew if I didn’t go back to that table and ask them how they were I would not get my tip. I always tell my kids that they need to have integrity and don’t lie. Integrity, honesty, and hard working they are so important… always doing that little bit extra.

Erica knew what it was to work hard, and prided herself on being a waitress and working for her money, because that was valuable to her and her parents. Therefore, she wanted to make sure her children had those same values without the struggle of knowing what it was like to not have money. Moreover, she brought those values into the working world as an educational leader, as she expected everyone to work extremely hard and she felt that it is their duty to be loyal and have integrity like she was raised to have. Moreover, she got pleasure in her job as she was able to give back to students and to a community that was much like the one where she grew up.

**Themes**

The participants had different backgrounds, experiences, and perceptions about being female educational leaders. Yet even with these differences, there were common themes that emerged from the interview. Interestingly, the themes that materialized often mirrored those in the literature review. The themes that surfaced were also supported by the literature researched. Each theme had various tones and variations, which is based on the participants’ unique
experiences and perceptions. The following themes emerged from the narrative interviews: *The executive boys network*, which talked about the impact of the female leaders working in a male dominated district; *When I look at my reflection who do I see?*, which talked about the self doubt, reflection, and criticism that the three female educational leaders described; *The great balancing act*, which talked about the struggle between work life and home life; *You’re my buddy*, which described the important relationship between leader and mentor; and *It’s a marathon not a sprint*, which described the inner determination that each female educational leader continued to possess.

**The Executive Boys Network**

Executives are responsible for running organizations…they have the authority to make decisions.

--*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*

Executives have power. They make decisions. A synonym for an executive is a leader. Yet, one common theme that the participants cited was that they felt that their leadership was tied to the male leaders in the district. As previously mentioned, the three participants were the only female educational leaders in the district: all the other leaders in the district are men they work with. This fact was a common theme that they described as influencing their leadership.

Kate was the most direct of the participants, as she was able to both recognize and articulate how the men in the district impacted her daily leadership life. This may have been because she has been in the district and an educational leader the longest, and she also was surrounded by other men in her exact position, principal, at other schools in the district. She explained that the male administrators in the district have a professional and personal connection that can leave her feeling “left out:”
There definitely have been times in my career, and actually just recently, at our recent in-service, I totally felt this way: it is still a boys club. You know it is things like they will go golfing together, they have lunch together, they call each other, and lots of times, that just rolls off my back because it is the way it is.

Kate described being singled out and the feeling of isolation from the male leaders as their bond that she was not privy to created an imbalance of power. Kate also observed that part of “male bonding” was that she often was excluded from those important talks and information.

Kate went on to explain that this bonding carried over into the professional world, as the male administrators made decisions that often did not include her. For example she told a story about a school in-service day where she showed up on time for the meeting but the other male leaders made other plans without involving her:

We work in a man’s world, which is sad. In May, I felt that way, because they [other male administrators] came in late, I am like “Why are you all late?” “Oh, we decided we are not coming in because the thing doesn’t start right away: and I am like “Well thanks for calling me…like you all talk and you all plan it but no one thought to pick up the phone?”

The meeting time decision was made for Kate, she did not have any ownership over her own decision here. In essence, the male leaders in the district took away Kate’s power as they banded together, showed their masculine dominance over her, and acted out the gender-socialized roles that they were expected to play (Gilenstam et al., 2008).

Chloe explained that she also felt that she could be treated unfairly. While Chloe was a newer administrator, she had her doctorate in education, and, interestingly, she got paid less than
male leaders who had fewer credentials than she did. While she did not explicitly say this about herself and her job, she did mention it in terms of equality:

You know even with equal pay, even though you may have more credentials than a man, you still may not be given equal pay. And for me that is heartbreaking… because you work so hard, and you go to school, and you get all the education that you are told to get, and yet sometimes you are still not treated as an equal.

While Chloe did not go into detail about how much she was paid compared to the men in her district, when looking on the board minutes which are public record, she received the least of all the administrators, and she had the same if not more credentials. Once again this was another way to segregate her from her male co-workers and send a message that she was not as qualified as the men in the district. It sends the message that there is still a “boys club” that can make executive decisions for her, and that they are worthy to make those decisions because they are paid more.

Moreover, both Chloe and Kate described instances when they were disrespected in the workplace. Kate explained that she was often asked to do work that a woman would be expected to do:

I am president of our association, and they are like “Well you need to take the notes.” And I’ll say “Why, because I am the girl? No, I am not taking the notes. Someone else needs to take the notes.” Or they will say “We just re-did our contract, can you type that up?” “o.” So you know it is still that perception.

In this instance Kate talked about being reduced to “being a girl” and that she had the self-awareness to understand that the male leaders have created this alliance and have left her out, and therefore they expect her to do the jobs that they deem acceptable. This behavior fits the
historical pattern of male leadership dominance that men tend to have: “task oriented, ability to take command/control, autocratic decision making” (Prime et al., 2009). Therefore, *The executive boys club* is taking this stereotypical gender role with the other women in the district and they expect the female leaders to take a back seat.

Both Kate and Chloe also said that they were not only treated differently as female educational leaders, but that they were sometimes disrespected when the men made “sexist” remarks or “crude” comments during meetings. It was clear that there was an unbalanced dynamic between *The executive boys network* and themselves, yet they each described dealing with these situations in different ways. Kate played into her gender role, as she explained the need to stay quiet when faced with this injustice:

I tend to stay more quiet in those meetings… quiet and sit back, and know how intelligent I am, because on one hand you need to know your stuff, but on the other you can’t be too in their faces.

Even though Kate both recognized and acknowledged that there is an inequity or injustice happening, she felt that she could not speak out about it. Kate talked about taking a more passive role when dealing with *The executive boys network* or when she did speak up, as she mentioned in her stories, it was in a more joking way. She seemed to use this as a way of survival. This could be because when women speak up and are more direct, they can be seen as minimizing their feminine characteristics and trying to adopt male values to achieve gender equality (Bell, 1995). As a result, this causes women to be seen as fake or unlikeable because they are not “themselves.” Therefore, Kate talked about “choosing to ignore it” and “to not make a fuss about it… because it is the way it is.” If Kate were to speak up, she may be seen as trying to violate the prescribed gender roles, and she may be afraid of the backlash. Kate almost resigned herself to
the fact that *The executive boys network* has made the decision, and she needs to deal with it, and survive in a world where she is an outsider.

However, Chloe deals with *The executive boys network* in a different fashion. Chloe took a more pro-active approach, as she explained that being honest and direct is the best way to solve the issue. For example, Chloe explained:

> When you have an honest relationship you can kind of call them on it and let them know. Like “Hmm I was a little offended by your comment that you made…I work just as hard as you do, and you know I have the same if not more credentials then you,” but you never want to throw that, but sometimes you may have to have that conversation.

While Chloe talked about having a conversation with male co-workers about the imbalance, injustice, and inequity, the words she used to describe the conversation showed the uneven balance of power. Chloe felt that she needed to show her worth by saying she had the same credentials, which demonstrated that there was already a divide between *The executive boys network* and herself. Her words showed that she felt she needed to justify or prove her worth.

The literature supports this, as Eagly (2005) described that in school districts female leaders often have difficult times with male leaders and may feel the need to prove themselves because they are surrounded by female teachers who fit the perspective roles, but they must lead outside them. Male leaders then resent the overturning of the expected and usual hierarchical relation between the genders. Therefore, while Chloe and Kate dealt with *The executive boys network* in different manners, they ultimately both faced this injustice together.

While Kate and Chloe both recognized that *The executive boys network* and those outside perceptions of women in educational leadership were present and continued to impact them on many levels, Erica, on the other hand, had a different point of view. Erica repeatedly explained
that she did not feel that as though she was perceived differently than the male leaders because she was a woman, yet she told some stories that contradicted this notion. For example, Erica talked about walking the halls with the superintendent (who is a man) and how the students would ask her if she were his wife. She laughed while telling this story, and said she often had to explain to students that she is the business administrator who handles the money for the district, and that students would respond by saying, “Wow, a woman can do that?” She explained that the students were usually very surprised that a woman was handling the money for the school district. The literature explains that this could be due to the community that makes up the district, in which fathers often took on the traditional role of handling the money (Anderman & Maehr, 1994).

Moreover, Erica described how being a woman may have impacted her pursuit of a new job opportunity:

A couple months ago a local school district reached out to me for a business administrator position. I went through three interviews, and my last interview was with the entire board and it was constant questions and I think I nailed them all…. but I told them that in order for me to leave them I would need to make 40K more. In my head I was like “who the heck asks for that kind of money, that is greedy!” But then the women in the district would say, “Erica, do you think a man would think that was greedy?” and I am like “No because he is the breadwinner and if he is going to take on those responsibilities that you are going to take on he would ask for it.” They didn’t hire me, which is fine, I think I was asking for too much not just money but other things. But I don’t personally feel that women are different, although I do think they tend to pay men more.
While Erica said that she did not feel different from her male counterparts, her story said something else, as she explained that a man may not have felt guilty asking for more money, but as a woman she did. Moreover, she felt she didn’t get the job because she “asked for too much” and felt that men do generally get paid more. Much like Chloe, she talked about inequality when it comes to men versus women in leadership. This dichotomy is not unusual, as research shows that many women may be unaware of having personally been victims of gender discrimination, and deny it even when it is objectively true or when they see that women in general experience discrimination (Ely, Ibrrah, Holb, 2011, p. 52). This is because women have worked hard to take gender out of the equation in order to try to diminish bias and be recognized for their skills and talents. Therefore, while Erica may face outside constraints from society, and may be treated differently in the district by The executive boys network, these are subliminal and not recognized by her.

Like Chloe, Erica talked about how her candor can sometimes negatively affect her as a female educational leader. As a business administrator, Erica also works with the board of education and the community, and she explained that she is often very outspoken and direct, which can “get her in trouble” with people sometimes. Erica explained that she is very honest with her opinions. She described a time with her board of education in which they did not want to pass the budget and she was up front and urged them to pass it because if not they would be making a mistake. Erica noted that her open candor is not always well-received:

So my openness and candor can be a bad thing because it can come off as being not respectful, although others feel that they always know where they stand with me and where I am coming from. So sometimes I think I can come off as not respecting the board
and it is not that at all, it is the whole system that is just kind of messed up, and I am just trying to do what is best for the school.

When Erica described herself as straightforward and direct, she was listing attributes that society values in male leaders but not in female leaders. Society praises dominance, authority, driving ambition, unflinching decisiveness, and fierce determination for male leaders yet not for female leaders (Kellerman & Rhode, 2004, p. 5). Therefore, a double standard is created with these expectations and women are not encouraged to portray such characteristics. Women are encouraged to internalize other stereotypes, which ultimately creates a self-fulfilling prophecy (Kellerman & Rhode, 2004).

Therefore when Erica stepped outside her stereotypical role, the board saw her negatively. Moreover, when women do possess male characteristics, they appear too aggressive or strident (Kellerman & Rhode, 2004). Consequently, when women adopt these stereotypically masculine authoritative styles, they are rated lower when evaluated, especially when the role is typically occupied by men (Kellerman & Rhode, 2004). For Erica, when she tried to lead the board members, she came off as disrespectful, much like Kate in her meeting with The executive boys network and Chloe in asking for equal pay. In addition, it was interesting that she chose to use the word disrespectful, as that word has the connotation of a child who does not respect authority, almost like she was being punished for speaking her mind.

