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**Diminished Aspirations or Something More? A Phenomenological Study to
Examine How Educational Leadership Experiences Influence Career Aspirations**

by

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The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this dissertation. The College of Education will ensure this dissertation is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

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DEDICATION

To my family for their continued love and support. I could not have done this without your encouragement.

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences female educational leaders' face, which may influence their career aspirations. Phenomenology allowed the researcher to explore the commonalities across female educational leaders' experiences. Female educational leaders from two school districts were invited to participate in the study, provided they had a minimum of one year of experience as school administrators. Participants were purposefully selected. The researcher utilized an electronic invitation inviting female educational leaders to participate in the study. The researcher then scheduled individual, semi-structured interviews with the participants to obtain data pertaining to the participants' experiences. The data was then analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) Seven Step Method, which includes bracketing and member checking. The researcher then developed a clear, concise description that explains the participants' experience.

Female educational leaders experience a multitude of experiences that play a part in their career aspirations. Female leaders face barriers that include the need to prove themselves, the need to develop a work-life balance, and gender barriers. However, they also noted supportive factors to assist as they transition into a leadership role, which include a mentor, encouragement, and inspiration, as well as district-level support. As new leaders transition into a leadership role, they develop their self-perception of their leadership. Leaders realize the need for empathy, building relationships, and continual professional growth.

Many of the female educational leaders in this study were encouraged and inspired to pursue a leadership role. This left many leaders feeling accomplished and

satisfied with their current role because they had already surpassed their initial career goals. Other leaders experienced feeling let down and discouraged when gender bias and stereotypes were encountered, and they were overlooked for a leadership position. While discouraged, these females persevered until they eventually obtained a leadership role.

CHAPTER 1. PROBLEM AND SIGNIFICANCE

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to determine how female educational leaders' experiences influence their career aspirations. Significant research has been done emphasizing the underrepresentation of female principals in K-12 schools across the nation, particularly on the barriers female leaders encounter (Connell et al., 2015; Hannum et al., 2015; Kruse & Krumm, 2016). However, little research has focused on how educational leaders' experiences influence their career aspirations.

Background of Problem

Females have been underrepresented in leadership roles across a variety of professions (Glass & Cook, 2017), with the field of education being no exception. During the 1970s female representation in the superintendent position was declining (K. Robinson et al., 2017). During this time, gender equality became a national issue. Since then, laws and policies have been created to level the playing field for female educational leaders. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act (1964) prohibited employers from discriminating against employees and employee candidates. Additionally, "gendered workplace requirements began to be challenged, and since that time, many organizations have adopted policies prohibiting overt forms of sex discrimination and harassment" (Diehl et al., 2020, p. 250). However, even though these laws and policies have led to increased gender equality in educational leadership, an underrepresentation of females is still present today.

Progress toward gender parity in leadership positions has been extremely slow. Hill et al. (2016) have even described the "leadership gap as significant, persistent, and systemic" (p. ix), particularly in top-level leadership positions. According to the National

Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2021a), females comprise 76.3% of classroom teachers across the United States; females comprise only 35.5% of secondary principals (NCES, 2021b). Furthermore, when looking at senior leadership positions, like the school district superintendent, females make up only 24.1% of the population (Kowalski et al., 2010). Within one southeastern state, the underrepresentation of female educational leaders at the secondary principal and superintendent positions does not appear as stark as the national level. Females comprise 44.4% of secondary principal positions (SCDE, 2023d) and 33.3% of female superintendent positions (SCASA, 2023). However, the number of female teachers within the state is also higher than the national average at 81% (Dickenson et al., 2020). Despite the increased presence of females in educational leadership, gender disparity still exists (Shaw & Hernandez-Gantes, 2021).

Gender disparity does not appear to be due to a lack of qualifications. Researchers have noted that over 50% of advanced degrees were earned by females, and this has been the case for decades (Guramatunhu-Mudiwa, 2015; Johnson, 2017; Madsen, 2012). Additionally, when looking specifically at the field of education, women earned 77% of all master's degrees and 67.7% of all doctoral degrees (Snyder et al., 2016). Breaking the educational field down even further, you find that 64.3% of master's degrees and 63.4% of doctoral degrees in educational leadership are earned by females (Snyder et al., 2016). Guramatunhu-Mudiwa (2015) noted that 66.9% of students enrolled in the master's degree of school administration program in a large southeastern university were female, and in their licensure add-on program, females outnumbered males four to one. A similar comparable occurred in Florida, where Eadens et al. (2012) found that 75.6% of graduate students enrolled in educational leadership programs were female. DeAngelis and

O'Connor (2012) also noted that there is no lack of candidates obtaining the qualifications necessary for an administrative role. However, researchers have noted the possibility that candidates with the qualifications for the position no longer aspire to the role (DeAngelis & O'Connor, 2012).

Female teachers aspire to educational leadership positions as indicated by the number of female teachers seeking advanced degrees and becoming qualified for administrative positions. This implies that females are “qualified but underutilized” (Kruse & Krumm, 2016, p. 28) for leadership positions. A leadership pipeline full of qualified female candidates that are not being utilized leads to untapped talent (Santamaría, 2013). Female leadership representation has increased, leading to greater organizational success (Dezso & Ross, 2012). K. Robinson et al. (2017) reiterates that “a lack of female representation is a problem not only because of fairness and equity but also because diversity brings improvement in leadership and learning” (p. 2). Furthermore, researchers have noted that students and teachers both benefit from a diverse leadership team (Bailes & Guthery, 2020). The diverse leadership team allows for various perspectives to be considered when making decisions. When females are excluded from leadership positions, they have no input regarding educational policy changes (Wyland, 2016). Some researchers even suggest that increased leadership diversity serves to benefit organizations and society (Hannum et al., 2015).

Policies have been created to increase equity, leading to increased female representation; however, gender parity has yet to be reached. Researchers suggest that barriers may prevent females from advancing to administrative roles. Various barriers have been identified: organizational barriers, workplace culture, discrimination, lack of

mentors, and societal expectations. Wyland's (2016) Minnesota study revealed that females found gender discrimination and family responsibilities to be the two biggest barriers aspiring superintendents face. Another study identified additional barriers: "not having a leadership identity, lack of opportunities and support, discouragement and sabotage, and different expectations for men and women" (Hannum et al., 2015, p. 69). Kruse and Krumm (2016) point out that gender discrimination may be a factor prohibiting the advancement of female educational leaders, whether intentionally or not. Researchers pinpointed family responsibilities, lack of confidence, decreased mobility, lack of a mentor, limited networking, and knowledge deficits as barriers females face (Kruse & Krumm, 2016).

Statement of Problem

Females make up most teachers; however, they are grossly underrepresented as secondary principals and superintendents (NCES, 2021a). Aspiring educational leaders, both male and female, must adhere to state guidelines regarding the qualifications necessary for school administrative positions. Typically, aspiring leaders complete a master's degree program or a licensure add-on program as well as pass a licensure exam. In Guramatunhu-Mudiwa's 2015 study, females outnumbered males within both the master's degree and add-on routes. This indicates that females are aspiring to educational leadership roles. Additionally, DeAngelis and O'Connor (2012) noted that nearly 75% of female participants in their study had applied for a leadership position within six years of becoming qualified for the position. This indicated that aspiring female educational leaders are just as likely to apply for administrative positions as their male counterparts (DeAngelis & O'Connor, 2012).

Researchers have identified barriers females face when attempting to obtain positions in educational leadership. Barriers include a lack of mentors, (Cassidy et al., 2021; Kruse & Krumm, 2016), lack of networking (Kruse & Krumm, 2016), gaps in knowledge including finances (Hacifazlioglu, 2010; Kruse & Krumm, 2016; Shoho & Barnett, 2010) “Old Boys networks” (Martinez et al., 2020, p. 899), gender bias, (Diehl et al., 2020; Wyland, 2016) self-confidence, (Cassidy et al., 2021; McCullough, 2020; Wyland, 2016) work and family balance (McCullough, 2020), and having to prove themselves (McCullough, 2020; K. Robinson et al., 2017). In addition to the barriers females face while attempting to obtain an educational leadership position, many challenges are associated with the position. Challenges educational leaders face include increased job stress (K. Robinson et al., 2017), time management issues (Hacifazlioglu, 2010; K. Robinson et al., 2017; Shoho & Barnett, 2010) issues regarding budgets and procedures, and overcoming resistance (Hacifazlioglu, 2010).

While barriers and challenges may play a role in the underrepresentation of female educational leaders, additional research suggests that females may alter their career aspirations after obtaining the qualifications necessary to obtain the position (DeAngelis & O’Connor, 2012). DeAngelis and O’Connor (2012) revealed that only 75% of participants who were qualified for school administration had applied for a position, suggesting that career aspirations may have changed over the course of the program or shortly after that. Therefore, this study aims to examine if the lived experiences of educational leaders influence the career aspirations of female leaders.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to determine how female educational leaders’ career aspirations for principal or district-level leadership are influenced by their experiences as an

educational leader. The study included female secondary assistant principals along with female educational leaders in a district-level position. The researcher employed a constructivist approach to phenomenology, using individual semi-structured interviews with female educational leaders from two school districts within the southeastern United States. These interviews with female educational leaders provided insight into the experiences female educational leaders endure as they tackle their leadership roles.

Research suggests that females aspire to educational leadership positions, as indicated by completing degree programs designed specifically for educational leadership obtainment (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2010). Furthermore, these females are fulfilling the requirements necessary to obtain a leadership credential (DeAngelis & O'Connor, 2012; Guramatunhu-Mudiwa, 2015; Snyder et al., 2016). However, females are still underrepresented at the principal and superintendent levels of educational leadership. This study sheds light on how their experiences influence their career aspirations.

Research Questions

Overarching research question: How do female educational leaders' experiences influence their career aspirations? This research question led to the following supporting questions:

- What specific challenges and supportive factors are encountered by female educational leaders?
- How have their experiences shaped their self-perceptions of their leadership abilities and opportunities for career advancement?
- Do gender-related biases and stereotypes impact the career aspirations of female educational leaders?

Significance of Study

Assistant principal roles are viewed as a stepping stone to principal and superintendent roles. Females are significantly underrepresented in both roles, resulting in the female perspective being excluded from important policies and other aspects of educational reform (Kruse & Krumm, 2016; Shaw & Hernandez-Gantes, 2021). The presence of even one female educational leader could lead to increased female representation within an organization (Madsen, 2012). Madsen (2012) stated that “when successful women leaders work with students (male or female), faculty, and staff, it is more likely that others will have positive experiences that help change their perspectives toward women in leadership positions” (p. 5). To add to that, “the gender composition of district administrators may influence the gender composition of school principals and assistant principals” (Kerr et al., 2014, p. 373). Furthermore, female educational leaders serve as role models to other females, including students. Researchers have indicated that diverse leaders create a sense of belonging for followers with similar identities (Chen et al., 2022).

Additionally, research suggests that there may be differences in how male and female leaders approach leadership. Eagly et al. (2003) noted that female leaders tend to be transformational, whereas male leaders tend to be more transactional or laissez-faire. Furthermore, researchers have suggested that transformational leaders are innovative and “by mentoring and empowering followers, such leaders help followers develop their potential and thus to contribute more effectively to their organization” (Eagly & Carli, 2003, p. 815). Other research suggests that females practice more democratic and participative leadership than males (Eagly & Chin, 2010). Researchers have even

suggested that females tend to be more effective leaders than men (Eagly et al., 2003). Ultimately, educational leadership is a vital factor in determining the school's success (Miller, 2018), and it emphasizes the need to increase female representation in these critical roles.

This study helped determine how educational leadership experiences influence female career aspirations by analyzing the first-hand account of the participants' experiences. Furthermore, this study aimed to determine if female career aspirations are changing or if barriers and discriminatory practices still exist that prevent females from obtaining their career goals. The insights gained from this study prove beneficial in identifying experiences that negatively impact female career aspirations. A thorough examination of these experiences could identify factors missing from principal preparation programs. Improved principal preparation programs could result in educational leaders who are better prepared to take on their new roles. Increased preparedness may also lead to increased confidence in aspiring female leaders, eliminating the self-doubt that deters females from applying for the positions in the first place.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to a small sample of female participants from two school districts within the southeastern United States. Therefore, their experiences may vary from educational leaders in different districts or geographic regions. Additionally, this study is limited to the experiences of females who have obtained administrative roles. The experiences of qualified females who have not yet obtained administrative roles were not included in this study due to the difficulty in locating participants. Furthermore, this

study is limited by the participants' honesty and willingness to share their experiences with the researcher. The researcher was hopeful the participants would be honest and forthcoming about their experiences; however, the researcher emphasized the confidentiality of the participants and their school districts.