It was apparent that while these were strong female leaders, strong male leaders surrounded them. From what they shared, it seemed that while these women were educational leaders, they were still surrounded by The executive boys network that exerted its power and had the final say. Some of the women chose to acknowledge the impact of The executive boys network and some chose to ignore it, yet each in some way told stories that showed that their
leadership was influenced by the male leaders surrounding them. Literature shows that the barriers that impact women are implicitly embedded in the culture and structure of an organization (Kronsell, 2005). Throughout the participants’ stories, it became evident that the female educational leaders were still struggling to move away from these preconceived outside notions and move towards gender equality with the men in the district.

The literature review revealed that one of the major barriers women face with respect to influencing gender equity is the social construction of gender. The social construction of gender impacts organizations and institutions. There are “concealed processes that subtly and latently produce and reproduce gender distinctions” (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998, p. 787). As explored thus far, society has preconceived notions of which roles are better suited for men and which roles are better suited for women, and in terms of K-12 educational leaders, society deems that role as better suited for men (Boldry, 2001). This idea was evident as the male leaders in the district banded together as if in an alliance, excluded the women leaders, and left them with little executive power.

All three women shared stories about the influence of male leaders on their leadership as female educational leaders. It was apparent in their stories that they needed to deal with the The executive boys network on many levels. Whether each woman acknowledged it as a barrier or not, it was present in many of their stories. While Chloe and Kate were more reflective in acknowledging their situation, Erica was either unaware or unwilling to recognize the situation and therefore was dismissive. Yet each story showed that there is some male dominance affecting their leadership roles, and that they needed to deal with it and survive on their own terms. Therefore, it is clear that, for female educational leaders, male leadership and outside stereotypical perceptions are hurdles that still need to be addressed. It would be interesting to
look at districts that have a high number of female educational leaders to see if this negates the issues or creates new ones.

**When I Look at My Reflection, Who Do I See?**

The alchemist picked up a book that someone in the caravan had brought. Leafing through the pages, he found a story about Narcissus.

The alchemist knew the legend of Narcissus, a youth who knelt daily beside a lake to contemplate his own beauty. He was so fascinated by himself that, one morning, he fell into the lake and drowned. At the spot where he fell, a flower was born, which was called the narcissus.

But this was not how the author of the book ended the story.

He said that when Narcissus died, the goddesses of the forest appeared and found the lake, which had been fresh water, transformed into a lake of salty tears.

“Why do you weep?” the goddesses asked.

“I weep for Narcissus,” the lake replied.

“Ah, it is no surprise that you weep for Narcissus,” they said, “for though we always pursued him in the forest, you alone could contemplate his beauty close at hand.”

“But... was Narcissus beautiful?” the lake asked.

“Who better than you to know that?” the goddesses asked in wonder. “After all, it was by your banks that he knelt each day to contemplate himself!”

The lake was silent for some time. Finally, it said:

“I weep for Narcissus, but I never noticed that Narcissus was beautiful. I weep because, each time he knelt beside my banks, I could see, in the depths of his eyes, my own beauty reflected.”
“What a lovely story,” the alchemist thought.

— Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*

All three participants showed deep self-reflection and self-criticism in their interviews. All three described feelings of self-doubt, guilt, and unknowingness when it came to themselves and their leadership ability. The female leaders spent much time internalizing and debating their decisions, almost like someone staring at her own reflection.

For example, each leader shared stories about some executive decisions that they needed to make in their lives, and how making those decisions caused self-doubt. Kate shared stories about the changes she was making to the school as its principal, such as new construction, schedule changes, and teacher changes. She explained that her process was a collective one, but not an easy one:

I took a lot of input from the staff. People would come to me and say “we used to do grade level hallways why don’t we go back to that,” and then we all kind of talked about it. It was weird because when we made that decision, when we have faculty meetings sometimes, or whatever we want to call them, the only problem with this staff is that sometimes when we all get together they say nothing, they say nothing! So you are like “Are they on board or are they not on board?” Then a few key people come to me afterwards and they share people’s complaints or concerns, but they all just said nothing, and then I have to go to them and be like, “Are we good with this?”

Kate described her need for a collective decision, for validation from the staff.

It was evident that she was continuing to debate her decision, and that she wanted to make sure that her leadership instinct was right. When she talked about introducing the new
structure of the school she seemed to be questioning if the staff was on the same page, and this created seeds of doubt:

So with the grade level halls, I really thought we were all okay with that, and then after I did, I have people from one specific department come and strongly complain about it. And I was like I thought we were all on the same page! So then it made me second-guess, “Is this the right thing to do?” “Am I getting the wrong impression from everybody?” I feel like I think it is a good idea, because I think the craziness in the hallways will be minimized, no way will it ever be gone, so I really think it is a good idea, but then when I hear this, that other part of your brain that is like “What are you doing?” And when I sit here and listen to whole ruckus of the classes changing, and I think I am doing it, I am just going to do it. I am going to stick to it, and I am going to do it, because I believe this is what is good for the school. Just like anywhere, there are people that get mad, and stay mad.

While Kate ultimately made the decision to go forward with changes in the school, she talked about doubting or second-guessing herself. In fact, Kate repeated many times that staff will come to her and complain, which caused her to question if she was doing the right thing. She even shared a story of a teacher writing an email and mentioning the school culture negatively. This really hit her on a personal level and caused her angst and stress. Interestingly, after we were interrupted during the interview, she asked me if she was “doing a good job” or if her answers were too long. This showed that questioning aspect. It is clear that while Kate came to a final decision of “sticking to it” and “believing in herself,” she had to work through the process and remind herself that she knew what she was doing; she had to stare at her own reflection and give herself that self-love pep talk. This trust in her own ability did not come easily. Research
confirms this self-doubt can cause women to feel that they are inadequate leaders, while their male counterparts are more likely to feel “very qualified” to lead (Sandberg, 2013)

Kate was not the only one with this self-doubt undertone. During the interview, Erica would also ask if her answers were “on-task” or apologize for giving her opinion. When she talked about making the decision to stay or pursue other opportunities within her job position, she often mentioned that she struggled to make the decision because of her uncertainty. Erica explained that when it came to her work, “I would always criticize myself ….I am my biggest critic.” This undertone of self-doubt crept inside both Kate and Erica, and they have to crawl their way to confidence and self-reassurance.

Chloe also continuously talked about how she had a “low confidence level” and how was very hard on herself when she came into her new role as vice principal. A self-described perfectionist, Chloe explained that while she learned from her mistakes, she also could be quite critical of herself:

Sometimes you feel that you can never do enough as female leader. You know, I think that is more personal. When you are such a perfectionist, you just want to be your best all the time. So you do 20 things, and out of the 20 things, you may do 2 things that are wrong. But those 2 things are the ones that bother you the most, not the other 18 things that you did great….So a lot of times you feel as a woman leader you can never measure up. But I think that is something that as women, because we are good at so many things, you know we just want to be our best.

Chloe used words like “measure up,” and “doing it right” as she often put pressure on herself to be the best, and she explained that when she made those mistakes she would focus on them. She needed to remind herself to also focus on the positive.
While the theme of self-doubt, questioning, and reflection was not an apparent theme, it was a subtle theme that continued throughout the interview process. Kate summed this theme up nicely when she said:

When you are thrown out there to the building or to the wolves, or whomever else you are working with, you have to be like “No, I know this is the right decision.” But then, I think sometimes we, I know I do, question myself as a female. Asking yourself, “Is this the right thing?”

The undercurrents of self doubt, criticism, and questioning support the majority of research that states that women can experience imposter syndrome, which is the feeling that they are not worthy of their position within their professional career (Bahn, 2014). Research also states that women do not often recognize this feeling, but that it is a consistent trace throughout their psyche (Bahn, 2014). Many of these women on the outside seemed confident of their leadership skills, and proud of their accomplishments, therefore this theme was an interesting one to analyze. While the hints of self-doubt were present throughout the interview, so were traces of power and confidence. Therefore, it begs the question if this was negative self-perception or just the normal amount of questioning that every human goes through.

The original version of the story of Narcissus warned against vanity and selfishness. However, this re-written version focuses on the positive of self-love; in fact in this version Narcissus was able to create something beautiful out of his vanity. Narcissus enjoying his beauty was not necessarily wrong. His self-love also allowed the lake to see its own beauty. Should Narcissus have been less than what he was? He could have been more. He could have embraced his gift and found a way to give others what he gave to the lake, like the female educational leaders.
The female educational leaders did not embrace their inner self or harness their amazing abilities. Instead they questioned it, and bathed in their insecurities. It seemed that sometimes they were even ashamed of it, and therefore they too succumbed to their own internal reflections. However, research explains that sharing the inner narratives of women, exposing their doubts, fears, and questions, can have positive outcomes for future female leaders (Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Shakeshaft, 1989; Tallerico & Tingley, 2001) The sharing of these women can create a new story, or a new twist on the old story, much like that of Narcissus.

**The Great Balancing Act**

So be sure when you step,

Step with care and great tact.

And remember that life’s a Great Balancing Act.

And will you succeed?

Yes! You will indeed!

(98 and ¾ percent guaranteed).

Kid, you’ll move mountains.

-- Dr. Seuss, *Oh, The Places You'll Go!*

The theme that brought up the most emotions and common ground was the balancing act between family and professional life. Work and family life balance was a large obstacle for each of these female educational leaders.

Kate and Erica both experienced internal conflict when it came to the balance between their motherly duties and their leadership ones. They both talked about the guilt associated with being a mother and an educational leader. Kate explained that when her children were young, she would have to drop them off at day care early and it would be “the hardest thing:”
It was, it was really hard…. any job I think, being a mom and working is really hard. It really is, because we take work home, educators take work home, I am not just an office person, and I am not saying anything bad about business people, but their day pretty much ends, where we -- we keep going. Even though we have the summer off, we still think about things, and we plan things, and you are buying things, and you are looking for things, and you are educating yourself, so, it’s hard. Our day starts earlier, for that instance, the day care opened up 20 minutes earlier so I could drop my son off. Which makes you rip your heart out as a parent, because you are like, “My God, like I am such a loser mother because my kid is here for almost 12 hours” it is so hard.

Erica had a similar experience, as she felt guilty if she missed a phone call or an event. She told the story of how she felt guilty that she was unable to make a field trip due to her job:

Balancing is really important as well… especially as a woman and leader, and not feeling so guilty. If I could take one thing out of my life it would be that guilt. That, how are you going to be the best mom and also do the best at your job? You know there are times when I wasn’t always able to make field trips. [My husband] actually went to one last year, and I was the happiest person that [he] went to a field trip but why not! They are his kids! Why do I have to feel like it is my role to go there? I can’t remember I had a bonds sale or something and I had these notes to pay for the way these construction projects are going, we get reimbursed by the state but not until we reach a certain level of expenditures, so we are spending money and not getting anything back so I had to go borrow money and I had a sale and I couldn’t go, and I felt like crap.

Both Erica and Kate described an internal struggle about not being there for their children, or having to juggle family life and work situations. When they were describing The
great balancing act they seemed to feel pain because they were not measuring up to what an "ideal mother" should be in their eyes. Research supports this thought, as studies on women in leadership have shown that women often feel that the ideal mother is one who “had to be a stay at home mom” (Litmanovitz, 2011, p. 27) and therefore they often feel conflicted between their leadership duties and their motherly ones.

Erica then explained that even when she home, she felt the need to do multiple jobs, and multi-task: “I am constantly on the phone now, even at work I will still answer for them, I have my phone with me all the time. My kids are my priority even though work is as well…you have to multi-task!” Throughout the interview Erica explained that she had to constantly check her phone for email or phone calls. Even before the interview started, she warned me that she may be checking her phone, and she didn’t want to seem rude, but it was a habit. She explained that when she was home with her children she also did this:

When I am at home this is me [motions to her phone in her pocket] I am making dinner, and washing dishes with my cell phone in my pocket. Everyone says that I respond right away. I could be sitting at the kitchen table doing homework with my boys and then having my iPad out doing work as well. I will say to my boys “Do this question” and then I will be looking at an email or looking something up.

While Erica seemed focused during our interview, the need to continue to “do it all” seemed to weigh heavy on her mind, meaning that she was never just totally present doing one thing, but needing to do several at once. This could have an impact on her job performance. She explained there is a constant juggling act between her work life and her home life:

There will be times when they call from school and this one is sick, and I am 40 minutes away from home, so I will have to call my husband or my mom or something and be like
“can you pick up” and then at the moment I am like okay he is fine, he is safe, but then sometimes I am like you know, “do they want their mom, do they need that hug?” I mean when I go home, of course…the older one is going through pre-teen and puberty and all that stuff, and emotions are going crazy, so I think he needs me more. It is that constant push-pull.

Both Erica and Kate talked about the pressure to make sure that they were there for both their children and their leadership positions, and that often it could be a hard balance as they always felt that one was not getting enough attention. Research supports this notion as it suggests that women find themselves torn between the enormous demands of administrative leadership and the social expectations surrounding family responsibilities (Grogan, 1999; Hoff et al., 2006; Johnson, 1997; Tallerico, 2000; Valian, 1999; Young & McLeod, 2001). In looking at their body language throughout the interview, it felt as if they were constantly holding their breath waiting for the next thing to arise and preparing themselves to be ready for it. The anticipation was palpable, as each was in the interview, yet in the back of their mind also ready for the 10 other things that would come afterwards before their day would be done.

While Chloe had similar feelings, she explained that because she had children early, she had to deal with the balance while working and going to school:

I still had to make sure that their clothes were clean, I still had to wash clothes, so I spent a lot of my times on the weekends washing clothes, taking care of the kids, making sure that their homework was done, um my kids always did well in school…. I think that is because when they were younger, I instilled that in them. So I never really had to worry about you know them doing their homework or them getting good grades. So that was a really good thing. I also didn’t have to really worry about their behaviors in school, they
were always good in school…they didn’t have detentions, but I think that is because I instilled that in them, our lives were very hectic, and they didn’t see me a lot sometimes because I was always working or at school.

Chloe talked about the fact that there were so many duties at home, at her leadership positions, and going to school. While Erica and Kate talked about the guilt associated with their responsibilities, Chloe talked about how it took an emotional toll on her life:

There were times I was just so exhausted. Mentally exhausted. There were times, especially when I was working on my bachelor’s, that I was depressed. I was very depressed because I had a lot going on. My husband he would travel, he was a musician, so he would be gone three months at a time and I was still working on my bachelor’s and then had the kids, so I considered myself a functioning depressant because I was able to get things done, but there were times that I would just be in the bed and I didn’t want a… that was my escape. So that was very challenging.

It was clear from all three participants that being a mother, wife, and leader could take an emotional toll, and that women felt a continuous inner battle between their home life and their careers.

Yet this struggle was not only internal; family and career pressure seemed to come from outside sources as well. Each leader touched on the fact that the role of being a wife and mother was not just self-pressure but also outside pressure. For example, Erica explained that coming from a traditional Greek family, and her husband coming from a traditional Italian family, she took on the expected cultural norm which was the sole role of being a wife and mother. She described this role:
But I know it has been getting harder because his career is getting more demanding. When I say recently I mean the past two years and so is mine, the construction is taking a lot of time. I used to do everything. My husband is Italian and his mom didn’t work so he is so used to that, and I did everything and he didn’t do anything...when we got married I assumed everything. We made the same amount of money up until two years ago so I assumed the house cleaning and the grocery shopping was mine, I did it for so long that in the past two years now he puts the kids on the bus in the morning and he makes their lunches, and he is kind of bitter lately and I am like, “You are such in a bad mood lately, what is your problem?” And he is like, “It is a lot of work,” and I am like, “Hello! Of course it is a lot of work.”

Erica explained that when she got married she assumed the responsibility of being a wife and mother, taking care of almost everything domestic and that it just got to be too much. She explained that her husband did not ask her to do those things, but it was self-imposed and it was more of an expectation she, and her culture, set for her. She explained that the change in schedule caused some issues, and that her husband now understood the difficulty of The great balancing act. She even stated that she felt bad that he had to take on more responsibility and she even talked about the fact that she knew her husband wished it would go back to the way it was:

I think he would rather sometimes go back to where he didn’t have to do so much. I mean I would even go so far as to drop off his dry cleaning and I wish I didn’t do all that, because these past two years have been more difficult. I feel bad for him. It isn’t his fault; I did it. Now all the sudden he says my clothes need to go to the dry cleaner, and yeah
there is your car and it is down the street and he isn’t used to that. As women you are expected to do it all.

This showed that perhaps she felt that she was doing something wrong by taking a step back from the traditional role of wife.

Research supports this notion as women are still expected to do many of the domestic duties at home. Statistics show that women spend an average of 4.4 hours per day on housework while men spent on average 2.4 hours per day. In terms of child-care, women spent 2.4 hours per day and men spent on average 1.8 hours each day (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Kosar, D., Altunay, E., & Yalcinkaya, M., 2014). Research explains this is due to outside societal norms, as women have traditionally assumed the role of cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the children. As a result, switching those roles can often be difficult (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Therefore Erica’s story was aligned with much of the research.

Erica also explained that early in her career, she did make sacrifices for her husband and her children. Both her and her husband were working in the same accounting firm, and because they had the same schedules, it became too hectic. Therefore, she made the decision to leave and go part time:

So he really wanted to be partner in the firm, I wasn’t sure I wanted to be a partner in a public accounting firm, but I didn’t necessarily think… it just wasn’t what I really wanted. So I was like “you go ahead and do that I am going to go” and I worked at [local high school] for a little bit. So at this point I was struggling internally because do I continue with my career in accounting and do I stay --I wanted -still another kid, or do I stay at home. I waitressed too, so I made a lot of money, and I didn’t know…so when [husband] gets home from work should I just pick up some shifts, make some money that
way? But in the end I thought about and I realized it is probably best for me to stay in the field, and do what I want to do.

Erica gave up some of her career aspirations for her husband and her children.

Her decision falls in line with the research, as Sandberg (2013) stated that women consider possible future family obligations and therefore they often “leave before they leave” by passing on opportunities to advance within their company. Women, more often than men, are also choosing between leadership careers and being a good parent, and are often unwilling to take the chance to try and pursue both. Erica said when she looks back on that time she actually regrets her decision. She explained that it was mainly based on the fact that she thought her children would “need her:”

I am glad I did, but the only thing that I regret, is when I went to [local high school] I went to part time. I did three days a week. Looking back now I regret it in a way…. for my career I regret it because the people who didn’t do that like my colleagues are in, I guess a better place right now, but then sometimes I think back and appreciate that time with my kids. But when they were younger I didn’t realize…I thought they needed me, and they do, they need you, but now they need me more. When they are little you are like “Oh my God, they are infants, they need this and that,” but they are fine. Now that they are older, they need you more because they need that motivation, you building their self esteem.

It was clear that Erica struggled to make a decision that she felt was right, and even during the telling of this story she was unsure whether she made the right decision or not, because she went back and forth explaining that either outcome would have resulted in some form of regret.
Erica’s husband was not the only one with expectations about her work and family life balance. Erica also observed that her family had made comments about her busy schedule:

Sometimes my mother-in-law or my mother will say things and I will say I am working as hard as I can and I am doing the best I can and I am not going to look back and feel shitty about something that I did today, when I am not lying, I am not stealing, cheating, I am a good person and if you are going to penalize me for working hard I don’t know what to say.

Therefore Erica not only had an internal battle with guilt, but her cultural values also played a part in how she viewed herself and how her family members viewed her as she herself, her husband, and her family all had opinions on what was the right way to conduct herself as a woman -- which did not match up with being a female educational leader.

Kate had similar issues. Kate mentioned that outside perceptions at the work place had an influence on her leadership interactions. She explained that it could be hard for the mostly male leaders around her to understand her work-life balance struggle. She told a story about her past boss being “very unfair” and not understanding:

So I would get emails from a past superintendent …, at all times of day and night, at six o’clock in the morning or whatever, or he would email me at six o’clock in the morning, and then he would send me two texts, between then and the time I got to work, saying, “I have emailed you and you haven’t responded.” And I was like, “Are you kidding?” I do look at my emails all the time, and even I send out emails at crazy times or whatever, and I try to respond, but at that point, you know a couple years ago, my kids were still in elementary school, and he would be like, “Everyone else has responded but I am waiting for you,” and I was kind of like, “Really?”
While Kate described not being able to always look at her email, she continued to give explanations as to why she may not have answered right away, almost as if she were trying to justify it to herself. She explained that she does answer emails most of the time, which was interesting because even though she knew that this was an unfair expectation that was being placed upon her, she felt the need to explain, almost as if she felt guilty for not doing her job. She then went on to explain how the other leaders in the district were able to answer so fast compared to her:

Because at that point, they were all men and none of their wives worked. So it was a lot of negativity there, a lot of times I was like crying on the way to work because it was just way too stressful. And it just felt, I don’t know, very [pause] unfair. Very unfair. I think it’s just the way it is. I think it is just really hard for men to fully understand.

Kate felt that the superintendent and the other male leaders were not empathetic and did not understand the demands of being a working woman, as they were not only men, but their wives did not work and took care of responsibilities.

While the participants did cite outside perceptions as hindering their work-family life balance, they also talked about how their families supported them. For example, Chloe talked about the fact that her father helped her juggle some of the cooking, cleaning, and sports run-around with her kids. She stated, “If it wasn’t for my family I don’t know, I wouldn’t have made it. I just wouldn’t have made it.” Moreover, she explained that her husband was a big support system and a “gift from God” as he was her partner in every way. Erica also discussed how her family helped when she needed them to pick her children up or as a support. Kate told a story about how she talked to her parents every day on the way to work as a comfort and for a pep talk.
She recalled a conversation one day on the way to work, when she told her dad about a situation with the former superintendent:

I would talk to my dad on the phone. I talk to my parents every day on my way to work, so when I would talk to my dad I would be crying, and he would be like “you know don’t let these assholes get you down, you have been there longer, you just need to stick it out, you know your job, and he is going to be gone. They are just building their resumes.”

And, and, it is true! It is very true.

Kate, Erica, and Chloe all described throughout the interviews that their families helped by supporting them through tough times and giving them hope, motivation, and comfort.

Each female leader expressed the need to find a work and family life balance, and said it was a true balancing act. Interestingly, when the female educational leaders described the many things they had to balance, none of them talked about taking care of themselves, such as engaging in self-care or making their own needs a priority. One reason could be that they lump self-care in the family pile, or it may show that they have so much to juggle that their own needs fall by the wayside or come in last.

Each participant explained that being a female educational leader, a mother, and a wife was rewarding but also exhausting, and that there were both expectations that they put on themselves and expectations from others that make *The great balancing act* especially difficult. While they may not always succeed at *The great balancing act* they do succeed 98 and three-quarters percent of the time.