Organization of the Study

This research dissertation is organized into five chapters. The first chapter is an introduction and overview of the study. It provides background information, the problem statement, the significance of the study, and the limitations of the study. The chapter concludes with a clarification of key terms used throughout the study. Chapter two comprises an overview of the literature that relates to the underrepresentation of females in educational leadership roles. Chapter three describes the methodology utilized for this study. Chapter three includes the research design, the setting, participants, procedure, and instrumentation used for data collection. Chapter four consists of the research findings. The chapter clearly details the themes identified as well as an exhaustive description of the findings. Finally, chapter five reviews the methodology employed by the researcher for the study, an overview of the findings, as well as a discussion of the findings. The discussion includes recommendations for future practice along with recommendations for future research.

Theoretical Framework

Several primary theories provide the theoretical framework for this study. These theories are presented below and explained in greater detail in Chapter Two. The first is social role theory, which posits that gender stereotypes are the result of social roles constructed by society (Eagly & Steffen, 1984). Specifically, females are seen as caretakers, whereas males are seen as authority figures (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Due to

these socially constructed visions of how males and females should behave, males appear to fit the managerial role. In contrast, female roles do not align with society's view of what a manager or leader should be (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

This theory leads to role congruity theory, which examines the “congruity between gender roles and other roles, especially leadership roles” (Eagly & Karau, 2002, p. 575). Eagly and Karau (2002) stressed that, due to role incongruity, females may face prejudice regarding leadership roles because leadership roles are stereotypically male, as well as prejudice regarding the leadership behaviors because leadership behaviors are associated with males therefore viewed negatively when utilized by females (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Next, the glass ceiling theory implies that a metaphorical ceiling prevents females from obtaining leadership roles (Juwitasari, 2021). The glass ceiling is a result of gender stereotypes that women put family before work, lack enthusiasm for success, take feedback as an attack rather than an opportunity for growth, are too sentimental, and lack the aggressiveness necessary for a leadership position (Soleymanpour Omran et al., 2015). Baumgartner and Schneider (2010) noted that females who “break the glass ceiling” (p. 566) had to learn to overcome stereotypes, interject themselves into the “Old Boys networks” (Martinez et al., 2020, p. 899), and develop a work-life balance. Furthermore, females can benefit from a mentor, using their leadership to empower their team, be determined, and learn from other female leaders.

Finally, transformational leadership theory emphasizes how leaders can promote change by leading through inspiring and meeting employees' individual needs rather than from an authoritative stance (Bass, 1990). Our ever-changing society has created a

change in roles that moves away from management as a use of authority and more towards leadership as an influence. J. M. Burns (1978) noted that leaders mentor and empower their followers to push them to their full potential. Transformational leadership is characterized by more communal traits strongly associated with the female gender rather than agentic traits associated with the male gender (Eagly, 2003; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001).

Methodology

This qualitative study took on a phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences of female educational leaders from two school districts in the southeastern United States. Female educational leaders from two school districts with at least one year of experience in a school leadership role were invited to participate in the study. Those invited included assistant principals, associate principals, principals, assistant superintendents, and superintendents. The first school district has five middle schools and four high schools. The second district has three middle schools and two high schools. The first district has two middle schools with no female administrators to be included in the study.

Individual semi-structured interviews took place at the participant's school or office. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Member checking allowed the participants to verify and clarify any information in the interview transcription. The researcher then analyzed the transcriptions to identify meaning statements which then revealed themes in the experiences of the participants. From here the researcher developed an essence statement that reflected the central meaning of the participants' experiences. The goal of this study was to determine if the lived experiences of educational leaders influence their career aspirations.

Clarification of Terms

Agentic characteristics – stereotypical male attributes such as “aggressive, ambitious, dominant, forceful, independent, self-sufficient, [and] self-confident” (Eagly, 2003, p. 83).

Communal characteristics – stereotypical female attributes such as “affectionate, helpful, kind, sympathetic, interpersonally sensitive, nurturing, and gentle” (Eagly, 2003, p. 83)

Glass ceiling – “an invisible – but impenetrable – barrier between women and the executive suite, preventing them from reaching the highest levels of the business world regardless of their accomplishments and merits” (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995, p. 10).

Educational leaders – for this study, educational leaders will be used interchangeably with school administrators, which will include assistant principals, principals, and assistant superintendents.

High School – “any public school which contains grades no lower than the seventh and no higher than the twelfth” (Code of Laws, 1978). All high schools represented in this study will include grades nine through twelfth.

Middle School – “any public school which contains grades no lower than the fifth and no higher than the eighth” (Code of Laws, 1978). For this study, all middle schools contained grades sixth through eighth.

Secondary Schools – for this study, secondary schools will include both middle and high schools.

Transactional Leadership – leadership characterized by the trading of things of value (J.M. Burns, 1978).

Transformational Leadership – leadership characterized by the engagement “with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality” (J.M. Burns, 1978, p. 57-58).

CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND RESEARCH

The underrepresentation of female educational leaders has been extensively researched for many years. Most of this research has focused on gender-based barriers aspiring principals, superintendents, and even leaders of higher education endure (Connell et al., 2015; Hannum et al., 2015; Kruse & Krumm, 2016), gender stereotypes and bias (Jean-Marie, 2013; Pirouznia, 2013), and facilitators female leaders utilize to overcome these barriers (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; De Bruyn & Mestry, 2020; Kerins & Spaulding, 2022). Little research has been conducted focusing on aspiring assistant principals' career aspirations.

This literature review aims to begin with a brief historical overview of the underrepresentation of female leaders. Next, the literature review summarizes aspiring leader preparation programs; barriers female leaders encounter, gender stereotypes and bias, support systems, leadership styles, and the advantages of a diverse leadership team. The literature review then develops several theories regarding social role, role congruity, and the glass ceiling in addition to transformational and 21st-century leadership theories.

Content in Leadership

The underrepresentation of female educational leaders has been an ongoing issue. The following literature provides an overview indicating that there are more aspiring female educational leaders than males, and both male and female educational leaders complete identical preparation programs and follow similar career paths. Even with equal foundations for leadership positions, female leaders face additional barriers in addition to gender stereotypes and biases that male leaders seem to avoid.

Historical Overview

Equality issues date back to the 1960s when Americans fought for equal rights based on race, gender, religion, or national origin. Passage of the Civil Rights Act (1964) eliminated segregation in schools and prohibited discrimination in the workplace. Additionally, the passage of other laws and policies has reduced discrimination practices (Diehl et al., 2020); however, discrimination in education is still present today (Pirouznia, 2013).

Colleges and universities across the nation have seen a shift in enrollment for females. Women now outnumber men across all higher education levels (Guramatunhu-Mudiwa, 2015). In fact, enrollment demographics in educational leadership programs have gone from predominately white males to predominately white females (Eadens et al., 2012). DeAngelis and O'Connor (2012) stated that 71.9% of the participants in their study who earned an administrative certificate were female. Another study conducted in Florida reported that 75.6% of students within administration programs were female (Eadens et al., 2012).

Principal Pathways

The typical pathway for school administrators in this southeastern state is for interested teachers to complete a master's degree in school administration and pass a certification exam. The state department of education would then issue an administration certification after the proper documentation had been submitted (South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE), 2023a). However, an alternative path has been created for career changers seeking an administrative position. These candidates must be recommended by their superintendent and possess a master's degree in another field (SCDE, 2023b). These candidates can be granted an administration certification after the

successful completion of three years as an assistant principal in the district (SCDE, 2023b).

Aspiring male and female educational leaders follow similar paths to obtaining a leadership role, yet their journeys look slightly different. Studies have shown that aspiring female leaders' paths are usually longer than aspiring male leaders' paths (Bailes & Guthery, 2020; Guramatunhu-Mudiwa, 2015). Looking specifically at high schools, females spend more time as assistant principals and are less likely to advance to a principal role (Bailes & Guthery, 2020). Additionally, "as candidates' years of experience, the likelihood of promotion for women decreases relative to male assistant principals" (Bailes & Guthery, 2020, p. 7). Furthermore, a study by Guramatunhu-Mudiwa (2015) shows that females tend to enter administration later than males; higher counts of women enrolled in administrative programs fell above the age of 40, whereas men fell between the ages of 31-and 40 years.

Principal Preparation Programs

Both male and female aspiring leaders go through similar preparation programs. Extensive research has been completed to examine the effectiveness of leadership preparation programs (Chen et al., 2022; Clayton, 2014; Marcos et al., 2011; Rushing, 2022). One study compared the skills and knowledge that aspiring administrators deemed necessary to the skills and knowledge university faculty deemed necessary for educational administration programs (Clayton, 2014). Researchers concluded that faculty and school leaders agree that leaders need "to be trained in instructional leadership, ethical decision making, cultural competency, and organizational management" (Clayton, 2014, p. 9). However, faculty specifically noted that understanding federal and state mandates was essential (Clayton, 2014), whereas aspiring school leaders emphasized the

importance of additional internship opportunities to gain practical experiences (Chen et al., 2022; Clayton, 2014; Fancera, 2022; Rushing, 2022). Rushing (2022) noted that interns with extended field experiences were more confident in their abilities, while interns with shorter field experiences were overwhelmed and less confident in their new roles. Additionally, aspiring school leaders noted that context matters, and no leadership program can adequately prepare them for the specific needs of a school district (Clayton, 2014; Marcos et al., 2011) or a specific geographic area, particularly urban schools (Marcos et al., 2011).

Successful Preparation Elements

While school administrator preparation programs may be unable to prepare aspiring leaders for the specific needs of a particular school district, preparation programs have been successful in many aspects of preparation. Marcos et al. (2011) noted that principal preparation programs in California adequately prepare aspiring principals for the overall principal position. The programs addressed the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, equipped aspiring leaders with instructional leadership skills along with management skills, and introduced aspiring leaders to policies and protocols necessary to lead a school (Marcos et al., 2011). Additional research indicated that even add-on preparation programs adequately prepare aspiring female leaders to fulfill the role of a school administrator. Chen et al. (2022) explained how a 21-credit hour add-on program adequately prepared aspiring female leaders for the role of assistant principal, noting that the females were prepared to pass the licensure exam, possessed the skills necessary to interview for an administrator position; learned the skills needed to carry out the duties of an administrator; felt prepared as instructional leaders; knew how to approach problems; and understood the importance of leading with care, creating a

positive school culture, building relationships, and embracing diversity (Chen et al., 2022).

Missing Preparation Elements

School administrator preparation programs contain many elements that align with the needs of school districts; however, missing elements have been noted. Aspiring school administrators pointed out that leadership programs stressed theory, yet superintendents noted that many aspiring leaders lacked the understanding of application in the field (Marcos et al., 2011). Chen et al. (2022) added that preparation programs lack a clear understanding of social justice and what it looks like for aspiring administrators and those who have recently obtained an administrator role. Aspiring female leaders in that same study noted that preparation programs lack elements regarding social-emotional learning and trauma-informed care (Chen et al., 2022). Furthermore, Chen et al. (2022) reiterated that preparation programs should prepare aspiring leaders to be ethical leaders who enact social justice for everyone's benefit.

Critical Components in Preparation

Adequate preparation of aspiring school leaders requires a multitude of skills and knowledge; however, aspiring leaders must also know how to use the knowledge and skills acquired effectively. Research suggests that field experience and internships are vital to any school administrator preparation program (Marcos et al., 2011; Rushing, 2022). Marcos et al. (2011) proposed that aspiring leaders need to practice with real-life scenarios. Rushing (2022) added that extended field experiences were beneficial due to additional firsthand experiences. However, extended internships and field experiences are not always practical. To better prepare aspiring leaders, preparation programs have added components where aspiring leaders can practice leadership skills in a low-stakes setting.

Several of these programs have added components dealing with identifying problems of practice (Sanchez & Kresyman, 2019), the use of case studies (Leggett & Smith, 2022), action research (Batagiannis, 2011), and experiential learning (Fusarelli et al., 2018).

One study focused on identifying problems of practice had aspiring administrators identify a problem of practice and then develop a research proposal explaining how to study the problem of practice (Sanchez & Kresyman, 2019). Aspiring leaders identified problems with collaboration, student achievement, a safe learning environment, diversity, and enhanced leadership behavior (Sanchez & Kresyman, 2019). Sanchez and Kresyman (2019) noted that safety and collaboration were problems primarily identified by female aspiring leaders, aligning with existing research on how females lead. Furthermore, nearly all aspiring female leaders chose a qualitative approach as their methodology, which may imply that female leaders are not as comfortable with analyzing data (Sanchez & Kresyman, 2019). Finally, researchers noted that preparation programs needed to emphasize diversity and leadership due to the few problems of practice identified regarding these themes (Sanchez & Kresyman, 2019).