**You’re My Buddy**

It will be that way until the end

And wherever you go, I want you to know
You're my buddy, my pal, my friend

Willie Nelson, “I’ve Loved You All Over The World”

One of the most prominent themes throughout the interviews was the role of mentors. Each woman said that mentors helped her, inspired her to be the female educational leader she was today, and combated negative self or outside pressure. There seemed to be two types of mentors, the family role model and the professional mentor. Each woman noted having both of those mentors and explained how each served an important role.

The female educational leaders explained that their family mentors were what sparked their initial leadership journeys. Kate talked about her father being a great role model for her when she was growing up:

I definitely feel my parents were a big part. My mom didn’t go to college, my mom was a hairdresser, and my dad didn’t go to college either. He worked in the trucking industry. He wasn’t a driver. He worked as a manger and general manger, we moved every four years growing up because he became more successful in his career and got promoted. I think my father, who came from a very poor family, worked his way up, never wanted his daughters to work you know that kind of thing…but my dad was a hard worker, like a really hard worker, and would go to work every morning, in the trucking industry you are there early anyway, so he really worked hard, and I would say that I got my work ethic from my dad.

Kate described her father as a huge inspiration in terms of her motivation and perseverance. She explained that her father was a role model regarding how to lead and work hard. She also asserted that it was not about his education, but it was about his values. She said that her father’s choice of profession gave him experience, and gave her a new point of view:
But he also had the mindset, I think he knew how the world was in the trucking industry, knew it was man’s world, so having two daughters that were getting ready to graduate high school and college, you know it is interesting the perspective he took on it. He knew that he had to work harder than the rest of them. You have to go; you have to work hard, so I definitely think my dad was key.

Kate’s father was a role model on how to lead and work hard, which gave her support and served as a guide who allowed her to feel safe.

Just like Kate, Erica talked about her family working hard. She explained that her father worked hard, that he was a role model for a work ethic, and that he taught her many lessons that she uses today as an educational leader. She said that her parents had a strong work ethic:

I mean both of my parents worked and my dad was only home one day a week and worked six ten-hour days, and I just remember how hard they worked, and he taught me so much about working hard and having integrity.

Both Erica and Kate described how important having their parents as role models were for them growing up, and how it contributed greatly to their current leadership ability and work ethic. As each of them talked about her family, she relaxed in her facial expressions, almost as if her family was her source of peace and safety.

Chloe also said that she “grew up in a household where my father was there and always pushed me,” and that she learned so much from her husband who is currently a principal too. She explained that her husband was a great role model:

I think I learned a lot of that from my husband, because my husband is very... he is a man, but he is so compassionate, he is so sensitive to other people’s needs, and kind in
how he speaks to people and I learn from him by observing and watching him, he is so wise and he thinks before he speaks.

Chloe, Kate, and Erica all said that having a family mentor and role model was important for them growing up, and remained so as they moved into leadership positions. It was evident that it didn’t matter who the family role model was, as long as they felt the ability to connect with them. Moreover, they all also described the full circle effect, stating a hope that their children see them as role models and a belief that their leadership positions will have a positive impact on their children just as it did for them.

While family mentors were important to the female educational leaders, each participant stated that professional mentors were also imperative to their current level of success. Each woman said that she had a professional mentor and that it impacted them greatly. For example, Kate explained that when she was just a teacher it was a mentor who pushed her to go into administration:

My principal, …, really kind of old school guy, but loved his staff, loved the teachers….

But he really pushed me -- and would say “What are you doing you have this degree, you need to start applying for jobs,” He really pushed me to do it and it was hard because I really loved teaching.

That consistent push made Kate start applying for leadership positions.

Similarly, Chloe talked about her mentor, who was the person that continuously inspired her to persevere:

It [the decision to pursue leadership] was all because of her, she really pushed me. You need a mentor, I was a little late in the game getting a mentor, and I really felt I have
come so far in such a short time, and that was because I was persistent and I had someone
to guide me.

Comparable to both Kate and Chloe, Erica also talked about the fact that her first mentor
allowed her to gain the experience she needed to go forward and that she felt so honored and
loyal to him because of it:

I was very fortunate… the partner I ended up working for, I was really lucky because he
didn’t have a team, you usually have a team, so he had me doing financial type stuff, and
everyone else started at the staff level where they were testing and looking at vouchers
and stuff like that and I was doing budgets so I learned. He really got me started, and
mentored me, guided me. At the time I was like, “What the heck is this guy making me
do?” But it was good, I was very loyal and very appreciative to him because he hired me
and gave me that opportunity and taught me so much.

All three female educational leaders talked about how their initial mentors allowed them to gain
experience, confidence, and motivation, and often set them on the path that they are on today.

While Chloe described how her mentor evolved into different roles as she grew as a
leader, Kate and Erica noted that as they progressed into their positions, they found mentors on a
deeper level who could connect in different ways. Kate described two professional mentors who
treated her as an equal and helped her discover her identity as a female leader:

So I mean everything I learned about budgeting I learned from the business administrator
that was here … so she was excellent. The superintendent that was here… he was
amazing because [pause] some superintendents you don’t want to call and say, “Oh I
goofed or you know I have a situation, I am not sure what to do,” because you never
know as a teacher, you never know how someone is going to take it. Will they put it in
the back of their head, “She is a dummy, or that isn’t a good choice.” But he was really great, because you could call him and say “I have a situation, I think I am going to handle it in this way, what do you think?” And he would be like “Yeah, that is a pretty good idea, or that is a good idea, but maybe you should do this.” Or “Well, I don’t think that is a good idea, I suggest this.”

Kate explained that both of her professional mentors gave her confidence and space. She did not need to ask permission to have conversations with them. This allowed her to gain her own sense of identity, and she explained that this was important to her as a woman in educational leadership:

So I was a young administrator, a young girl, a young woman, I was in my 30s, young 30s, they were like “Nope you are all equal.” So I think going into a world where they treated you like an equal makes you more confident… makes you know that they trust your ideas, they trust your decisions, trust the route you want to take, so I think that helps build up how you feel.

Erica had a similar situation with her mentor, who hired her and was the superintendent when she first started working as the business administrator:

I felt so fortunate, because he trusted me. He had faith in me to let me do what I do. He taught me a lot. [He] taught me a lot in the sense of not my job, but in the sense of the leadership styles. I mean I took a lot from him and some things you grow to learn yourself. But he was a mentor in the sense that he believed in me, he gave me a great opportunity, I feel like, I have learned so much here. But [he] was a mentor in many ways, and he was one of those kick you in the butt when you had a bad day, but he also knew when to give you a hug or say “Put your big girl panties on” and “Go get them.”
So now I am at the point where I don’t need that, I can do it on my own. Mentors are someone you look up to that kind of motivate you and make you appreciate things… there was something in that relationship that you just can’t explain, at first you are grateful for those opportunities and then you want to do well.

Both Erica and Kate described how their professional mentors helped them establish their identity as leaders, and allowed them to explore new ways to lead. Litmanovitz (2011) would agree with this assessment, as he explained that one of the commonalities among successful female educational leaders was that they had mentors to support them. Moreover, Cullen and Luna (1993) explained that there were different levels of mentors, and it was imperative for each educational leader to find the right type. All three women found the level of mentor that worked for them. Their family mentors were “role model” mentors; their original entry level mentors were “counseling,” who helped them to get established and offered guidance; and then finally their professional mentors were “the offer of friendship” or “sponsorship” which allowed them to find their own leadership identities. Having the right type of mentor helped them become effective leaders.

Interestingly, both Erica and Kate talked about the fact that their mentors were men. All three participants talked about working with male co-workers versus. female co-workers and had varying opinions. Kate expressed the need to “find other women” to work with, and that she wished she had more female co-workers and mentors throughout her career. She also observed that when Chloe was hired as vice principal, it was a nice change to have a woman around:

I think that recently having Dr. Chloe here, having another female here for the last three years has been a positive; it is good because we work together, we really do work together, she is newer and she is green, but having that other female to balance, we think
alike. During situations we can look at each other, it is a good marriage, it really is, and I don’t know that it would be if it would be exactly the same with a man.

Kate was the only person who said she enjoyed working with female co-workers, as both Chloe and Erica explained they much prefer working with men. Both Chloe and Erica said that it was much easier to be honest with men, and that they were not as dramatic. Erica illustrated this when she said:

I like working with men. I work better with men because I just want to be up front, what is the issue and then let’s resolve it. I understand that we all have feelings, but I think that sometimes in a business you just have to take the feelings out of it, you have to be a genuine person. I just like working with men so much more, and like I said my two mentors were men, I just feel like with men, not that much emotion is involved. I felt that both of those men care a lot for me and would do anything for me but it wasn’t that excessiveness about it.

Similar to this experience, Chloe explained that she related more to men and felt that she could be more direct when working with male leaders:

Working with men in the district, it really isn’t a big problem for me, because I had a lot of male friends, so I was really able to connect more with men than females and I think it is because a lot of females they can be very catty, and you know, very controlling, and women can be controlling and I think that can be a flaw sometimes of women leaders and I think you learn how to let go of some of the rein and just know that you have people around you that have different expertise, you have to trust that. I think because we have so many men in the district, we are really men heavy in our district in terms of leaders, I
think men aren’t as catty and so they kind of make a balance, when it comes to leadership because what women may get caught up in men don’t, so it is good.

Both Chloe and Erica talked about the easiness of working with men, and that they both had to get used to working with women. This also supports the research that men are considered to be easy going, even when both men and women demonstrate the same exact behavior (Boldry 2001). Unlike Kate, Chloe felt that working with another woman leader was a bit of an adjustment:

I remember when I first came here, as a vice principal I had to work with a couple of females and I think that at the time we just weren’t meshing, and that really bothered me because when I am working with someone, I want to feel connected, but the only way that I could get my needs met was by being honest and by having that conversation, and it is difficult but once I was able to do that, and since having that courageous conversation, it made my work environment so much better. The one thing about me is that I never want to come to work, and I am feeling like I am on eggshells because it makes you really uncomfortable it makes you ill, like in your stomach, you just don’t feel well, and once I was able to do that and overcome that barrier it made things much better.

Chloe and Erica made it clear that for them, women were harder to work with.

Erica continued with this discussion when she mentioned that for a brief time there was a female superintendent who tried to mentor her but she “just didn’t have that connection.” She explained with a story about their time together:

We had an interim superintendent for a little that was a woman and I got along with her very well and at first I was like “Oh my gosh am I going to get along with her?” But I did. But, I didn’t have that relationship with her that I had with those two gentlemen. I
don’t know why, and she was so supportive. She was the first person to say to me --
every year we have a national conference and I never went to it, and I thought it was
really important to be home with my boys, and I didn’t know how [my husband] would
feel being at home alone with the kids and me in a different state than the kids and I
never flew by myself. But she had a son, and really encouraged me to go, she said, “You
need to go, and share your ideas and thoughts and how you do things with other people in
the country!” She said it is so different how everyone in different states handle things and
she pushed me to do it. But there was something there that I just can’t explain that wasn’t
there… I welcomed her advice and I valued it, but that connection wasn’t there.

While this female mentor did help Erica make a new decision, she just felt that she wasn’t the
right type of mentor and couldn’t connect. In fact Erica was nervous from the start that she
would not get along with another woman as a leader, and was surprised that she did. Both
Erica and Chloe had very specific perceptions about working with other women, as they called
them “catty” and hard to work with. This echoes some of the same issues that they face
themselves when it came to male leaders judging them. In essence, it seemed that they were
perpetuating the classic female stereotype. Research supports this notion, as many researchers
concluded that women working with women could create barriers. Kanter (1993) explained that
since there are so few women in leadership positions, outside and self-perceptions can make it
difficult for women to work together rather than seeing themselves as competition. This factor
could be why both Chloe and Erica called other women “catty” or dramatic: they feel that
competitive nature.

Kanter (1993) also explained that women do not want to be overly friendly with female
coworkers because it perpetuates the idea that they are exhibiting feminine friendship behavior.
This can lead to “horizontal violence,” which is a way of acting out the negative stereotypes placed upon the oppressed individual by the dominant group, in an attempt to regain a sense of power (Freire, 2000). This research supports the feelings that both Chloe and Erica may have had in regards to working with other women in the district. The question is why didn’t Kate feel this way? Perhaps it is because she is a principal and presides over Chloe, and therefore she does not feel any of this competitiveness.

While all three educational leaders had different stories about their mentors, each one was adamant that her mentor played a role in her leadership success. This theme was one of the most prevalent, as the leaders were quick and willing to talk about it. Moreover, all three talked about the fact that up and coming female educational leaders needed to find networks and mentors to help them as they pursued their positions. In summary, each participant talked about the fact that women in educational leadership need to have a mentor, even if it is just someone that turns into a buddy, pal, or friend to have on your side.

**Living Life like a Marathon not a Sprint**

Grit is sticking with your future, day in, and day out, and not just for the week, not just for the month, but for years.

--Angela Lee Duckworth, “Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance”

Each female educational leader talked about how her mentors helped motivate and inspire her. Moreover, each participant talked about the need to continue in the face of turmoil. Therefore, the last theme that was present throughout the interviews was a theme of intrinsic motivation, perseverance, and grit. The idea is that it was important to persevere day in and day out, to continue to overcome obstacles and stay motivated for extended periods of time.
(Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). Each participant talked about how she kept going in order to overcome adversity, showing their strong perseverance levels.

For example, Erica explained that it was so hard to do everything herself: to work, go to school, and pay for school, but she wouldn’t let herself stop:

Sometimes you have those moments that you say “Screw it all,” but then, I am like “No, this isn’t how you will succeed” and I would push myself. I had to wipe my tears and go. Doing that all pushed me and I felt like it made me a tougher person…made me a better person…. And I think my kids will see that… But I also think this, the kids will be better people from seeing me work and seeing what I do.

Chloe, too, talked about continuing to push on no matter how many times she wanted to give up or how many times people told her she would not amount to anything:

I looked at myself like the ordinary just wouldn’t do, and I always had to be better and I think I always had to be better is because I longed for…. I knew that wasn’t what I wanted to do with my life, so I had this intrinsic motivation that I am going to do something with my life and I think I did. I may not be a millionaire but for me I am content. I felt that I achieved a lot, and I am still trying to achieve. Even though I have a doctorate I am still trying to achieve and I am going to continue to go higher and higher until I am not living anymore. I want kids to look at me, and I want my kids to look at me and say wow, my mom did it, or Dr. Chloe did it she is an example. If you work hard and persevere and never give up even when others give up you can do it.

Both Chloe and Erica talked about the fact that part of their motivation was to be successful in their own mind but also to be role models for their children. They had this inner stubbornness that wouldn’t allow them to give up, and kept them motivated to keep going.
Kate summed up how a woman leader needed to have motivation:

So I think that you just need to know, you can do it. The strength as a young girl, that you know you want to be a leader in school and I am going to get all A’s, you have to not let part of that young girl go, and know that I can do this. And just, stand up for yourself and not be pushed around by the guys because you are a girl. It is freaking 2016 for God’s sake, and I hope that other young women that I work with are like, “Oh, well if she can be married, and balance a house,” and I mean we all gripe, we all gripe about the housework, you know look at me and say, “She is female that has been at this a long time, and has kids, and she can do it.” So I hope that people see that. You know if you can run a school you can really do anything, you really can.

Each female educational leader had a lot of intrinsic motivation and perseverance to “be the best.” This could be the best at being an educational leader, at being a mother or a wife, or their best selves. Moreover, each female educational leader showed that she “stuck with it” in order to overcome any struggles or barriers that she encountered along the way to get where she was today. It was evident for all three women that they had this intrinsic motivation from childhood, and that even in the face of adversity, they kept going, knowing that it wasn’t about who got there the fastest, but just making it to the finish line to accomplish their goals. This motivation also seemed to take the place of other self-care. While each of the women talked about accomplishing goals, overcoming obstacles, and being role models for future educators, she was also repeating it to herself, like a self-affirmation.

Recently, research has shown that for educational leaders it is important to value non-cognitive factors such as “persistence, effort, confidence in abilities, and force of character” (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). The three educational leaders interviewed all explained that they
placed value on hard work and persistence, and so did their families. They also said that their mentors, their families, and their experiences all contributed to their current perseverance and motivation. It was apparent that this was an important trait for women in educational leadership to have, as they all had to overcome obstacles and continue to persevere. Research suggests that “grit predicts success over and beyond talent and IQ...when you consider individuals of equal talent and intelligence, the grittier ones do better” (Perkins-Gough & Duckworth, 2013, p. 5). Therefore, the female educational leaders may be where they are today because they continued to persist even when faced with barriers such as stereotypical perceptions from outside sources, self critical perceptions, and balancing family and work life. They all have this inner doggedness that won’t let them quit, and forces them to keep going and finish one more race.

**Theme Summary**

The common experiences shared by these women in educational leadership positions offered insights into issues that surround being a female educational leader. Overall, five themes emerged from the interview experience. These talked about the outside perceptions that the women faced working in a male dominated profession, the self-perceptions and self doubt that the women faced as they continued to question themselves and their leadership decisions, family and life balance, mentor influence, and high motivational levels. The participants felt that working in a male dominated district was a barrier, as they were often perceived in a stereotypical way and sometimes treated unfairly by others in the district, and that these outside perceptions also caused negative self-perceptions about their own decision-making.

All three participants shared a common struggle to balance work and family life, and explained that they received pressure from outside ideals and their own self-pressure and expectations that they wanted to live up to. The demanding hours made it difficult for these
women to balance the time commitment with work and their family life, which ultimately led to moments of guilt if one aspect was being neglected. All three women explained that mentors helped them to not only go into leadership positions, but also motivated them to find their own identity as women in educational leadership roles. Each woman had various levels of mentors who she felt served multiple roles or purposes for her at different stages of her life. Throughout their narratives, each female leader showed a high level of perseverance, motivation, and commitment to self-growth. Chapter 5 relates these themes to feminist standpoint theory and the literature. It also provides personal thoughts and conclusions about the experiences of women in leadership positions, and offers some last words.
Chapter 5

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter summarizes this study and discusses its findings. It includes understandings about the participants that illustrate the conclusions and findings, implications of this study, suggestions for future research to explore new ideas and questions prompted by this study, suggestions for future practice that include new ways for future school districts and communities to continue to help female educational leaders, and some last words. These women’s experiences and narratives provided much needed insight into the educational realm.

Summary of Current Study

This narrative study explored the stories of female educational leaders in a school district in order to understand their experiences as women in K-12 leadership positions. In order to uncover the lived experiences of female educational leaders, one central question guided this research: How do women, as women, understand their experiences in educational leadership?

This study used feminist standpoint theory to gain a full understanding of the participants’ stories and journeys from their own point of view. Through semi-structured interviews, three female educational leaders in a K-12 school district were able to tell their leadership journeys and the important details that led them to be the leaders they are today.

The literature and the interviews not only acknowledged the underrepresentation of women in educational leadership positions, but they also provided reasons why this gender gap in educational leadership still exists today. This narrative, qualitative approach was able to dig deeper into the causes of gender stratification by giving a voice to women who have worked in educational leadership positions. This narrative study gave audiences a new insight into the world of female educational leaders in K-12 school districts, which shed light and gave insight
into the gender-related issues that plague the majority of women in educational leadership positions.

In order for these narratives to be treated with respect and care, feminist standpoint theory (Hartsock, 1983) was used as the theoretical framework. Feminist standpoint theory (Hartsock, 1983) was important when framing this research study as it allowed the research to acknowledge the important insights that would be overlooked by the dominant group. Feminist standpoint theory states that knowledge is situated and that the oppressed groups’ perspective is more reliable and less biased than that of the dominant group, as they are the ones going through the experience (Harding, 2004).

In this study, the participants, female educational leaders, had valuable perspectives. While the female educational leaders’ perspectives may be situational or based on their personal standpoints, they were still valuable as the participants were going through the experience themselves. As a result, it was imperative to hear from female educational leaders firsthand, about their stories, opinions, and ideas. While there are many statistics about the experiences of female educational leaders, it was important to humanize those numbers and hear the stories of individual women in order to gain a better understanding and narrow the focus. Feminist standpoint theory focuses on empowering oppressed people while making them aware that their experiences are valued (Collins, 1989; Sandoval, 1991); when these women shared their stories it allowed them to feel understood, and gave them the ability to use their stories for positive ends.

The participants in this study were all current administrators in a K-12 school district, with at least one year of experience in a leadership position, who were willing to tell their leadership journey. The participants consisted of a principal, a vice Principal, and a business
administrator. While each leader had a different job description, they all had various leadership experiences, and worked in a mostly male environment as the only female leadership staff.

While each leader had a very different journey, common themes that emerged from the interviews. These touched on the impact of working with male leaders; the negative stereotypical perceptions, self-doubt, and criticism that they experienced; the difficulty of balancing work and family life; the importance of mentors; and the high motivational levels that helped them overcome adversity. The themes provided an opportunity to examine and gain insight into women’s gendered experiences in educational leadership positions.

**Discussion and Findings**

It is imperative that female educational leaders share their experiences so the education community can understand the barriers that women in educational leadership encounter. More importantly, it is crucial that the detailed narratives of women leaders are expressed from women by women, as the literature suggested that the social world had been studied from the perspectives of men and for the most part ignored the way women experience the world (Bernard, 1973; Neuman, 2000; Smith, 1998). Moreover, in terms of K-12 education, the literature demonstrated that there is gender stratification, as there are many female teachers, yet few female administrators (Ortiz & Marshall, 1988; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Loder, 2005; Smith, 2011). Therefore, there was a need to conduct research that gave female educational leaders a voice. As a result, this research may have created understanding about some of the barriers that female educational leaders face, as audiences were able to hear from the women leaders themselves.

The experiences and career life histories of these female educational leaders has brought a new understanding of the dynamics that they faced, which included sociopolitical and
psychologically burdened choices that surrounded these women on a daily basis in a profession that is traditionally held by men. In looking at these participants’ experiences, it was fascinating to see how they made meaning of their lived experiences. Ultimately, their narratives could be connected to the “Woman Question” raised in the literature review, and that Ehrenreich and English (1978) once asked so long ago: “...how shall we all—women and children and men—organize our lives together?” (p. 323). The literature review explained that this is the ultimate question that still cannot be answered. It is clear after this study that in order to organize our lives together the experiences of women in educational leadership need to be acknowledged and recognized. This study provided insight into that very question.