Need for Continued Support

Adequate preparation not only leads to more effective educational leaders but also aids in creating a skilled and knowledgeable pipeline. Burkett (2021) noted that after completing an administrator preparation program, the typical next step would be for aspiring leaders to obtain a leadership role as assistant principals. The role of the assistant principal is often viewed as a stepping stone to the role of the principal. However, assistant principals indicated that school districts often overlook professional development for assistant principals (Hayes & Burkett, 2020). Researchers have noted that providing professional development opportunities for assistant principals builds a

strong leadership pipeline with highly trained candidates to meet the district's needs (Burkett, 2021). Professional development for assistant principals should focus on activities that identify leadership strengths and constraints, which allow leaders to make more informed decisions (Burkett, 2021; Hayes & Burkett, 2020). Additionally, researchers voiced the importance of communication skills (Burkett, 2021; Hayes & Burkett, 2020). Well-developed communication skills allow administrators to adequately address instructional improvements (Burkett, 2021) as well as provide quality feedback to teachers (Burkett, 2021; Hayes & Burkett, 2020).

The acquisition of skills and knowledge extends beyond the formal preparation programs required for certification programs. Educational leaders must be life-long learners who continue to grow as the school and district's needs change. Research suggests that assistant principal professional development opportunities extend beyond the first few years (Burkett, 2021). Research indicated that veteran leaders transitioning to district-level administration positions noted that their formal education had a greater influence on the external school context; however, professional experiences had a greater influence on the internal school context (Fancera, 2022). Fancera (2022) proposes that educational leaders must continually advance their leadership skills to meet the continually changing needs of the school or district.

School districts that invest in creating highly trained leaders have the potential to create a solid pool of diverse candidates. School districts and educational leadership preparation institutions must work to address gender inequities; however, school districts must first acknowledge the underrepresentation of females in secondary leadership roles (Broadhurst et al., 2021). Madsen (2012) added that to increase the presence of female

educational leaders, preparation programs must develop the skills and knowledge necessary and obtain mentors and coaches to guide and support aspiring female leaders.

Barriers and Challenges

Aspiring female administrators face a multitude of barriers throughout their leadership journey. Extensive research indicated family responsibilities, along with balancing work and family obligations, as a top barrier female leaders face (Kruse & Krumm, 2016; Martínez et al., 2020; Mayya et al., 2021; McCullough, 2020; McGee, 2010; Pirouznia, 2013; K. Robinson et al., 2017; Wyland, 2016). In fact, McGee (2010) noted that females often enter educational leadership later in their careers than males do because they choose to raise their children and develop a balance between work and family before advancing their careers. Additionally, male superintendents are more likely to be married and four times more likely to have children than female superintendents (K. Robinson et al., 2017).

In addition to family responsibilities, aspiring female educational leaders often struggle to create networks and obtain mentors. For example, researchers suggest that females lack the support of a mentor (Hannum et al., 2015; K. Robinson et al., 2017), which often inspires in addition to assisting in skill development (K. Robinson et al., 2017). Furthermore, more male leaders in top-level positions can enable other males (Cassidy et al., 2021). K. Robinson et al. (2017) noted that most mentors mentor people of the same race and gender; therefore, the males, who comprise most top leaders, are more likely to mentor other males, which only exacerbates the problem. To add to that, Mayya et al. (2021) revealed that female leaders lack support from their male colleagues.

An additional barrier aspiring female educational leader's face is a lack of networking. Hill et al. (2016) emphasized that networking is critical for leadership

advancement. Some research even suggests that networking is more influential than performance regarding advancement (Hewlett et al., 2010). Hannum et al. (2015) noted that qualified female leaders may even be overlooked due to male candidates with connections. Aspiring female educational leaders lack strong female networks, whereas male educational leaders are often associated with “Old Boy Networks” (Cassidy et al., 2021, p. 6; Martínez et al., 2020, p. 899; McGee, 2010, p. 9; K. Robinson et al., 2017, p. 7). In fact, McGee (2010) noted “Ole Boy Networks” as one of the top two barriers aspiring female leaders face, with K. Robinson et al. (2017) indicating that “Old Boy Networks” (p. 7) ranked sixth. “Old Boy Networks” (Martinez et al., 2020, p. 899) often involve male leaders socializing after hours (Hill et al., 2016); however, McGee (2010) posited that aspiring female educational leaders miss these networking opportunities due to raising families and obtaining advanced degrees.

Family responsibilities and a lack of a supportive mentor or network are not the only barriers aspiring female leaders face. One study on female leaders in higher education found that female leaders sometimes lack a leadership identity, meaning they cannot visualize themselves in a leadership role (Hannum et al., 2015). Additionally, female leaders in this study noted they have faced discouragement, sabotage, and differing expectations for males and females (Hannum et al., 2015). Other studies found barriers such as a lack of confidence (Kruse & Krumm, 2016) or imposter syndrome (McCullough, 2020), lack of mobility (Kruse & Krumm, 2016), and increased time demands (K. Robinson et al., 2017). Furthermore, aspiring female leaders’ achievements are often devalued (McCullough, 2020), resulting in their continual need to prove

themselves (Cassidy et al., 2021). The lengthy list of barriers aspiring female leaders face demotivates female leaders to aspire to top-level leadership roles (Mayya et al., 2021).

Gender Stereotypes and Bias

Gender stereotypes and bias can also play a role in the underrepresentation of female educational leaders. For example, Jean-Marie (2013) interviewed two African American female principals who experienced racism, sexism, and ageism. Participants stated they were denied leadership positions due to their age and inexperience and that male leaders would often make sexist remarks that were patronizing or imply they were doing the females a favor by preparing them for leadership positions (Jean-Marie, 2013). Furthermore, the participants explained how they were mistreated when told they would be transferred to low-performing schools to clean up the schools (Jean-Marie, 2013). The participants agreed to transfer to low-performing schools, as the district had asked when they were told they would have to apply for the transfer (Jean-Marie, 2013). It was later discovered that the community was against hiring the first female principal, let alone an African American, for the high school; they wanted a man to fill the role (Jean-Marie, 2013). An additional study of aspiring superintendents conducted by Connell et al. (2015) also noted that gender bias typically stemmed from the community rather than the school board or district.

In addition to gender bias, societal culture can also lead to disadvantages for aspiring female leaders. Societal culture has resulted in gatekeeping, leading to more significant support for males in leadership positions (Cassidy et al., 2021; Hagan & Olivier, 2022). Additionally, Pirouznia (2013) found that sex-role stereotyping created an additional barrier for females due to the preference for masculine leadership styles. Successful leaders are considered male leaders who lead with authority (Pirouznia, 2013).

Researchers emphasized the need for gender stereotype education, noting that women will be trapped in female stereotypes if traditional views continue (Pirouznia, 2013). McCullough (2020) agrees that change is necessary, noting that “devaluing women’s achievements and disrespecting their authority, we need to move towards an environment where every leader is treated with respect” (p. 6).

Support Systems

Aspiring female leaders often face gender-based barriers, yet various support structures can assist females overcome those barriers. A plethora of research has emphasized the importance of mentoring as a support system for aspiring leaders (Connell et al., 2015; Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; De Bruyn & Mestry, 2020; Hagan & Olivier, 2022; Kerins & Spaulding, 2022; Kruse & Krumm, 2016; McCullough, 2020; McGee, 2010; Wyland, 2016). McGee (2010) noted that women do not feel supported even after obtaining a leadership position, indicating a need for mentors. One study found that 91.2% of participants designated a mentor as critical to their success, noting that mentors can increase confidence while holding you accountable (Wyland, 2016). De Bruyn and Mestry (2020) added that trust and an open line of communication were essential aspects of the mentoring relationship.

Additionally, the gender of the mentor influences the relationship. For instance, studies revealed that both aspiring female principals and superintendents found that male mentors successfully made the necessary connections for aspiring leaders to advance their careers (Connell et al., 2015; Kruse & Krumm, 2016). Additionally, male mentors have been known for connecting with community members to gain acceptance within the community (Connell et al., 2015). Aspiring female leaders claim that male mentors have supported, provided guidance, and even encouraged them to seek the superintendent

position (Connell et al., 2015). However, Copeland and Calhoun (2014) revealed that aspiring female superintendents appreciated male mentors; however, they preferred female mentors primarily because they felt they were better suited to support them through obstacles specific to female leaders.

In addition to mentors acting as a support system for aspiring female leaders, networking can be a valuable support. Supportive people within networks provide aspiring female leaders with the knowledge and insights to advance their careers (Hannum et al., 2015; McCullough, 2020). Connell et al. (2015) pointed out that state and national organizations can create network opportunities for female leaders to increase their “knowledge, skills, influence, and recognition” (p. 49). Furthermore, when school districts do not implement a formal mentoring program, new and aspiring leaders can connect with colleagues to create informal mentor opportunities (A.D. Robinson, 2014).

While mentors and networking were two of the top supports for aspiring female leaders, additional supports also aid in the advancement of female leaders. Research suggests that preparation is vital (De Bruyn & Mestry, 2020). Formal leadership programs develop the skills and confidence to lead (Hannum et al., 2015). Additionally, female leaders in higher education can use professional development to overcome gender-based barriers (Hagan & Olivier, 2022) and provide relevant, up-to-date knowledge to stay current in the field (De Bruyn & Mestry, 2020). Furthermore, encouragement and support can come from any person, especially a role model (Hannum et al., 2015) or spouse (McCullough, 2020). In fact, one researcher found that none of the female superintendents within the study aspired to the superintendency; however, they were encouraged into the position (Connell et al., 2015). De Bruyn and Mestry (2020)

added that, in their study on career trajectories of female principals, only two females aspired to leadership roles early in their careers, while others were encouraged into leadership by another colleague or family member.

Leadership Styles

Conflicting research exists about the effectiveness of leaders based on their gender. Research notes gender differences in leadership styles. For example, Eagly et al. (2003) suggest that female leaders are more democratic, whereas male leaders are autocratic. Female leaders tend to be more relationship focused, whereas male leaders tend to be more assertive (Sebastian & Moon, 2018). Furthermore, research suggests that female leaders manage under a system of rewards rather than reprimands (Eagly et al., 2003). Eagly et al. (2003) posit that gender roles play a part in how males and females lead.

Female leaders are typically more transformational in their approach to leadership than male leaders (Eagly et al., 2003; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Sebastian & Moon, 2018). Researchers suggest that female leaders' use of transformational leadership gives them an advantage over male leaders, resulting in more effective leadership (Eagly et al., 2003; Knowles & Mainiero, 2021). Other studies suggest that female leaders' use of transformational leadership may be the edge necessary to overcome gender role incongruity (Eagly & Carli, 2003).

A study by G. Burns and Martin (2010) examined leadership effectiveness based on invitational leadership. Invitational leadership focuses on four key tenets: optimism, respect, trust, and intention (G. Burns & Martin, 2010). G. Burns and Martin found that more effective schools practiced invitational leadership qualities more consistently than ineffective schools; however, the gender of the leader was insignificant when considering

the effectiveness of the leader. Another study by Thompson (2000) revealed that a leader's effectiveness depends more on leadership style than gender. Thompson emphasized that effective leaders utilized all four of Bolman and Deal's leadership frames. G. Burns and Martin (2010) added that effective leadership qualities should be considered effective regardless of the leader's gender.

Advantages of Increased Diversity

Even if the gender of the leader does not influence leadership effectiveness there are advantages to increased diversity within the leadership of an organization. First, Shaw and Hernandez-Gantes (2021) revealed that "closing inequality gaps and improving economic stability and welfare of women can lead to improvements in pediatric nutrition and mortality rates, increased school enrollment, improved maternal and children's health, and improved natural resources" (p. 4). Additionally, Fuller et al. (2018) added that from a moral and ethical standpoint, aspiring female leaders should have an equal opportunity to obtain an administrative role. Furthermore, school districts send symbolic messages to the community about what they view as acceptable leadership values when they choose to exclude females from leadership positions (Fuller et al., 2018).

Additionally, leadership is a critical factor in determining the success of an organization. Gender diversity in leadership leads to stronger business and equity practices (Glass & Cook, 2017). Additionally, Glass and Cook (2017) noted that businesses that lacked gender-diverse boards, whether male or female, are less likely to have strong business practices. Furthermore, research suggests that leadership is responsible for the success of a school (Green, 2015; Miller, 2018). Shelton's 2022 study revealed that the principal's gender was significantly related to student achievement. Specifically, male principals were 76% less likely to lead a school with above-average

ACT scores. Another study conducted in New York revealed that the gender of the principal across different boroughs significantly impacted student preparedness; however, within boroughs, gender played a role in student preparedness (Green, 2015).

The underrepresentation of female educational leaders excludes the female perspective from decision-making processes, reduces the number of female role models, and results in a misuse of talent. First, aspiring female leaders lack a voice in pertinent decisions and perspectives (Madsen, 2012). Madsen (2012) noted that in higher education, the lack of female representation influences not only the institution but also the specific research questions addressed and the findings. Furthermore, when females occupy leadership positions, it provides role models for other females, including students (Seliger & Shames, 2009). Finally, when aspiring female leaders are overlooked, their talents are wasted. The Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2022) noted that all perspectives, both male and female, are necessary for forward progress and to overcome crises. Santamaría and Jean-Marie (2014) added that female leaders, including minority female leaders, remain an untapped resource that may provide learning opportunities based on the inclusion of different perspectives.