The “Woman Question” is still very relevant today, and the narratives of these female educational leaders help make meaning of how educational leaders, women, mothers, wives, friends, and co-workers co-exist. The three women participants shared how they navigated the “Woman Question” by overcoming both social and self-inflicted norms and barriers in order to find their own identity and lead their district. Both family and professional mentor support provided a cushion for the female educational leaders to push against an “archaic feminine ideal” (Ehrenreich and English, 1978, p. 323). However, even with support, many of the participants shared stories that included barriers, adversity, and self-doubt that plagued their careers as women in educational leadership.

This research continued to confirm the importance of Ehrenreich and English’s (1978) summary: “The Woman Question in the end is not the question of women. It is not we who are the problem and it is not our needs which are the mystery” (p. 323, italics in original). These women’s life histories and experiences add to the literature that explores women in educational leadership and also provides insight into this “Woman Question” that is still relevant to ask
today, as it cannot be answered (Adkison, 1981; Arnot, David, & Weiner, 1999; Barnett, 2004; Baxter, 2009; Blount, 1998, 1999; Cohen, 2013; Ehrenreich & English, 1978; Fuegen, Biernat, Haines, & Deaux, 2004; Grogan, 1996, 1999, 2000; Harris, Arnold, Lowery, & Crocker, 2002; Shakeshaft, 1989; Skinner, 2009; Smith, 2011). After sharing their experiences, these women created new understandings in the educational community as they were able to make meaning of their narratives and explain how they co-existed in the educational realm.

All five themes that emerged from this study added to the understanding of the experiences of women in educational leadership. While there were similarities and differences between the three participants, each of them touched upon the five themes about concepts regarding gender. Therefore, the themes that emerged from this study are very important to women in positions of educational leadership, as they spanned across all three leadership positions. In addition, this specific study was unique as it focused on women who were currently leaders, in different positions, yet also worked together in the same district. As a result it was able to highlight the struggle of female educational leaders in different types of positions, but also compare the similar barriers that women across all educational leadership positions may go through.

**Understanding the Gendered Perception**

All three women talked about the impact that perceptions had on their daily life and job performance. The construction of gender did impact the women in many ways, as the literature suggested it would. For example, Blount’s (1999) research discussed the perception that men historically have been administrators because they possess leadership qualities and women historically have been teachers because they possess caring qualities. These perceptions support practices that maintain the gendered hierarchy in education. This dynamic was evident when
Kate talked about the male leaders asking her to do stereotypically feminine jobs, and how two of the participants categorized women as “catty” and men as calmer, even though their actions were not necessarily so. Sherif (1979) stated that “the rest of the world changes more slowly than the new awareness of self, and parts of both resist change or simply stay the same…. social power is not equitably distributed” (Sherif, 1979, p. 126). This was clear in their narratives as they described a separation between them as female leaders and the male leaders.

The participants’ narratives showed how they pushed against barriers and navigated through gender perceptions as female educational leaders. The complexity the women faced for “violating the expected status order” can be difficult to understand. Ridgeway (2001) said these expectations create the “glass ceiling” and that men’s traditional rule over women prolongs the delay of creating “a society that is organized around human needs” (Ehrenreich & English, 1978, p. 324). These gender expectations perpetuate the marginalization of women and reduce the number of women in authority positions. This was evident as many of the participants talked about the fact that they did not have opportunities to work with other women, and each one described and acknowledged that her leadership role was still dominated by men.

In addition, some women explained that there was subtle resistance from spouses regarding their career and life choices, and that male administrators may also offer resistance and resentment as their wives were expected to stay home, yet these women looked to do both. Moreover, the social construction of gender impacted the way these women looked at themselves as mothers, wives, and leaders, as they felt they were expected to fulfill all roles, and were hard on themselves when they felt they did not meet the expectation. This exemplified Sherif’s (1979) understanding of social power as unequally distributed. The narratives demonstrated both resistance to change and a small shift in a part of the educational world that is still mostly run as
a male dominated career. The women’s narratives allowed audiences to understand how social construction of gender impacted their leadership identity.

Feminist research seeks to understand the world in ways that might be blocked by the dominant conceptual frameworks in our culture (Harding, 2004), in order to then reconstruct the world so that the interests of women are not subordinate (Jaggar, 1983), and to then create a shift in perspective. Feminist standpoint theory focuses on empowering oppressed people while making them aware that their experiences are valued (Collins, 1989; Sandoval, 1991). As a result, these women may have felt empowered by their participation in this study as sharing their experiences can contribute to shifting perspectives of women and reconstructing the ideologies of women in leadership positions.

Moreover, they may also have felt empowered as they realized that they have a lot in common with each other as women in educational leadership positions. As all three women shared that both outside and self-perceptions were barriers for them, it could help all stakeholders in education understand what is happening in educational leadership -- not just in one position, but in multiple educational leadership positions. Moreover, as each woman leader noted that she handled these barriers differently, it can help the dominant group understand some of the signs and reactions that they may not be aware of in the first place.

**Understanding Family-Work Balance**

All three participants in this study were wives and mothers, and reflected on that role and how that impacted their professional life. Each participant said that she experienced guilt and trouble balancing work and family life, and that it was a consistent struggle that afflicts her on a daily basis. The women often felt that in order to do their jobs effectively they may not be able to be the “ideal mother” (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). For example, Kate talked about dropping her
child off at day care for an extended period of time and feeling like the “worst mother,” and Erica talked about “feeling like crap” when she missed her son’s field trip.

All three talked about the need to keep in touch and juggle family life when at work, and work life when with family. Moreover, the participants talked about outside judgment from male co-workers as they felt that they might not understand that same pressure. The ongoing challenge to maintain balance in their work and family life is one that Landon (1996) described as the most difficult challenge for women to move up the ladder: “A major impediment to progress at senior executive levels is the difficulty of balancing careers and family. That remains one of the most difficult issues facing women seeking to climb to the top of the corporate ladder” (para. 7).

This theme was very common across the board, even when each woman had a different number of children at different ages and at a different stage in her career. Therefore, this implies that while women have come a long way in terms of their working careers and independence, they still have that traditional stereotypical pressure of being the primary caregiver in the home and taking on most responsibilities for the family.

While each woman explained that family and life balance could be a struggle or barrier, she also explained that family and mentor influence was a positive theme in her life. Each female educational leader shared stories about her personal mentors, such as her father, mother, and husband having a large impact on their leadership careers by serving as role models for work ethic, leadership abilities, and perseverance.

The narratives of these women allowed for an understanding of the difficult balance that women encounter when having to balance both family and work life, and it shows that while women have come a long way in becoming equal partners in both work and family life, it is still an ongoing battle.


**Understanding the All Male Networks**

These participants worked in a district that had mostly male leaders. While some of the women acknowledged that this was a barrier that they had to overcome, others did not recognize the marginalization. For example, Kate openly talked about being often isolated from the male administrators, who created an alliance together and left her out of the loop. Yet, Chloe and Erica felt that working with male leaders was beneficial, although they also shared stories that demonstrated some prejudiced nature. These women shared stories about the “good old boys” networks, the gender stereotypical conversations that they encountered, and the systemic biased dynamic that they had to continue to overcome. Their stories may help to break down gendered barriers and show others in the educational community that women can become self-defined administrators (Marshall, 1985).

**Understanding the Importance of Mentors**

Each female educational leader explained her need for both professional and family mentors. The participants said that their personal role models ignited their initial spark in becoming a leader. Kate explained that her father was such a hard worker that he was a large influence on her own work ethic. Similarly, Erica was able to watch the hardship her family endured after the move America; how hard it was to work, live, and move on from struggle, motivating her to continue her education. Chloe cited her family experiences as a factor in wanting to be a leader. In addition, each participant shared how her professional mentors guided her in understating their own identity. Their narratives showed just how important having mentors is for a woman in educational leadership.

When female educational leaders share their experiences and become mentors it benefits everyone:
Effective female leaders should make efforts to support new and aspiring leaders—they should share successful experiences. Such supportive activities have many benefits; negative perceptions and stereotypes can be challenged, a wide pool of successful women leaders can be developed, and would-be leaders can be encouraged to move forward.

(Sanchez & Thornton, 2010, p. 10)

Making sure that female educational leaders have mentors is important, and continuing the cycle is also imperative, allowing female educational leaders a voice so that they too can reach more educational leaders.

**Understanding the Mental Component**

Psychological factors were evident in both the success and the demise of women in educational leadership. For example, all three women explained that self-doubt and criticism plagued them and their decision-making. Kate talked about how self-doubt impacted her when it came to making changes at the school and with her teachers. Erica talked about how self-criticism and doubt influenced her potential advancement and job-seeking, and Chloe explained that her lack of confidence and need to be perfect could sometimes get in her way.

Yet, each female educational leader also showed true inner persistence, doggedness, and inner strength that allowed her to endure in the face of adversity, overcome social negativity and personal devastation, and continue to strive to move forward. Each participant had an inner cheerleader and dialogue with herself that told her to keep going even when she felt she could not go on anymore. Each shared tidbits of her personal mantra. For example, Chloe talked about “never giving up” and “proving people wrong” when they told her she would be nothing. She talked about “everything happening for a reason.” Erica discussed reminding herself to “give 110 percent” and that “everyone is always having a worse day than you.” Kate talked about
remembering “the strength I had as a young girl” and saying “I know I can do this.” Their inner dialogues allowed them to persist.

Moreover, each participant said that her inner grit was consistent from the time she was a young girl, and that contributing factors included her children, spouse, and parents. These women’s experiences showed that high motivational levels were vital. Christman and McClellan (2008) studied the resiliency of women administrators in educational leadership programs and found that “resiliency rests on one’s ability to transcend and persist despite adversity....

Seemingly, these women leaders would have to adapt in the face of adversity and so resiliently transform their identities as leaders” (p. 8). It was clear that these female educational leaders persisted despite adversity, and that they would continue to do so. Moreover, as the women leaders overcame each barrier, that became a part of their identity. They wear their inner warrior as a badge of honor.

**Understanding the Benefits of Female Educational Leaders**

Although this study did not collect data on the effectiveness of the participants, the narratives proved some benefits of having female educational leaders from their own perspectives. Each leader explained that as a woman who is a leader, she had a different perspective, and due to her experiences she had a new type of empathy that may help a school district. Kate shared a story of giving a student a second chance to succeed due to his personal issues, as she had gone through some rough times with her own family. Chloe was able to give solace to parents who were struggling with their children, as she had been a young single mom. The literature supports this, as it states that women administrators have greater knowledge of and concern for instructional support (Whitaker & Lane, 1990), seek community involvement (Adkison, 1981), are problem solvers and task-oriented (Grogan, 1999), and have more years of
teaching experience than male administrators (Young & McLeod, 2001). The participants supported this research as many of them had years of teaching experience, and due to their tough roads to becoming leaders, they were able to support students, parents, and teachers. The benefits of women administrators in schools include providing a balance in methods of decision-making and support of student learning.

It is evident that students, teachers, parents, and the school community benefit from having female educational leaders. Moreover, an urban school district like the one the participants were working in could benefit in different ways as many of the boys and girls in the school district do not have role models at home and therefore seeing women in leadership roles could be especially beneficial. In K-12 schools where there were female educational leaders, many of the students began to discover characteristics in themselves and others who they respected. Students notice how the adults around them interact and deal with a variety of situations as they observe their surroundings and learn how to socialize. Observing a variety of men and women leaders in K-12 schools work together allows students to determine expected gendered norms and socialization. It is important for school communities to have a balance of men and women in leadership roles. This will inform students’ aspirations as they become adults (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010, p. 10).