The advantages of increased female representation are even more significant when race is considered. Jang and Alexander (2022) found that when considered individually, race and gender did not influence student achievement; however, when race and gender were considered together, all students with Black female principals resulted in statistically significantly higher math achievement scores. Santamaría and Jean-Marie (2014) found that minority female leaders can provide alternative cultural perspectives that may inform practices that will benefit the ever-changing diverse needs of the

students within our schools. Increased diversity among leadership teams is essential to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population adequately.

Educational Theory

Several theories provide the framework for this study. Social role theory and role congruity theory explain how cultural expectations have created beliefs about how different careers are better aligned with a particular gender. Then the glass ceiling theory emphasizes the role gender stereotypes play in the advancement of females into high-level leadership positions. Finally, transformational leadership theory shows how leadership has shifted from an authoritative position to one that utilizes influence to encourage followers to perform, and 21st century leadership is an all-encompassing leadership style that leads to more effective leadership.

Social Role Theory

Social role theory pertains to the gender roles that society assigns to different sexes. Eagly et al. (2003) stated that social role theory is people's tendency to participate in activities that align with gender roles that have been culturally defined. Gender stereotypes result from the social roles constructed by society (Eagly & Steffen, 1984). Eagly and Wood (2012) noted that socially constructed gender roles originated from physical sex differences. Due to these physical differences, particular tasks were more efficiently completed by one sex over the other, which led to a division of labor (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Even though cultural advancements have been made, gender role beliefs persist. Our society maintains the gender roles observed through the behaviors of men and women (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Females are associated with communal characteristics that pertain to the welfare of other people, whereas males are associated with agentic characteristics aligned with assertiveness and control (Eagly, 2003). Society

views females as caretakers, whereas males are seen as authority figures suitable for leadership (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Due to these socially constructed gender roles, males fit the managerial role, whereas females do not fit society's view of what a leader should be (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This theory leads to role congruity theory, which examines how social roles align with leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Role Congruity Theory

Role congruity theory examines how gender roles established by society align with other roles, in this case, leadership roles. As stated above, society has constructed gender roles that view males as authority figures and females as caretakers (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Communal characteristics are associated with females, while agentic characteristics are associated with leadership positions; therefore, role incongruity exists for female leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Prejudice can occur when aspiring female leaders possess the communal characteristics rather than the agentic characteristics associated with leadership positions; however, an additional prejudice can occur when female leaders are evaluated poorly for possessing the agentic characteristics associated with leadership because they are perceived as less desirable characteristics in females (Eagly, 2003).

Glass Ceiling Theory

The glass ceiling theory refers to the invisible barriers that prevent female leaders from rising to the top. Juwitasari (2021) refers to the glass ceiling theory as a metaphorical ceiling that prevents females from obtaining leadership roles. The glass ceiling stems primarily from gender stereotypes. Soleymanpour Omran et al. (2015) indicated that one assumption was that females are more likely to prioritize family needs over the needs of an organization. It is believed that family needs will interfere with

motivation and enthusiasm and that females take feedback personally instead of constructively (Soleymanpour Omran et al., 2015). Additionally, females tend to be more sentimental and lack aggression (Soleymanpour Omran et al., 2015). Another barrier for females is the lack of access to power channels, which leads to increased success, constantly having to prove themselves capable, and being forced into a masculine culture of leading (Soleymanpour Omran et al., 2015).

Many females still feel the presence of the glass ceiling even though they have begun to crack it. Several strategies have been identified to assist female leaders in breaking through the glass ceiling (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010; Soleymanpour Omran et al., 2015). Baumgartner and Schneider (2010) identified four strategies to assist females in breaking through the glass ceiling. Aspiring leaders must put forth effort, sell themselves, persevere, and gain experience through internships and other low-level leadership roles. Additionally, aspiring females must overcome stereotypes, which can be done through anticipation and detachment (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010). Aspiring females must be prepared to face stereotypes and learn not to take them personally. Furthermore, Baumgartner and Schneider (2010) found that aspiring females must interject themselves into the “Old Boys Networks” (Martinez et al., 2020, p. 899) and develop a balance between work and life. Aspiring females can also benefit from a mentor, use their leadership style to empower their subordinates, deemphasize their status, be determined and overcome fears, and learn from other female leaders (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010).

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership begins to shift away from an authoritative management style of leadership. J. M. Burns (1978) noted that transformational

leadership focused less on authority and more on leading through empowerment. Leaders and followers work collaboratively, increasing motivation and boosting morale (J. M. Burns, 1978). Transformational leaders focus on the organization by encouraging followers and seeking innovation (Nazim & Mahmood, 2016). Bass (1990) reiterates that transformational leaders inspire and meet followers' needs to create change.

Transformational leaders have a vision that is communicated to their followers, who are inspired by the leaders' enthusiasm (Nazim & Mahmood, 2016).

Transformational leadership is characterized by communal traits such as affection, nurturing, and gentleness (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These traits are strongly associated with the female gender rather than the agentic traits associated with the male gender (Eagly, 2003; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). Agentic traits such as assertive and controlling (Eagly & Karau, 2002) are more closely aligned with transactional leadership that focuses on rewards and consequences rather than relationships and collaboration (Nazim & Mahmood, 2016).

Transformational leadership is more effective than transactional leadership. Nazim and Mahmood (2016) found a correlation between teacher satisfaction and transformational leadership. Additionally, the study concluded that transformational leadership leads to change through a motivating leader who supports and empowers followers by giving them a voice in organizational decisions (Nazim & Mahmood, 2016). Furthermore, Vinkenburg et al. (2011) found that female leaders who practice transformational leadership may increase their probability for advancement by blending the communal characteristics of transformational leadership with the typical agentic characteristics of leadership.

21st Century Leadership

Leadership has historically taken on an industrial paradigm. This industrial paradigm is no longer suitable for the twenty-first century. The post-industrial era of the twenty-first century has led to new values within our society (Rost, 1993). Bolman and Deal (2017) have noted four frames which leaders must consider when dealing with organizational change. The first frame is the classical or structural frame. This frame focuses on the analytical side of organizations. Another frame is the human resource frame, which focuses on teamwork and relationships. A third frame is the political frame. Here, the focus is on creating allies and negotiations. Finally, the symbolic frame is all about traditions and storytelling. Bolman and Deal (2017) found that most people gravitate towards the structural or human resource frames but that the political and symbolic frames are also critical for leadership to be effective.

Twenty-first century leadership theory is about a strong partnership. Teamwork is a crucial component of this partnership. Twenty-first century leadership theory moves away from management as a use of authority and more towards leadership as an influence. Leadership consists of members on a team that collaborate and develop a course of action that will move the organization toward a collective aim. Twenty-first century leadership moves away from procedural forms of management; it is more about the big picture and the global impact that organizations are making.

A strong partnership is the foundation of twenty-first century leadership theory. This partnership consists of leaders and followers however their roles may vary throughout the partnership (Rost, 1993). Leaders are no longer strictly figures of authority. Leaders must become more inclusive and ethics-driven in the twenty-first century (Otte, 2015). Leaders and followers alike play a vital, engaging role in

influencing the relationship (Rost, 1993). Influence can come from all sides of the relationship. Leaders can influence followers; followers can influence leaders or other followers (Rost, 1993). Leadership is based on consensus and inclusiveness (Rost & Barker, 2000). Influence results from persuasion and collaboration but does not include coercive measures. Influence is non-threatening and is used more to inspire than to oppress members. It is from these influences that change occurs.

Twenty-first century leadership depends on relationships to influence and transform organizations through change. These changes must be intentional and transformational. The team works together to reveal the intentions of both the leaders and followers (Rost, 1993). Intentions are often revealed through persuasive actions. Members of the group then evaluate intentions to determine if the intentions are genuine (Rost, 1993). If the intentions are not genuine, then real change is unlikely. Intentions must be genuine and conducted for real change to occur. Regardless of intention, some changes are unsuccessful. Effective leadership can be ineffective at producing results (Rost, 1993). Effective leadership is more about collaboration, which produces intentions that will lead the organization toward a collective aim.

Twenty-first century leadership theory hinges on a collective aim, which requires the team to agree on the organization's strategic direction. The collective agreement ensures that neither the leaders nor the followers are the only side winning out (Rost, 1993). Again, this collective aim is developed through the influential relationship between leaders and followers. Gone are the days when the leader was primarily an authority figure who gave orders to subordinate followers with no say in the strategic plan. Leaders now empower followers and encourage active participation. Leaders and

followers collaborate and create a course of action to produce changes. Leaders and followers understand that, through reflective practice, intentions may need to be revamped along the way.

Summary

The continued underrepresentation of female educational leaders, particularly within secondary schools and the superintendent position, has led to extensive research on barriers (Connell et al., 2015; Hannum et al., 2015; Kruse & Krumm, 2016) as well as gender stereotypes and biases (Jean-Marie, 2013; Pirouznia, 2013) that have created obstacles for the advancement of female leaders. Additionally, conflicting research has been conducted regarding leadership effectiveness based on gender. However, researchers agree that leadership styles differ based on the leader's gender (Fuller et al., 2018). While effective leadership is vital to the success of a school, effective leadership has more to do with leadership characteristics than gender.

Additionally, the literature reviews support systems that assist aspiring female leaders in overcoming the barriers encountered (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; De Bruyn & Mestry, 2020; Kerins & Spaulding, 2022). Leadership is vital to the success of organizations, including schools (Miller, 2018). Therefore, it is imperative that females, as well as minorities, are recruited and tapped to fill leadership positions. Even if gender has no bearing on a leader's effectiveness, the advantages of an increasingly diverse leadership team are enough to push for a more diverse leadership team.

In the next chapter, the researcher will explain the methodology utilized in this research study. The chapter begins with a brief overview of the study, including the research questions to be answered. Next, the researcher clearly outlines the research

design, the settings and anticipated participants, and an explanation of how the data will be analyzed. The chapter also addresses limitations and ethical considerations throughout the study.

CHAPTER 3. METHOD AND PROCEDURES

Study Overview

Most educators are female, and females comprise most students enrolled in educational leadership programs. However, female educational leaders are severely outnumbered in both the secondary principal and superintendent positions. Therefore, this study aims to examine the experiences of entry-level female educational leaders, specifically how their experiences have influenced their career aspirations.

Research Questions

Overarching research question: How do female educational leaders' experiences influence their career aspirations? This research question led to the following supporting questions:

- What specific challenges and supportive factors are encountered by female educational leaders?
- How have their experiences shaped their self-perceptions of their leadership abilities and opportunities for career advancement?
- Do gender-related biases and stereotypes impact the career aspirations of female educational leaders?

Research Design

This study used a qualitative design intended to explore a phenomenon (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). The study aimed to understand how the experiences female educational leaders have encountered influence their career aspirations. Specifically, this study took on a phenomenological approach to study the experiences from the first-person point of view (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). A phenomenological approach

attempts to capture the essence of the lived experiences common to those who have shared the experience (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). Presumably, all female educational leaders have shared a common experience.

Qualitative research is a non-experimental method of collecting data. Qualitative research can be used to explore and explain phenomena (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). Specifically, phenomenology is a qualitative approach that allows researchers to explore participants' experiences from the first-person point of view (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). Privitera and Ahlgrim-Delzell (2019) noted that the phenomenological approach is designed to uncover the essence of the experiences shared by the participants who have endured that experience. Alhazmi and Kaufmann (2022) added that phenomenological studies capture the experiences of the participants to understand them through the participants' context. To do this, the researcher must refrain from casting judgment or including their own beliefs about the phenomena being investigated (Patton, 2020).

Participants for phenomenological studies are typically chosen through purposeful sampling (Padilla-Díaz, 2015). Padilla-Díaz (2015) defined purposive sampling as selecting participants based on the criteria the researcher is studying. Data for phenomenological research is collected through participant interviews. Privitera and Ahlgrim-Delzell (2019) stated that the researcher interviews participants to obtain a first-person view of the experiences. Interview transcriptions can then be analyzed through coding methods, which lead to themes (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). Once themes have been developed, the researcher can look for patterns (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell,

2019). A final step, member checking, allowed the researcher the opportunity to validate the results (Praveena & Sasikumar, 2021; Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019).

This qualitative approach encompassed a social constructivist worldview. Social constructivists believe people seek meaning from their experiences (Creswell, 2009). In this case, the researcher attempted to understand how the experiences of female educational leaders influence their career aspirations through a phenomenological approach. The researcher must rely on the participants' views of the experiences; therefore, questions must be open-ended so the participants can make meaning of their experiences (Creswell, 2009).