**Summary**

The stories that the female educational leaders shared were eye opening, as they provided new insights into the lives of female educational leaders. Their stories were moving, honest, rich, and difficult at some points. The findings suggested that our historical roots significantly influenced society to continue with these stereotypical roles, and they have an impact on the way that female educational leaders are perceived and how they in turn perceive themselves.
However, some of the participants have found ways to cope with these perceptions through mentors and family support. Moreover, traditional views of women are so deeply rooted in our subconscious that they often go unnoticed by the women: they perceive it as normal.

It is crucial that we do not allow our historical context and our societal constraints to play out in a stereotypical way, but acknowledge their existence in order to create a new structure in order to move forward towards gender equality. Moreover, we cannot consent to the belief that the role of the educational leader is not suitable for women and that they are not capable of taking on such positions. As a society, we need to acknowledge these ideals and bring them to the surface so that they do not remain dormant in the subconscious; instead, we need to look past these assumptions and historical standpoints and face these societal perceptions head on.

In addition, this research also showed ways in which female educational leaders continue to overcome, cope, or protect themselves from barriers. It was evident that the participants found ways to rise above adversity through their personal and professional networks, their inner strength and perseverance, their families, and through the telling of their stories. It is imperative that research continues to focus on the positive ways in which women lead, and look at those contributing factors.

The narratives showed ways in which female educational leaders “organize their lives together,” make meaning of their experiences, and show the barriers that female educational leaders face. It also showed that the “Woman Question” is not only relevant, but that there is a need for female educational leaders to have to organize ways to fit in a male dominated culture. Women do have to find ways to overcome male networks, work and life balance, and inner doubt, and they must recognize and adjust in order to fulfill their aspirations. Marshall (1985) stated that women needed to find ways to cope with the “conceptions of feminine roles” (p. 139) in order to
be successful educational leaders. This shows that women start out at a disadvantage and have to work their way up to level the playing field. Both literature and the narratives showed that female educational leaders experience inequalities that need to be addressed.

**Implications**

There are many implications of this study. The women’s experiences illustrate that there is still a large degree of gender stratification and gender bias in educational leadership. However, the gender stratification and bias has evolved and changed. Many of the barriers that women now face in the 21st century are subtle, and hard for female educational leaders to directly pinpoint. Moreover, gender roles in educational leadership are to a large degree socially defined. Yet the women participants showed that these roles are not static, and can be challenged and redefined, as many of them continued to evolve and push against stereotypes. The stories that these women told seemed to imply that their choices as socially constructed leaders were never wholly free, as many of them felt outside pressure and self pressure from the socially constructed and historical obligations that were bestowed upon them.

However, regardless of the pressures on them, many of the participants tried to resist by taking back control of their individual identity and pushing back to create their own new set of expectations. This was shown when Kate stood up for herself in meetings, and when Erica decided that her husband would have to share the role of childrearing. In the end, the female educational leaders made choices, even if limited, that effect change in their lives and in the lives of other female educational leaders. As a result, there is a hopeful aspect that implies that educational leadership can be a profession in which gender roles can be challenged and reshaped.
Subtle Barriers

It is also clear that many of the barriers that women now face have turned from outright to subtle. Scholars like Acker (1992, 2004); Arlton, Lewellen, and Brissett (1999); Kimmel (2004); Mandel (2003); Rhode (2003); and Tennen (1990) confirmed it is difficult to change deeply rooted gender stereotypes and bias regarding societal gender expectations on what men and women should be or act like. These expectations can be a barrier for women leaders. Consequently, the answer to the question of whether times have changed for women or not, based on the findings from this research and those found in existing literature, is both yes and no. This study implies that women do still face many limitations and that many of those limitations are subtle and subliminal rather than apparent. While each participant expressed how far she came as a female educational leader, she also noted the internal and external barriers she still faced on a daily basis. While the work situation has clearly improved from the 1950s and 1960s, female educational leaders still said that they are not getting equal pay, that there are unfair expectations, and that societal constraints affect their leadership success. Some participants also shared through their narratives that with progress in society, the once overt barriers have become subtle, little things that are hard to identify as sexist because of the awareness of sexual harassment. Therefore it can be harder to identify some of the obstacles for female educational leaders, but it is evident they still exist. This was apparent when both Chloe and Erica observed that they do not feel they are treated differently in the workplace, but shared stories of subtle sexist behavior and unequal treatment. It was hard for them to identify how they were treated differently, but it was clear they were being held to different standards.
Pressure to Overachieve

It was also implied that women leaders feel the need to overachieve and work harder as they all felt like they had “something to prove” about their competence. Each female educational leader described her perfectionist ways. The findings support the results of previous work on female educational leaders. For example, women leaders studied by Clemons (1998) and Gatteau (2000) strived to constantly overachieve and outperform as a means of proving that they are as competent as their male counterparts. Kate explained that she always felt that she needed to “know her stuff,” and Chloe shared the need to “fix her mistakes.” It is clear that these women leaders felt pressure to outperform. Each of the participants felt that she had to be twice as “good” in order to be considered as capable as men. Many scholars, such as Cantor and Bernay (1992), Collins (1989, and Kanter (1993), also argued that due to societal bias and historical perceptions about women’s intellectual inferiority, women often must pass “a higher competence threshold” (Kanter, 1993, p. 122) to prove their ability and validity as leaders. Therefore, this consistent pressure to prove one’s worth can be a subtle challenge that plagues women on a subconscious level.

Layers of Connections to Cope

Another implication is that many of the participants emphasized a need to know themselves and to harness their leadership identities. Each woman shared experiences with self-doubt, worry, and self-criticism, yet they also shared how they created coping mechanisms to push through those issues. For example, the participants talked about support systems, mentors, and positive self-talk. The participants were excellent at forging multiple, strategic layers of support through connections, collaboration, networking, sponsorship, and advocacy. In terms of overcoming barriers and challenges, the participants learned to develop and rely on their
leadership effectiveness or to combat difficult situations in their professional and personal lives through multiple layers of support such as connections, collaboration, networking, sponsorship, and advocacy.

The female educational leaders explained that when faced with cultural, political, professional, or personal issues, they relied on their colleagues, mentors, allies, and advocates to help them work through their problems. Similarly, many participants noted that these networks also helped on a personal level, as they had someone to turn to when it came to seeking help with domestic responsibilities. The anxiety and pressure to juggle both family and work life is very crucial for women with children. Consequently, all the participants cited family and spousal support as a source of relief, while lack of support was a source of guilt.

Kanter (1993), Rhode (2003), and Wheeler (1988) all explained that successful women leaders need support networks, and these networks are especially important for women who are working in male-dominated contexts. The implication is that it is necessary for female educational leaders to have mentors and multi-layered support systems both at home and in the professional setting.

**Continuing to Fight**

The last implication is that while it is clear that female educational leaders face many trials and tribulations, it is also clear that women leaders never give up. Each participant showed great perseverance. Each struggled to get to her leadership position, and continued to break down any barriers that were thrown her way. In addition, while all participants cited that struggle to balance family and work life, they also cited it as contributing to their need to achieve. In addition, many participants also said that being a mother had a positive impact on their
leadership skills, allowing them to be empathetic leaders in the teaching profession, which is mainly women who also have children.

It is clearer than ever that women have come a long way in the realm of educational leadership. However, it is also evident that many of the barriers that female educational leaders face have become more subtle and subliminal. Therefore, there is a need to make the invisible visible, so that even the subtle barriers are now brought to the forefront. The fact that women leaders still struggle with juggling family and work life, feel that they have to work twice as hard, still need to break through male networks, and have self-doubt, needs to be shared and talked about.

**Summary**

This study had various implications. While female educational leaders still face barriers, these have evolved to become more subtle, which can in the long run be more potent as female educational leaders often don’t even realize those biases are occurring. Unless more people realize and recognize the unequal share of work and burdens falling on women’s shoulders, women’s struggles and needs cannot be fully addressed or corrected. Moreover, the challenge of promoting women’s equal rights and privileges resides in capturing the subtlety of the bias. Many researchers, such as Martin (2000), Morris (2002), Ropers-Huilman and Shackelford (2003), and Ropers-Huilman and Taliaferro (2003), suggested that there can be “backlash” against exposing the dark side of the gender bias in leadership. However, it is crucial to expose both the negative and positive aspects in educational leadership, so that a narrative discourse continues, and to treat the narratives with respect and tolerance. If institutional leaders are devoted to correcting social issues and enacting change, then it is important to encourage and support women and the research of women.
Future Research

Future research needs to be conducted. Rhode (1997) concluded that most Americans did not view gender inequality as a serious problem. Therefore, more research needs to be done, so that all educational leaders understand that gender bias is an issue, especially for leaders in K-12 education. Future research could expand this study across a larger group of women. The findings are specific to this particular group of female educational leaders, and therefore the findings cannot be generalized to a larger group of women. Future research is needed in this area of study, as educational environments remain gendered and biased. There are a few recommendations that emerged from the findings and the limitations of this study.

It would be valuable to explore future research that focuses on female educational leaders working with other women as co-workers. This is due to the fact that many of the participants noted the negative impact of working in a male dominated district, yet also expressed difficulty working with other women. Therefore, it would be beneficial to see the difference it makes for female educational leaders working in a female dominated environment, and to see if the competitive and “catty” nature that the participants described in this study is then minimized, and if the negative outside perceptions of female educational leaders also change.

Similarly, research that detailed the inner workings of the relationships in this specific district such as a case study that focused on the interdependence between the three female educational leaders would provide new insight. As the narratives showed, each woman’s leadership style was unique and therefore diving deeper into the dynamic between the three female educational leaders and even their other administrators may uncover new nuance and bring a new powerful story.
In addition, future research that incorporates the perspectives of both men and women would be insightful. As many of the women in the study talked about working in a male dominated district, and the impact of their male co-workers, it would be helpful to hear their perspectives. Including men in future research on the topic of educational leadership may create a broader perspective in order to compare and contrast the experiences of female educational administrators and facilitate a deeper understanding of the power relationship between gender and educational leadership. However, it is important that adding the male perspective does not to silence women leaders as a marginalized group. Nevertheless, hearing from men may provide new insights. For example, as many of the participants talked about their male co-workers, it would be interesting to hear their perspectives on working with women leaders. Moreover, hearing not just from men, but also from other members of the community such as parents, students, and board members may provide new insights about women in educational leadership positions. Research that allows community members a voice may provide new ways that female educational leaders are beneficial.

While this study had a variety of backgrounds and ethnicities, future research that focuses on the experiences of women who are more marginalized in society than White women, such as members of racial and ethnic minorities, may bring nuance and shed light on different variations of female educational leaders. Future studies that address other areas of diversity such as race, culture, or sexual orientation would provide new insights as these women may face different barriers than the ones addressed. While race and ethnicity were brought up by one participant, exploring these areas further would be important, as all of the women were straight and married. Therefore future research could seek narratives from single women, or women without husbands and children. Similarly, future research that explores how female educational leaders are treated
in different socioeconomic settings would be significant. The participants noted that working in 
an urban environment affected their leadership, so researching women in different types of 
environments could produce results that show the different barriers women experience based on 
the type of district they work in.

While the current study provided new insight and understanding into the experiences of 
female educational leaders, future research can continue to illuminate the ongoing issues that 
women in educational leadership face. Therefore, conducting research that includes various 
socioeconomic status and races, and opening up the research to include men, co-workers, and the 
community, may provide different outcomes and new understandings.