The researcher began by sending electronic invitations (See Appendix C) to female educational leaders. Participants who accepted the invitation were contacted to ensure they met the participant requirements and to schedule their individual semi-structured interviews (See Appendix A). Participants included current female educational leaders with a minimum of one year experience as a school administrator. The researcher obtained six participants from two school districts located in one southeastern state. The interviews all occurred in person at the participants' school or office. The interviews lasted between 8 and 27 minutes, and follow-up interviews were scheduled as needed. All interviews were audio recorded for transcription purposes. Once transcription and member checking occurred, the audio recordings were deleted to ensure the confidentiality of participants. For data analysis, the researcher employed Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step procedure as described by Zhou et al. (2022). Following this process leads researchers to the essence of the participants' lived experiences (Alase, 2017). Figure 3.1 provides an overview of the researcher's study.

Figure 3.1

Methodology Overview



A phenomenological approach is an appropriate method for this study because it allows the participants to share their lived experiences to understand how these experiences influence career aspirations. Research suggests utilizing a phenomenological approach when studying experiences and examining patterns in the lived experiences of participants (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). Additionally, a phenomenological study aims to obtain the lived experiences rather than the opinions participants may have about the experience (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022).

Credibility

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, the researcher employed bracketing. Bracketing ensured that the researcher did not influence the results with preconceived notions (Praveena & Sasikumar, 2021). The researcher must remain open to the participants' ideas and emotions (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). An additional method utilized to ensure credibility is member checking. Member checking involves allowing participants to review the findings to ensure their experiences were accurately portrayed throughout the study (Praveena & Sasikumar, 2021). Additionally, the researcher should include any insight or feedback given by the participants in the study results.

Setting

This research took place within a single southeastern state. The study included female educational leaders from two school districts within the state. The researcher purposely excluded the school district they are employed with from the study to avoid any bias; therefore, two neighboring districts were selected for the study. District A is a large suburban district that covers an entire county while District B is a smaller suburban district that includes only a portion of a neighboring county. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) provided community demographics data for both District A and District B. Data is shown in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1*Community Demographics*

School District	Total Population	Average Household Income	Percent of Families Below Poverty	Percent of Families Receiving Assistance ^a
A	129,617	\$53, 188	12.9	17.2
B	84,906	\$50, 230	20.5	24.9

^a Assistance in the form of Food Stamps or SNAP benefits.

Additionally, the agency provided labor force data for the adults in the community shown in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2*Community Labor Force*

School District	Percent of the Workforce				
	Management	Service	Sales	Natural Resources	Production
A	37.9	18.1	18.7	10.8	14.5
B	36.1	16.1	19.7	7.5	20.6

Due to the close geographic proximity of the two school districts, the communities are similar.

School District A takes pride in the fact that the district consistently ranks near the top compared to other districts within the state. District A's ACT and SAT scores rank above the national average and within the top five in the state. Additionally, the district maintains a graduation rate that exceeds the state average. According to the district's strategic plan, one of the district's top priorities is to increase the 3rd grade readiness. The district is currently working on literacy training for early childhood teachers and expanding its Pre-K programs to jump-start literacy initiatives. Additionally, the district is working to ensure that all teachers are provided professional development opportunities to ensure high-quality educational opportunities for all students. Professional development is provided to assist teachers in preparing differentiated instructional plans and to increase understanding of the social-emotional needs of gifted and talented students. Furthermore, the district is working to increase diversity among the faculty and staff. The district has partnered with a local university to provide opportunities for classified staff to earn teaching degrees, which will expand the teacher pipeline.

School District B ranks within the top 30% of school districts within the state. District B's graduation rate is higher than the state average. According to the district strategic plan, much of their professional development is concentrated at the elementary school level. The district trains all K-5 teachers in implementing Reading, Writing, and Math Workshop. Additionally, the district provides Level Intervention Literacy training for K-3 teachers. All teachers 3K-5 receive RTI training, and reading coaches were trained and added to each elementary school. All Pre-K teachers received training on the

new standards and CERDEP curriculum. Beyond the elementary level, ELA teachers receive training on text-dependent analysis aimed to increase English EOC scores. All teachers receive professional development regarding teaching gifted students, differentiated instruction, and instructional strategies for language development specifically targeted to support ML students. Finally, Algebra 1 teachers receive training in small groups of personalized instruction aimed to increase EOC scores.

District A is a one-to-one technology school that provides tablets to all kindergarten students and Chromebooks to all students in grades one through 12. The district also provides mobile hotspot internet connections for families who need reliable internet service. The district provides teachers with mobile laptops and has developed a plan to provide mobile laptops for classified staff as well. Additionally, the district has provided interactive projectors for classroom use. Furthermore, the district encourages teachers to create technology-rich lessons that will prepare students with the 21st-century skills necessary to prepare them for the workforce and beyond. The district ensures that teachers remain current on technology use by requiring them to earn professional development hours for certificate renewal.

District B is also a 1:1 technology school that provides Chromebooks to all K-12 students. Teachers are encouraged to utilize technology when planning and designing lessons. Students who do not have internet access at home can still utilize many of the Chromebook features while offline. Technology integration was part of a district initiative to enhance students' 21st-century skills and better prepare them for the future. Additionally, the district furnishes laptops for all teachers as well as interactive displays

for use within the classrooms. The district provides professional development and training through its extensive district technology team.

District A has 16,223 students enrolled with 2,457 faculty and staff, including 1,051.8 full-time teachers. The student-teacher ratio for District A is 15.42. The specific student demographics for each of the districts can be seen in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3

Student Demographics

Category	District A		District B	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Total Students Enrolled	16,223	100	12,420	100
Black	1,131	6.97	4,061	32.70
American Indian	16	0.10	7	0.06
Asian	205	1.26	182	1.47
Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	2	0.01	1	0.01
Hispanic or Latino	1,652	10.18	1,336	10.76
Two or More Races	1,083	6.68	959	7.72
White	12,134	74.80	5,873	47.29
Students in Poverty	10,217	62.98	8,431	67.88

District A encompasses 14 elementary, five middle, and four high schools. This includes two magnet schools for elementary students, one of which is an arts school and the other a science and technology school. On top of that, the district has two Montessori Pre-K programs for qualified three- and four-year-olds. Furthermore, the district offers high school students the opportunity to attend a career center that partners with a community

college and a local university. The district offers school choice, which allows families to choose where their students will attend school. However, the district does not provide transportation outside of the attendance zone in which the student resides. Furthermore, the district is working to increase the number of students enrolled in advanced placement (AP) courses, which aligns with the district's goal of increased rigor. The district prioritizes the fine arts from kindergarten through high school. In addition to the fine arts programs available, the district offers K-12 Project Lead the Way (PLTW) courses, which provide firsthand learning and problem-solving opportunities. Finally, the district has a World Language program that provides students with the choice of enhanced communication skills. All these programs aim to provide opportunities to meet the various needs of students within the district. In addition to these programs offered to students within the community, the district offers adult learning programs to benefit the community.

District B has 12,420 students enrolled with 850 full-time teachers. This represents a student-teacher ratio of 14.92. District B has two early education centers that focus specifically on Pre-K students. Additionally, the district is home to 11 elementary schools, four middle schools, and two high schools, including two Academy of the Arts schools, one elementary and one middle school, emphasizing arts integration. Furthermore, the district offers a summer arts consortium, a week-long summer intensive for artistically gifted students. The district shares a technology center with various career pathways for students to receive specialized training. Furthermore, the district offers an alternative school for at-risk students to provide individualized learning to support students and an adult learning center for community members.

Participants

This study aimed to understand how the experiences of female educational leaders influence their career aspirations. According to Privitera and Ahlgrim-Delzell (2019), any study's target population is all members who fit the researcher's criteria. For this study, the target population represented all female educational leaders nationwide. Due to feasibility, researchers then narrow the target population to a sampling frame (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). For this study, the researcher has narrowed the sampling frame to two local school districts within a southeastern state. This qualitative study utilized a nonprobability sampling technique. Nonprobability sampling is a method of selecting participants from the accessible population in a nonrandom fashion (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019).

All participants were purposefully selected because they fit the specific criteria the researcher was studying. Privitera and Ahlgrim-Delzell (2019) agree that purposeful sampling is used when a researcher intentionally selects participants based on specific characteristics and experiences. All participants in this study were female educational leaders with a minimum of one year experience as a school administrator. A minimum of one year of experience helped to ensure the participants had acquired the lived experiences necessary to explain their journey. However, the researcher also used a convenience sampling technique to obtain accessible participants. Convenience sampling is a method of sampling that researchers utilize based on available access to participants (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). For this study, the researcher purposely excluded the school district in which they are employed to avoid unnecessary bias; therefore, two neighboring school districts were selected. Female assistant principals, associate

principals, principals, assistant superintendents, and superintendents from both districts with at least one year of experience as school administrators were invited to participate in the study. Due to the underrepresentation of female secondary administrators, most schools have only one or two eligible participants. Two middle schools in District A have no female representation to be included in the study, and only one high school principal is available from each district. This data aligns closely with the literature in that few secondary administrators are female. The participant demographics can be seen in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4

Participant Demographics

Position	District A			District B		
	Black	White	Other	Black	White	Other
Middle School Female Assistant Principal	0	0	0	1	1	0
High School Female Assistant Principal	0	2	0	0	1	0
Assistant Superintendent	0	0	0	0	1	0

These sampling methods are resource-effective, given that they are both cost and time-efficient for the researcher. However, these methods result in a sample that is not random and may not represent the target population. Based on the small, nonrandom sampling techniques, the study's results cannot be generalized to the target population.

Procedure: Data Collection and Analysis

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to gain an understanding of how the lived experiences of female secondary educational leaders influence their career aspirations. Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with individual participants. The interview data was then analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step method of analysis.

Data Collection Plan

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval through Anderson University (see Appendix B), the researcher sought school district approval to interview female educational leaders from two neighboring school districts. Once school district approval had been granted, the researcher began sending electronic invitations (see Appendix C) to female educational leaders to participate in the research study. The invitation included a short biography introducing the researcher and the study's purpose, along with the researcher's contact information. The invitation allowed participants to accept their invitations by responding with their preferred method of contact and the best time to reach them regarding the scheduling of their interviews. Reminder e-mails were sent twice to increase participation in the study. Data collected from the participant invitations was stored in an encrypted file on a password-protected computer.

Next, the researcher began scheduling individual interviews with qualifying participants who accepted their invitations by providing contact information and availability. Interviews were scheduled to take place at the participants' schools or offices. Interviews lasted between 8 and 27 minutes, depending on the participant's responses.

Before the interview, participants provided written consent (See Appendix D) for voluntary participation in the research study. Consent forms reiterated the purpose of the study and provided participants with other information regarding their participation. The consent form outlined the minimal risk involved in participation. The researcher explained that information obtained during the study would be kept confidential using pseudonyms for participants and school districts. Additionally, the researcher explained how the study could increase awareness of the advantages of a more diverse leadership team. Participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary, and they may withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were also informed that they may choose not to answer a question while remaining in the study. Finally, participants were notified that they would not be compensated for their participation in the study.

Interviews were conducted individually at the participants' school or office. All interviews were audio recorded, and the researcher recorded field notes throughout the interviews. Interviews were semi-structured to promote a conversational style interview with questions to guide the conversation (see Appendix A). Interviews lasted between 8 and 27 minutes, depending on how the conversation transpired and the participants' willingness to share. Following the interviews, all interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. After the audio recordings had been transcribed, the researcher deleted the audio files to ensure the participants' confidentiality. Again, the interview transcriptions were stored in an encrypted file on a password-protected computer. The data collection timeline is shown in Table 3.5.

Table 3.5*Data Collection Timeline*

Key Steps	How	When
IRB Approval	Follow Anderson University Guidelines	December
Locate Participants	Obtain District Approval	January
Send Participant Invitations	E-mail female educational leaders within each district Send reminder e-mails as necessary	January
Schedule Interviews	Use contact information from the questionnaire	January – February
Interview Participants	Obtain written consent Audio record interviews	February – March
Analyze Data	Follow Colaizzi’s (1978) Seven seven-step process, which includes transcription, member checking, and triangulation	February – March

Data Analysis Plan

The data collected in this research study was analyzed using Colaizzi’s (1978) Seven Step Method, a type of descriptive phenomenology (Praveena & Sasikumar, 2021). Descriptive phenomenology involves four critical steps for the researcher (Praveena & Sasikumar, 2021). First, the researcher used bracketing to set aside preconceived notions or judgments about the phenomenon (Patton, 2020). Next, the researcher kept an open mind regarding the participant's experiences (Praveena & Sasikumar, 2021). Then, the researcher analyzed the data and developed a description that defines the phenomenon (Praveena & Sasikumar, 2021).

The analysis phase followed Colaizzi's (1978) method, which begins with listening to the audio recordings several times, transcribing the recordings verbatim, and then reading and rereading the transcriptions to develop a good understanding of the participants' thoughts (Praveena & Sasikumar, 2021; Zhou et al., 2022). Step two required the researcher to extract significant statements relevant to the participants' experiences (Praveena & Sasikumar, 2021; Zhou et al., 2022). Step three involved creating the meaning of the significance statements to generate codes (Praveena & Sasikumar, 2021; Zhou et al., 2022). In step four, the researcher organized the codes into clusters (Praveena & Sasikumar, 2021; Zhou et al., 2022). For step five, the researcher combined the themes to develop a description of the phenomenon (Morrow et al., 2015). Morrow et al. (2015) described step six as condensing the description into a clear, concise description. Finally, in step seven, the researcher returned to the participants to validate the results through member checking (Morrow et al., 2015; Praveena & Sasikumar, 2021). Member checking allows the participants to verify that the data collected is accurate and that the results accurately represent the participants' experiences, which increases the dependability of the qualitative study.

Ethical Considerations

The study went through Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (see Appendix B) to ensure the study followed university policies and ethical standards. This research study posed minimal risk to candidates who elected to participate. All information collected in this study will remain confidential. The researcher stored all data collected in encrypted files on a password-protected computer. Additionally, the researcher deleted all audio recordings once transcriptions had been completed. The researcher must store all research data for at least two years; after that, all files will be deleted from the computer.

All identifiable information was removed once interviews were scheduled, and participants and their school districts were referenced only by pseudonyms.

Participation in the study was completely voluntary. Any participant could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Additionally, any participant could omit questions in the interview without withdrawing from the study. Participants were not compensated for their participation in the study. Furthermore, to avoid a conflict of interest, the researcher selected two neighboring school districts for participation recruitment rather than recruiting from within their current school district. This helped avoid any preconceived ideas or biases from collecting data from colleagues.

Data Sources

The researcher utilized electronic participant recruitment followed by individual semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix A) designed to guide the conversation between the researcher and the participants. The questions were carefully created to gather information about the school leaders' experiences. All participants are female educational leaders who share a common experience, transitioning from teacher to educational leader. The questions were designed to obtain information pertaining to how female leaders' experiences influence their career aspirations.

Summary

The goal of this study was to explore the perspectives and experiences of female educational leaders to determine how those experiences play a role in their career aspirations. This study took on a phenomenological approach to understand how the lived experiences female leaders face on their journey through leadership influence their career path. Data for the study was collected via individual semi-structured interviews and

analyzed through Colaizzi's (1978) Seven-Step Method to explore the essence of the participant's lived experiences. Member checking ensured validity throughout the study.

CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

Females hold most teaching positions; however, female educational leaders are underrepresented, particularly in secondary principal (NCES, 2021b) and district superintendent roles (Kowalski et. al., 2010). This study aimed to determine how female educational leaders' career aspirations are affected by their experiences. The overarching research question guided the study on how female educational leaders' experiences influence their career aspirations. In addition to the overarching question, the study was guided by three supporting questions. (a) What specific challenges and supportive factors are encountered by female educational leaders? (b) How have their experiences shaped their self-perceptions of their leadership abilities and opportunities for career advancement? (c) Do gender-related biases and stereotypes impact the career aspirations of female educational leaders?

Data Collection

This study focused on the perspective of female secondary assistant principals and district-level leaders. The participants in this study consisted of five female assistant principals and one female assistant superintendent of instruction from two neighboring school districts. All female leaders were individually interviewed regarding their experiences as a leader.

Amelia is currently 36 years old. She has been in the field of education for thirteen years. She spent six years teaching high school math prior to moving into an instructional coach position. After several years as an instructional coach, she accepted a position as assistant principal. All her experience has been in one high school located in District A.

Brooke is 60 years old. She was a stay-at-home mom who began her teaching career at the age of 30. Brooke did not initially aspire to be a teacher. She obtained her undergraduate degree in computer science. Once her children were in school, she began her career in education in a clerical position. During this time, Brooke decided to become a teacher and began taking classes to do so. Once certified to teach, she spent ten years teaching high school math before being encouraged to pursue a leadership role by her principal. She initially entered leadership as an instructional coach at the same high school where she previously taught math. She has spent the last ten years as an assistant principal for a total of thirty-four years in that high school in District A.

Camila has been in education for thirteen years. Similarly to Brooke, Camila did not initially pursue a teaching degree. She obtained a degree in Business primarily hoping to increase her opportunities and her earning potential. After several years, she decided that teaching was her calling and decided to change careers. Camila is currently 53 years old. She spent eight years teaching all subjects at the elementary level. Camila was also a Title 1 facilitator for two years prior to becoming an assistant principal at a middle school for the last three years. Camila's entire career in education has been in District B.

Diana has been in the field of education for 37 years. She has experience in two states. She began as an elementary teacher. She spent five years in the classroom before becoming a building level curriculum coordinator. From here, Diana moved into the role of principal. She served as the principal of four different elementary schools. She also worked for the State Department of Education. She was the personnel director for the district and was the director of early childhood and elementary education, as well as the

assistant superintendent of instruction. She is currently 64 years old and has been in District B for the past eight years.

Elizabeth is 34 years old with thirteen years in education. She spent her first eleven years teaching math at the middle school level. She has been an assistant principal for the last two years in District B.

Faith has 24 years in education. She is currently 45 years old. She taught middle and high school English for ten years. As part of her teaching experience, she served as a lead teacher where she taught for part of the day and assisted her administrator for part of the day learning some of the duties of an assistant principal. She then stepped into the director role at the ninth-grade academy the following year. She has been an assistant principal for a total of fourteen years in District B serving both the middle and high school levels.

Participants varied in age from mid-thirties to mid-sixties. Additionally, the participants' classroom experience ranged from elementary to high school across various content areas. Several participants gained leadership experience by stepping into roles such as an instructional coach or Title I facilitator before entering an administrative role. One of the participants had advanced to several district-level leadership roles.

Participants' specific experiences are outlined in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1*Participant Years of Experience*

Participant	Role(s)	Years
Amelia	Classroom Teacher	6
	Instructional Coach	4
	Assistant Principal	3
Brooke	Classified Role(s)	6
	Classroom Teacher	10
	Instructional Coach	10
	Assistant Principal	8
Camila	Classroom Teacher	8
	Title 1 Facilitator	2
	Assistant Principal	3
Diana	Classroom Teacher	5
	Curriculum Coordinator (school level)	3
	Principal	17
	Executive Director Early Childhood/Elementary Education	2
	Personnel Director	2
	State Department of Education	3
	Assistant Superintendent	1
Elizabeth	Classroom Teacher	11
	Assistant Principal	2
Faith	Classroom Teacher	10
	Assistant Principal	14

Researchers use bracketing to ensure any preconceived notions are set aside and do not influence the research (Alase, 2017). Before each of the interviews the researcher engaged in bracketing. The researcher set aside all beliefs pertaining to the phenomenon,

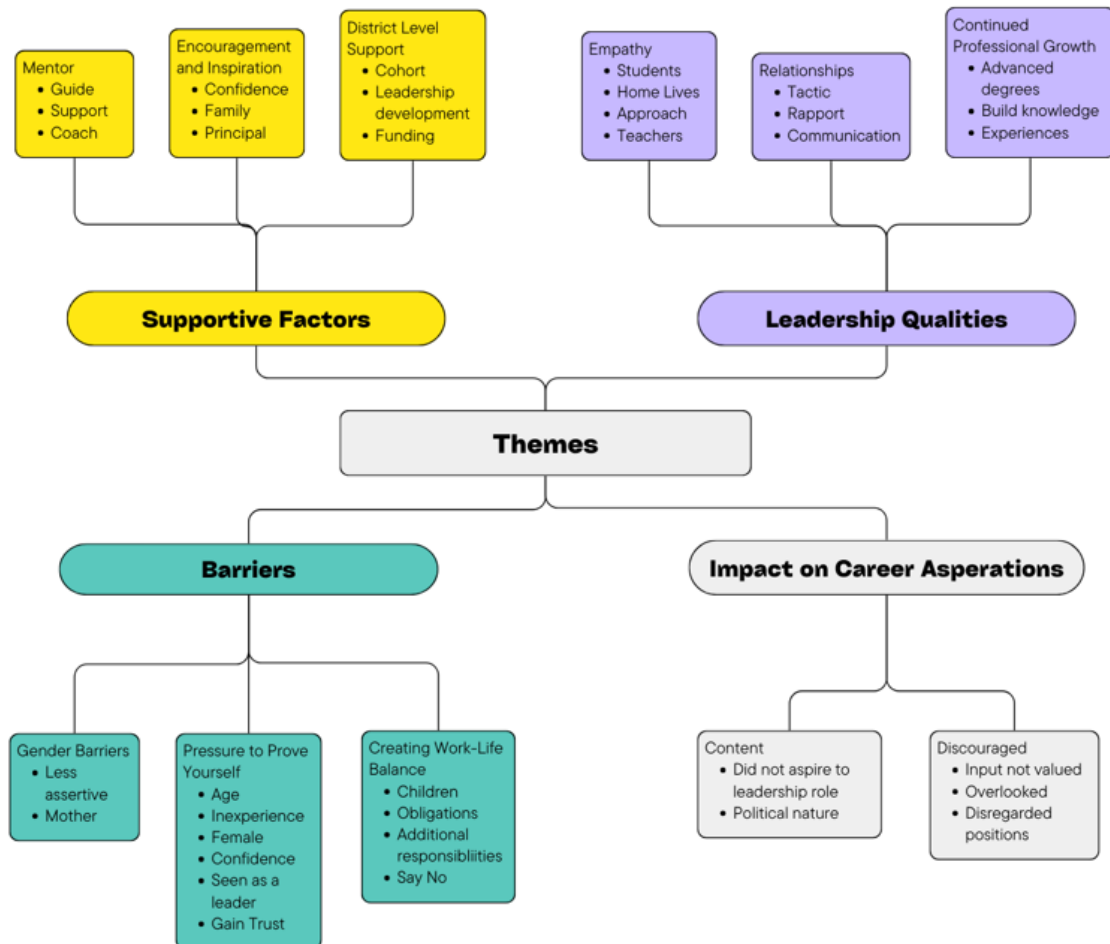
refrained from leading the conversation in a particular direction, and allowed the participants to tell their story.

Following the individual interviews, the interviews were transcribed verbatim, and their responses were analyzed using Colaizzi’s (1978) descriptive phenomenological method. This process led to the development of theme clusters and emergent themes.

Figure 4.1 provides an overview of the theme development process.

Figure 4.1

Theme Development Process



The analysis consisted of identifying significant statements and determining the meaning of those statements. Table 4.2 provides examples of formulated meaning from significant statements.

Table 4.2

Formulated Meanings from Significant Statements

Significant Statements	Formulated Meanings
<p>“I entered leadership at such a young age that just my age itself... there were some judgments based on well, what does she know?”</p>	<p>Due to entering leadership at a young age, after only five years in the classroom, she felt she had to prove herself as a leader. She was perceived as lacking the experience to be an effective leader.</p>
<p>“My biggest strength is I’m a workaholic, and I need to learn to delegate and say no sometimes. My principal says his goal for me is to delegate and pass off [tasks] to spend that time with family.”</p> <p>Before accepting a leadership role, “I had [a] conversation with my husband... you realize [this] means late nights or on the call or something happens.”</p>	<p>Leadership requires a great deal of responsibility; however, her principal noticed that her work ethic could be detrimental to her and her relationship with her family.</p> <p>She values her family enough to have an upfront conversation regarding the added responsibilities of the new role and the impact on their relationship.</p>
<p>“He had never been a classroom teacher. He had only ever been a guidance counselor, so he had never taught a class... and he’s handling referrals for teachers.”</p>	<p>Female leaders feel defeated and overlooked when positions are offered to male candidates who are less qualified for the position.</p>

The meanings were then clustered into common themes across participants so that an inclusive description of how female educational leaders' experiences influence their career aspirations could be developed. Table 4.3 provides an overview of how of themes emerged from the data.

Table 4.3

Theme Development

Formulated Meaning	Clusters of Themes	Emergent Theme
Due to entering leadership at a young age, after only five years in the classroom, she felt she had to prove herself as a leader. She was perceived as lacking the experience to be an effective leader.	Pressure to Prove Yourself	
Leadership requires a great deal of responsibility; however, her principal noticed that her work ethic could be detrimental to her and her relationship with her family. She values her family enough to have an upfront conversation regarding the added responsibilities of the new role and the impact on their relationship.	Creating Work-Life Balance	Barriers
Female leaders feel defeated and overlooked when positions are offered to male candidates who are less qualified for the position.	Gender Barriers	

The researcher validated the findings of the study using of member checking. During data analysis, the researcher reached out to two of the participants for clarification of their experiences. These participants then verified that the interpretation of their interviews were accurate. Furthermore, after themes had been developed and an exhaustive description generated the researcher sent each participant a copy of their individual interview transcript along with a copy of the findings to provide an opportunity for participants to dispute any information that may have been misinterpreted. Only two participants responded to the researcher; however, both participants indicated that the results were indicative of their experiences. The following is a detailed account of each of the themes identified throughout this research study.