**Recommendations for Future Practice**

Despite its limitations, this study also makes distinct contributions. First, this study 
incorporates the voices of women who are currently educational leaders in a K-12 school district. 
Hearing their narratives allowed new insight into both their barriers and their accomplishments 
as women in educational leadership. After hearing the experiences of the participants, there are 
some practices that could be put in place to improve school districts and the experiences of 
women in educational leadership. The recommendations for future practice are for future 
educational leaders, current educational leaders, college and university leadership training, and 
for all other stakeholders in K-12 education.

**Professional Development Training**

Both school districts and school leadership programs can develop and plan workshops 
that can educate students, teachers and administrators about the various implications of their 
biases and gender role assumptions. Through professional development, people can understand 
how positionality often shapes future views and decision-making by stakeholders. Keeping
neutrality at the forefront by organizing initiatives can sustain and maintain awareness (Olgiati & Shapiro, 2002). Teacher programs can create workshops or even classes that address this issue so that it is known before entering the workplace.

**Mentoring, Networking, Learning Groups**

School districts can bring female educational leaders together by establishing coaching, mentoring, and networking programs that are geared towards women’s unique needs, thereby not only giving women opportunities to broaden their professional experiences, but also creating learning groups and support for women in educational leadership. This can be both in person and global, as women leaders can come together to share ideas and experiences and start to feel connected. This should begin for future female educational leaders as they are going through school, so they can connect with current leaders even before becoming one. As a result, female educational leaders will feel more prepared and less isolated. All the participants explained that mentors were essential in their leadership success, so it is important that all female educational leaders have this opportunity.

These strategies could ultimately be useful in addressing some of the barriers that the participants expressed and help future female educational leaders. These brave participants allowed a peek inside the sometimes tough experiences that they went through, and as a result it allowed a new understanding to develop. By giving a voice to these women, this study achieved one of the primary goals of feminist research, which is to “ask new questions that place women’s lives at the center of social inquiry” (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 3).

**Last Words**

The themes that surfaced from the interviews demonstrated that female educational leaders still face many obstacles as educational leaders and these could be contributing to the
current gap in educational leaders, especially in K-12 schools. As both the research and the stories pointed out, women have fought long and hard for their rights and experienced a great deal of frustration while trying to move forward towards gender equality in the workplace. When examining this historical content, the lack of support women have received throughout history is disturbing. Lack of support and isolation can be harmful to any group, and my concern is that women do not want to acknowledge their need for support, and therefore their struggles will be swept under the rug. Moreover, another concern is that women cannot directly acknowledge the stereotypical outside perception and pressure that they are under, and therefore they feel this guilt or negative self-perception without understanding the root cause.

If women do not feel supported, they may not work towards achieving their true potential within educational leadership roles and their experiences will be that much more challenging. All the participants in this study had supportive spouses and mentors along their journey who make them feel less isolated. This shed some light on the possibility that traditional gender roles can be challenged and women can move past some barriers with the support of their spouses and family. In addition, it further confirmed my belief in the importance of supporting women and their journey in educational leadership, as other women may read this study and find some comfort and assurance in knowing that they are not alone, and also find inspiration in hearing positive aspects of their journeys that they can celebrate.

The goal of this study was to understand the experiences of female educational leaders in K-12 schools in order to shed light and gain insight into their narratives. In doing so, the hope is to gain understanding, empathy, and tolerance, and find ways to help women leaders in their educational leadership journey. The goal was also to demonstrate that women in leadership positions have unique stories that are both valuable and important. I believe that the three
participants felt valued and important because they were able to share their stories with me and reflect on their own experiences. They were able to discover new ideas about themselves, reflect on the experiences that led them to where they are today, and strengthen their current beliefs about themselves and women in leadership positions.

This research has a significant impact on my life, as I am pursing a leadership position in education. I know that as a woman in educational leadership I will face obstacles. Yet in hearing these educational leaders’ stories I not only feel more prepared, but I feel more supported. In addition my positionality has changed. I came into this process as someone who had experienced bias in educational leadership, and was worried that not having children or a husband would be an obstacle. However, now I have a better understanding of the true nature of striving to “do it all” and realized that I have much in common with female educational leaders and their struggles whether I have children or not. Hearing the experiences of women in educational leadership is an amazing learning tool that everyone in education can benefit from. I gained a great amount of respect and empathy towards the participants and in understanding their journey, I am able to reflect on my own. Analyzing this research was no easy feat, as I acknowledge my bias as a woman going into educational leadership, yet someone who has not had the same experiences as these women.

Moreover, understanding that I am neither a mother nor a wife, I wanted to capture the essence of these women in the fairest way possible and make sure that the true essence of who they are as women and leaders came through. I know that moving forward I will keep these women’s experience in mind and continue to ask about women in educational leadership and want to hear their experiences in order to grow and help close that gender gap. I look forward to continuing to empower women who are educational leaders to speak up and share their stories.
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Appendix A:

Superintendent Consent Form

Dear [Superintendent]:

As you may know I am a graduate student in Northeastern University’s Doctor of Education program and am now embarking on the dissertation phase of this degree. My research focus is centered on Women Educational Leaders in K-12 School Districts. The purpose of this letter is to request permission to conduct a research study in the [School District].

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of women leaders in educational administration. I am looking for your permission to contact three women administrators in the district in order to gain their perspectives on being a woman in K-12 educational leadership. Interviews with those individuals would take place through the summer of 2016 and into the early fall of 2016 at a time and place convenient to each participant. These interviews will in no way interrupt the education of your students. Following your approval I will apply to the NEU Internal Review Board for further approval to conduct research with human subjects.

If you have questions or concerns regarding my study, please contact me at [email]. If you are willing for three administrators in your school to participate in my study, please indicate by signing below. For your convenience, you may email a scanned copy to the email address above.

Yours truly,

Dana Blair
Doctoral Candidate 2016, College of Professional Studies Northeastern University, Boston

I give my permission for Dana Blair to conduct interviews with three administrators from [School District] for the purpose of her study in order to gain the narratives and perspectives of Women Educational Leadership in K-12 School Districts.

________________________________________________ ___________________
Signature Date
Appendix B:

Letter For Participants:

Letter For Participants (Women Leaders)

May 1, 2016

Dear Ms.__________

My name is Dana Blair and I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University in Boston Massachusetts. I am writing to ask that you consider participating in a research study, which will begin this year. This study is entitled: Giving a Voice to Women In K-12 Leadership. Below, I will briefly outline the proposal.

Research finds that there is a gender deficiency in female educational leadership. Moreover, research also demonstrates that women leaders face difficult barriers when becoming a leader in K-12 schools. As a result, I am currently working on my dissertation that explores the experiences and narratives of women in educational leadership. This research will give a voice to women leaders in education, and provide insight for future leaders aspiring to go into the profession.

The research process includes up to two interviews that will last between 60-90 minutes. In the first interview I will collect basic background information allowing you to tell your story as a woman leader. This may include your experiences in becoming a leader, your current role as a leader, and how your identity as a woman influences your leadership character. The second interview will be a follow-up in order to clarify any specific experiences, stories, or details, for further interpretation. Any interviews I conduct will be under rigorous university protocols, which give the interviewee the right to remain confidential and to withdraw from the study at any time.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me at [phone number] or by email at [email] Once contacted, I will send you a consent form. Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Dana Blair

EdD Candidate
Northeastern University at Boston, MA
Appendix C:

Consent Form

Northeastern University, Department: College of Professional Studies
Name of Investigator(s): Principal Investigator- Dr. Karen Reiss Medwed, Student Researcher Dana Blair
Title of Project: Giving a Voice to Women in K-12 Leadership

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You are asked to be in this study because you fit the criteria below: 1) a female educational leader who indicates a willingness to participate in multiple, in-depth interviews and are comfortable sharing both positive and negative experiences with gender bias and leadership; 2) A female educational leader who has held a leadership position for at least one year as she will have plenty of assorted information to share on this topic; 3) A Female leader who are diverse in their age, race, and experience levels.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences (both positive and negative) that women leaders face in educational administration.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in two semi-structured interviews that will be recorded and transcribed. Each interview will generally take 60-90 minutes and will take place at a location of your choosing. The interview will ask that you tell your experiences and stories as a woman in leadership. This may consist of past experiences that you contribute to becoming a leader, your experiences as a current leader, and any negative or positive narratives that you have experienced as a woman leader. Your participation is voluntary and you can opt out at any time.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
There will be two individual interviews. Individual interviews will take between 60-90 minutes. Individual interviews will take place after school at a location that is mutually agreed upon between participants and myself.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There are no significant risks involved in being a participant in this study.
**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

There are no direct benefits for your participation in the study. However, the information learned from the study may provide valuable insights into work environment of women educational leaders in K-12 school districts.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researcher will see the information about you. If you decide to participate, a pseudonym will be used throughout the study to protect your identity. Any reports, presentations, or discussions associated with this study (i.e. doctoral thesis, journal articles, conference presentations) will utilize this pseudonym and will not include any personal information linked directly to you. Information about your age, gender, race, and field of study will be included to help others understand and interpret the research findings. Our interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed into writing. The researcher will code the written transcript to identify patterns and themes within your interview and across interviews with other participants. All physical documents or files related to this study will be stored in a locked file cabinet. All electronic files will be stored in a password protected online file storage program and on an external data storage device. Only the researcher will have access to these storage mechanisms.

**If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?**

You do not have to participate in the study if you do not wish.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**

No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of my participation in this research.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have [as a student, employee, etc].

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**

You can contact:
- Dana Blair NEU researcher [email and phone]
- Dr. Karen Reiss Medwed, Principal Investigator [email and phone]

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Will I be paid for my participation?</td>
<td>There is no payment for your participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will it cost me anything to participate?</td>
<td>There will be no costs to participate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there anything else I need to know?</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I agree to take part in this research.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Signature of person [parent] agreeing to take part: ____________________________ Date: ____________________________

Printed name of person above: __________________________________________________

Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent: ____________________________ Date: ____________________________

Printed name of person above: __________________________________________________
Appendix D Interview Protocol:

An interview guide was created using components of authentic leadership, but questions were broad enough to ensure the participants flexibility to answer according to their experience and perspective. Six questions comprised the interview guide:

Intro: I would like to hear about your experiences in your own words. To do this, I am going to ask you some questions about the key experiences you encountered as a woman in educational leadership.

1. Tell me the story of your leadership.
   - Describe your journey in becoming a leader?
   - Were there any influences, experiences, or situations in your life that have led you to pursue a leadership position in education?
   - If there are any, describe experiences or stories where you may have encountered obstacles in becoming an educational leader.

2. What is important to you in being an educational leader?
   - Tell me about your values and goals as a leader and describe what that currently looks like in the district
   - Share some important stories or experiences you have had as an educational leader

3. Describe what your professional environment is like for a woman in educational leadership.
   - Can you share any negative experiences you may have encountered as a woman leader? If so, please describe how you dealt with those challenges.
   - At any time in your career as a woman educational leader describe decisions you made that may have conflicted with your other roles as a woman.
   - Can you share any positive experiences you may have had as a woman leader?

4. Describe any factors that you feel contribute to your current success as a woman educational leader. (Family, Mentors, Upbringing)
   - What would you describe as the pivotal achievements and successes of your career?

5. How have your experiences shaped you to be the educational leader you are today?

6. Wrap-Up: Are there any other educational leadership experiences you would like to share?