Themes Identified

Three themes emerged regarding barriers encountered by female educational leaders. These themes included pressure to prove yourself, creating a work-life balance, and gender barriers. Additionally, three themes emerged regarding supportive factors that assisted the participants in transitioning into a leadership role. Those themes include the importance of a mentor, encouragement or inspiration, and district-level support. Three additional themes regarding leadership qualities emerged, which included empathy, relationships, and continued professional growth. A final theme identified was the impact on female educational leaders' career aspirations.

Barriers

Several factors can hinder or limit the success of aspiring female leaders. Participants in this study have indicated several barriers they experienced in their educational careers. The researcher developed the following themes regarding barriers experienced by participants.

Pressure to Prove Yourself

The first theme was pressure to prove yourself. Participants mentioned struggling to be seen as leaders, especially if they were promoted within the building they taught. Amelia recalled the challenge of moving from a student in the building to the assistant principal and how it was difficult for some to see her as a leader. “The biggest struggle moving from a teacher to [administration] is I was in this building as a student and then as a teacher, a colleague, and then moving up as their boss.” Additionally, Diana noted being a young educational leader also led her to feel pressured to prove herself. This was primarily due to the “judgements based on what she knows” after only spending five years in the classroom. Camila indicated she struggled to get teachers to trust her after being promoted to the leadership team. She stated that “teachers were no longer as open and honest” with her as they had been when she was a teacher and viewed as a peer rather than a leader. Additionally, Faith stated that she felt she had to prove herself as a leader because she was viewed as less assertive and authoritative as a female. She recalled, “The perception is we’re not going to break up fights. We’re not going to go and run to things, or we’re not going to, like if an intruder comes in, we’re not going to be the aggressor.” Faith believed that female leaders are often viewed as more reserved less likely to act when necessary.

Creating Work-Life Balance

Another theme that emerged was creating a work-life balance. Due to societal expectations female leaders must fulfill the role of primary caregiver along with their leadership responsibilities. Additionally, single-parent leaders lack supportive partners to assist with childcare. All participants in the study had children. The number and ages of each of the participants’ children varied. Participants indicated several ways they had to

work to create a work-life balance. Brooke noted she was a stay-at-home mother while her children were young; therefore, she delayed her career goals until her children were older. “I got married and had a child... during that time I was not working.” Amelia stated that she and her husband had an extended conversation prior to her accepting an assistant principal position because they knew they were expecting a child as she was being offered a leadership position. Amelia describes herself as a “workaholic” who has “a hard time saying no.” She stated she and her current principal have developed “a goal for me to work on learning to delegate and pass off tasks to others”, which would allow her to spend more time with her family. She recalled that some days, as her principal left the building, he would encourage her to go home. Additionally, Elizabeth reported feeling burned out early on because she was trying to do it all. She recalled feeling, “I needed to get into every classroom and help every teacher.” She also quickly realized that she could not fix every teacher but could be there to support and guide them. She had to learn not to do the teacher’s work but to guide them so they could learn to do it themselves. Furthermore, Elizabeth indicated that as a mom of two small children, she could not take on the additional responsibilities of a principalship. “I’m not going to put more on me right now just because I want a balance of school and home.” While she does aspire to become a principal eventually, she plans to delay those aspirations until the timeline works for her family.

Gender Barriers

The final theme that emerged was gender barriers. While Brooke and Elizabeth noted they did not experience any gender barriers as they transitioned from the classroom into the leadership role, many participants noted gender barriers. Amelia and Camila indicated they did not experience any gender barriers from their employers but that they

had experienced gender barriers from the community. Camila indicated that “parents do not always receive me well”, especially when dealing with discipline issues. Amelia agreed; she stated in her interview that “parents and outside community members do not treat male and female administrators the same.” She recalled one situation with a difficult parent.

We were having conversations, and he was very combative. But even on the phone he was asking some questions, and I was answering all those questions. He said, “I need to talk to the assistant principal and the vice principal.” I said, Sir, I am one of the assistant principals. Then he asked, “Well, where’s Mr. so and so? And after they talk to a male administrator, they calm back down.

Diana and Faith indicated they had encountered gender barriers from potential employers. These participants divulged that they were overlooked for positions given to less qualified candidates. Diana stated, “I would see people get promotions and not be as qualified for certain roles, and myself and others be overlooked for some of those promotions.” Faith added that she was overlooked for an assistant principal position given to a male who had no classroom experience and no experience with discipline. “He had never been a classroom teacher. He had only ever been a guidance counselor, so he had never taught a class... or handled referrals for teachers.” Furthermore, she recalled foregoing certain positions. She expressed, “So a man’s leaving, and a woman’s already there. There’s no point in applying because I know they’re going to have to hire a male.” She added that in her experience, if the school administrative team already contains one female they were less likely to hire another one. While the participants in this study identified several challenges, several supportive factors were also identified.

Supportive Factors

Just as the participants recalled barriers they experienced, they also recalled several supportive factors that aided in their transition into a leadership role. Participants felt as if these factors aided in their success in their new leadership role. The three themes developed are explained below.

Mentor

All participants mentioned the assistance of a mentor. Mentors guided and shaped the participants as they transitioned from the classroom into a leadership role. Amelia referenced an assistant principal who “poured into” her and gave her the confidence to pursue an administrative role. Brooke added her principal took on a mentoring role, which helped her gain an instructional coach position where she continued to learn and grow from his leadership. However, Faith added that her mentor was her principal when she was in high school. She also noted that when she was in the lead teacher position, she got to experience some of the administrative duties, which enabled her to grow as a leader. “I taught a class and the rest of the time I helped the academy director with whatever he needed. I had administrator responsibilities which gave me experience with advisory lessons, professional learning communities (PLCs), and those types of things.” While mentors helped guide new leaders throughout their transition into leadership, many participants were encouraged or inspired to pursue leadership.

Encouragement and Inspiration

The next theme identified was someone who encouraged or inspired them to pursue a leadership role. Only two participants expressed the desire to aspire to a leadership position on their own. The remaining participants referenced someone who inspired or encouraged them to pursue administration. Amelia communicated a male

assistant principal, along with her family, encouraged her to pursue a leadership degree. Other participants had principals who encouraged them to participate in an administrative cohort. Brooke noted her male principal “saw something in me that I never saw myself.” He then prompted her to investigate a multidistrict leadership cohort the district partially funded. She indicated that she would not have joined the cohort without that encouragement. Camila had a female principal who returned from a principal’s meeting and stated she recommended the participant for a district leadership cohort offered through a partnership with a local university. However, Faith had never considered pursuing an administrative position. Her grandfather encouraged her to obtain her master’s degree in administration by explaining how he thought it would be a good fit for her. He was so confident in her ability that he agreed to pay for the degree if she did. Finally, even though Diana saw herself as a natural leader, she declared that her father and a female principal were instrumental in encouraging her to pursue leadership. She shared, “my dad was probably one of the catalysts for saying you need to really look [into administration]. I also had a wonderful principal that I worked under who also encouraged me to [pursue leadership].”

District-Level Support

The final theme in supportive factors is district-level support. Participants noted several district-level leadership programs that have successfully grown aspiring leaders within the districts. Amelia mentioned a district leadership cohort where new and aspiring leaders can grow and work with the district office staff. She noted that it helps young leaders get to know the district office staff and pushes them to grow as leaders. She believes this cohort has pushed her to grow as a leader, encouraging her to pursue an Educational Specialist Degree.

Camila and Brooke noted district level partnerships which led to advanced degrees. These degrees helped to prepare them for the leadership positions they eventually took on. Brooke noted that her school district partially funded the cohort she participated in. This funding helped offset the cost of obtaining the advanced degree, enabling some aspiring leaders to participate.

Leadership Qualities

Educational leaders identified several leadership qualities that needed to be developed as they transitioned into their new roles. Participants noted the importance of empathy and building relationships. Additionally, participants posited that continual growth was necessary for successful leadership.

Empathy

Empathy emerged as leaders reflected on their self-perception of their leadership abilities. Participants recalled that through experience, they learned to have empathy. Participants noted increased empathy for students. Faith expressed that her increased awareness about all the different struggles students face outside of school that most people would not suspect has made her more empathetic to the students. She stated, “Just experience and hearing the things that I’ve heard from students has really changed my approach...I’ve softened my approach...just trying to deescalate the situation...get to the root of the problem.”

Additionally, participants emphasized the need for leaders to be empathetic toward other adults. Diana reiterated leaders must “build people and grow people.” Building and growing people is “being able to have hard conversations with them when they need it, but you have to leave the person’s dignity intact so that they’re still

coachable and leadable.” Empathy is critical in these situations for a team to trust you and maintain an open line of communication. This leads to building relationships.

Relationships

The participants in this study highlighted the importance of building relationships with teachers and students. Relationships with students are just as vital as those with teachers or other adults. Brooke noted that relationships were crucial to success and that building relationships creates trust and rapport, making being a leader easier. Elizabeth confirmed she is leading in one of the schools she attended as a student. She feels by creating relationships with students, she can prove they can grow up and be somebody. She stated, these “students are growing up like I grew up and just guiding them and showing them it is possible to overcome their circumstances and succeed.” Through relationships, as a leader herself, she can emphasize to the students that they truly can be whatever they want to be, and that they do not have to settle. Additionally, Faith added that building relationships with students allows her to create a safe space where students feel they can talk to her. She believes that when students are comfortable enough to share their thoughts and feelings with her, she can get to the root of the problem. She deems getting to the root of the problem has decreased her repeat offenders regarding discipline.

Participants emphasized that building relationships with other adults was just as vital as building relationships with students. Building relationships with adults is essential so that they feel comfortable communicating with you as a leader. Teachers and other staff members should feel comfortable discussing issues or making suggestions for the betterment of the school or the students. Diana noted trust was necessary because “once you surround yourself with yes people, you don’t grow yourself.” This leads us to the final theme of continued professional growth.

Continual Professional Growth

Diana emphasized the need to learn and grow. She noted leaders should surround themselves with people who “have a different view on things” because people “may not agree about something, but we’re going to talk through it and come to the best solution for our organization, our children, or our schools.” Additionally, Diana noted her experience has given her opportunities to collaborate with various leaders. She perceived she has “learned things I wanted to replicate, and I’ve learned things I never wanted to do [again].” Furthermore, Camila noted all teachers have “different strengths they bring to the table.” She continued, “The more I can be around [teachers] and work with them, it helps me fine-tune my strengths.” Amelia added by working on her Educational Specialist degree, she was learning more about “capital improvement plans and budgets,” which increased her confidence in participating in conversations regarding the matter because she would not have known what to add to the conversation had it not been for the class she was taking. Whether fine-tuning strengths or building a more extensive knowledge base, every experience has provided growth for the participants within this study.

Impact on Career Aspirations

Most of the participants in this study did not aspire to the principal or superintendent position. Four of the six participants in this study were also content in their current role as an assistant principal or assistant superintendent. Participant satisfaction with their current role is beneficial to an organization because it ensures knowledgeable, well-qualified candidates in all leadership positions. Diana recalled at one time, she did aspire to the superintendent role; however, experience has shown her that the political nature of the position would not be ideal for her.

I've really come to realize that that probably was not a good goal target for myself because that particular position is so politically influenced, and I become frustrated when decisions are made based on the influence of politics and attitudes, and who am I going to make mad.

As a district-level leader Diana is an analytical person who appreciates discussing various solutions to determine the best course of action for the organization, including the students. Furthermore, she recalled working with a "very close-knit small group of males." She recalled the males "working together, and then we [females] would work sort of parallel over in another silo." The males and females did not work together as a united team which led to a lack of female input into the decision-making process.

Participants also indicated they felt discouraged when applying for various positions, and the positions were given to less qualified candidates. Diana recalled feeling defeated when a principal called to inform her she was not selected for a position for which she had interviewed. She stated, "[You feel] like, what did I do wrong?" As previously mentioned, Faith emphasized that it did not "soften the blow" when she found out the person who was offered the position was a male guidance counselor who, in her mind, was less qualified for the position. She recalled that this male had never been in a classroom, had never even written a discipline referral, and was now going to be dealing with classroom management and behavior problems.

Additionally, Faith recalled that she completely disregarded applying to certain leadership positions if she knew a female leader was already in the building. She claimed, "They're going to need to have a guy...I understand you also can't have a staff of all

females.” She believes that if a man leaves the school, there is no need to apply because they will hire a male, especially at the high school level.

Exhaustive Description

Once all themes were developed, the researcher developed an inclusive description of the phenomenon aligned with the overarching and supporting questions. This exhaustive description includes all themes identified throughout the study relating them to the research questions. To recap, the overarching research question: How do female educational leaders’ experiences influence their career aspirations? This research also included the following supporting questions.

- What specific challenges and supportive factors are encountered by female educational leaders?
- How have their experiences shaped their self-perceptions of their leadership abilities and opportunities for career advancement?
- Do gender-related biases and stereotypes impact the career aspirations of female educational leaders?

The overarching research question sought to examine how educational leaders’ experiences influenced their career aspirations. The researcher found the lived experiences of educational leaders did, in fact, influence their career aspirations. First, participants identified several challenges and supportive factors they faced as they pursued a leadership role. The following challenges were included in the barriers theme. First, participants indicated the need to prove themselves. They recalled that being promoted within the same building where they formerly taught made it difficult to be trusted and seen as a leader. Two participants noted having to prove themselves simply

because they entered leadership at an early age. Finally, one participant even felt she had to prove herself because female leaders tend to be less assertive or authoritative.

Additionally, participants struggled with creating a work-life balance. Participants had to make tough decisions based on the needs of their families. One participant delayed her education career while staying home with her young children. Other participants mentioned having family discussions to determine if the timing of a leadership position was right for their growing families. One participant even mentioned not aspiring to a principalship because she could not take on any additional responsibilities with two small children at home. Furthermore, participants struggled with delegating and initially tried to take on too many tasks.

The final barrier faced by the participants in this study was gender barriers. Most participants did not feel the gender barriers resulted from their school or district. They found that community members, particularly parents, brought about gender barriers. Participants found that parents did not treat male and female administrators equally. The parents may not receive female administrators, but when a male administrator intervened, the parents calmed down. Additionally, participants noted having to learn to have hard conversations and stand their ground regarding discipline. However, two participants recalled being overlooked for positions offered to less qualified candidates. Participants would sometimes forego applying for certain positions if the school had a female leader. From their experiences, a male would be hired to fill the role.

Participants also face several supportive factors in their pursuit of leadership. Participants spoke highly of mentors who guided them as they transitioned from the classroom to leadership. Mentors provided the confidence boost to encourage teachers to

pursue leadership. Mentors provided wisdom and opportunities for these young leaders to take on their new roles. Additionally, four participants in this study recalled that they never considered a leadership role until they were encouraged and inspired into the position by either one of their administrators or a family member. Participants felt these people saw the potential they did not see in themselves. Finally, many participants relied on district-level leadership partnerships. These partnerships with local universities helped to prepare the participants for their leadership roles.

Regarding the second supporting question, the participants' self-perceptions of their leadership abilities and opportunities for career advancement were also shaped by their experiences. Participants learned to be more empathetic to their students because they were more aware of where students came from. Participants altered the way they approached students and teachers because of the experience. They realized, through experience, that getting to the root of the problem by talking through it was a better approach than just delving into the consequences. Additionally, participants began to see the benefit of building relationships. Relationships build trust and rapport so that students and teachers are comfortable enough to begin to share their thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, participants saw the need to learn and grow as a leader. Participants all grew as leaders through a variety of methods. Some participants learned through observations what they wanted to replicate as a leader and what they would never replicate. Participants learned to discuss various solutions to determine the best solution for the students. Others learned through district leadership cohorts where the school districts themselves attempt to grow leaders. Still others grew through obtaining advanced degrees. These experiences have increased confidence in each leader's ability

to succeed. Additionally, the experiences have helped to shape these young leaders into role models and coaches who can further the success of their schools and districts.

The final supporting question sought to determine if gender-related biases and stereotypes impact the career aspirations of female educational leaders. This study found that gender-related biases and stereotypes did not seem to impact their career aspirations. Female leaders still see gender-related biases and stereotypes; female leaders are viewed as less assertive and authoritative than their male counterparts (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Female leaders have been overlooked for positions given to less qualified male leaders. These experiences have left female leaders feeling defeated, frustrated, and questioning what they did wrong; however, they have persevered and obtained leadership roles.

Many female leaders in this study did not intend to pursue a leadership role initially. Someone encouraged them, and because of that, many of them do not aspire to be principals. They agreed that if approached about a principalship, they would consider taking the position; however, many felt they had already surpassed their expectations by being an assistant principal. The assistant superintendent did aspire to the superintendency at one point in her career, but her aspirations changed with experience. She realized she would not be happy in a superintendent position due to the politics associated with the position. She prefers to focus on the individual needs of the students rather than the politics of her decisions.

Summary

Aspiring female educational leaders face many obstacles as they pursue a leadership role. They must prove themselves as a leader, learn to create a work-life balance, and even face gender barriers. However, aspiring female leaders also encounter several supportive factors. Female leaders have found that a mentor can be beneficial,

especially as a new leader transitions into a leadership role. Sometimes, a new leader is encouraged or inspired to take on a leadership role. This encouragement could come from another leader or a family member who sees potential in the leader candidate. Advanced degrees, particularly when offered through a district partnership, allow aspiring leaders to prepare adequately for a leadership role.

Female leaders' experiences as they transition to a leadership role provide them with opportunities to gain experience and grow, allowing them to become better leaders. Experience taught young leaders to be more empathetic with students and adults alike. Additionally, it taught them the importance of building relationships. Moreover, through experience, leaders can understand that to become the best version of themselves, they must continue to learn and grow.

Finally, gender bias and stereotypes are still present today. Gender bias and stereotypes can make aspiring leaders feel discouraged and defeated, but it has not prevented the participants in this study from obtaining a leadership role. In fact, many of the participants in this study did not even aspire to a leadership role without being encouraged to pursue it. Many participants are content with their current role because they feel they have surpassed their original expectations. Again, this is advantageous for school districts because it allows them to build a strong, knowledgeable, well-qualified leadership team.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

This was a qualitative phenomenological that explored how the experiences of six female educational leaders influenced their career aspirations. This final chapter includes a restatement of the research problem and reviews the methodology used in this study. Additionally, the chapter summarizes the results and discusses their implications in the field of education.

Problem Statement

The field of education is a female field. Females make up the majority of all teachers; however, females are underrepresented as educational leaders, particularly in the roles of secondary principal and district-level superintendent (NCES, 2021a). Both male and female leadership candidates must obtain the same credentials. Aspiring leaders are required to complete a master's degree program or a licensure add-on credential if they have previously obtained a master's degree. Research suggests that females aspire to be educational leaders since females outnumber males in educational leadership preparation programs (Guramatumu-Mudiwa, 2015). Furthermore, aspiring female leaders are applying for leadership positions. DeAngelis and O'Connor (2012) noted that 75% of aspiring female leaders had applied for a leadership role within six years of obtaining the proper credential.

While aspiring female leaders are attempting to obtain leadership roles, research indicates they encounter several barriers in their pursuit. Barriers include a lack of mentors (Cassidy et al., 2021; Kruse & Krumm, 2016), lack of networking (Kruse & Krumm, 2016), gaps in knowledge including finances (Hacifazlioglu, 2010; Kruse & Krumm, 2016; Shoho & Barnett, 2010), "Old Boys networks" (Martinez et al., 2020, p. 899), gender bias (Diehl et al., 2020; Wyland, 2016), self-confidence (Cassidy et al.,

2021; McCullough, 2020; Wyland, 2016), work and family balance (McCullough, 2020), and having to prove themselves (McCullough, 2020; K. Robinson et al., 2017).

Moreover, once aspiring leaders obtain a leadership position, they face additional challenges associated with the position. Challenges identified include increased job stress (K. Robinson et al., 2017), time management issues (Hacifazloiglu, 2010; K Robinson et al., 2017; Shoho & Barnett, 2010) issues regarding budgets and procedures, and overcoming resistance (Hacifazloiglu, 2010).

Barriers and challenges may play a role in the underrepresentation of female educational leaders; however, aspiring educational leaders' career aspirations may change after obtaining the proper credentials. DeAngelis and O'Connor (2012) noted 75% of aspiring educational leaders applied for leadership roles within six years, suggesting that career aspirations may have changed over the course of the leadership preparation program or shortly after that. Through this study, the researcher hoped to gain an understanding of the specific experiences that female educational leaders face that may play a role in their career aspirations.

Methodology

As explained in Chapter 3, this study used a phenomenological, qualitative approach to capture the essence of the lived experiences of educational leaders' experiences that impact their career aspirations. Participants included five assistant principals and an assistant superintendent from two neighboring school districts within a southeastern state. The researcher individually interviewed each of the participants using a semi-structured format to encourage the participants to share in as much detail as possible their experiences throughout their educational careers.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and then analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) method. First, the researcher identified significant statements from the interview transcriptions. Next, the researcher made meaning of the significance statements, allowing the researcher to establish themes. Throughout this process the researcher practiced bracketing to avoid any personal bias or preconceived notions. Finally, the researcher created an exhaustive description of the experiences of aspiring educational leaders which was condensed to the fundamental structure of the lived experience of female educational leaders. These findings were validated with member checking. Each participant received a copy of their individual interview transcript along with a copy of the research findings in order to verify the information presented by the researcher accurately portrayed their experiences as an educational leader.

Summary of the Findings

The overarching research question guided this study, how do female educational leaders' experiences influence their career aspirations? This research question led to three supporting questions.

- What specific challenges and supportive factors are encountered by female educational leaders?
- How have their experiences shaped their self-perceptions of their leadership abilities and opportunities for career advancement?
- Do gender-related biases and stereotypes impact the career aspirations of female educational leaders?

Themes Identified

Data analysis led to the development of various themes. Participants referenced barriers including pressure to prove themselves, creating a work-life balance, and gender

barriers. In addition to the barriers, participants acknowledged supportive factors such as a mentor, being encouraged or inspired to pursue leadership, and district-level support. Additionally, participants identified leadership qualities essential for successful leadership. Those qualities included empathy, relationship building, and continued professional growth. Finally, the impact of these experiences on career aspirations were developed.

Barriers

Throughout the study, participants identified specific barriers and supportive factors they encountered throughout their career in education. First, participants agreed that they experienced pressure to prove themselves. Pressure to prove themselves stemmed from a variety of sources. Pressure to be seen as a leader after being promoted within the same building they taught. Additionally, participants felt pressured to prove themselves because as females they are often thought of as less assertive and less authoritative. The next barrier identified was the struggle to create a work-life balance. All participants in this study had children, which emphasized the need to create a work-life balance. Participants mentioned delaying their careers to stay home with their children. Additionally, participants spoke of discussing the position's increased commitments with their spouses before accepting the position. Lastly, participants spoke of learning to delegate and feeling burned out. The final barrier identified was gender barriers. Gender barriers identified referenced gender bias from the community as well as gender barriers throughout the hiring process. Gender bias in the community involves parents and community members who do not treat male and female leaders equally. Furthermore, participants noted gender bias in hiring when they were overlooked for positions that were offered to less qualified male candidates. While female leaders

identified these barriers experienced, they also identified several supportive factors they experienced.

Supportive Factors

Supportive factors comprised of factors the participants experienced that aided in attaining their career advancement. First, participants identified a mentor who provided opportunities for leadership growth. Mentors guided the participants as they transitioned from the classroom into a leadership role. Next, participants alluded to someone who inspired or encouraged them to consider a leadership role. This inspiration or encouragement may have been from a family member or another leader who saw in the participants what they did not see in themselves. Some participants even noted that they did not even consider a leadership role for themselves until they were encouraged. Finally, participants noted the value of continued professional growth. Professional growth came from a variety of sources. First, district partnerships with local universities to offer advanced degrees. Next, district level leadership cohorts where districts focus on developing future leaders from within the district. Additionally, participants noted that continued professional growth gave them increased confidence regarding leadership aspects.

Leadership Qualities

In addition to identifying barriers and supportive factors, participants discussed experiences that influenced their perception of their leadership abilities and opportunities for career advancement. Participants recalled learning to be more empathetic to both students and adults. Empathy for students resulted from learning where the students came from and learning to get to the root of the problem. Empathy towards adults stems from learning that hard conversations are inevitable, but leaders must practice empathy so that

the adults remain coachable. Next, participants reiterated the need for relationships. Experience as an educational leader has allowed participants to note the importance of building relationships with not only the adults in the building but the students as well. Relationships build trust and establish an open line of communication. Finally, participants emphasized the need to learn and grow as a leader. Participants emphasized the importance of learning through others as well as through professional development or advanced degrees.

Impact on Career Aspirations

Finally, the participants in this study noted several forms of gender bias and gender stereotypes that left an impact on their career aspirations. Participants recalled tight knit groups of male leaders who would work closely together while the female leaders worked parallel to them rather than with them as a team. Additionally, participants felt discouraged when applying for positions that were given to less qualified male candidates. Furthermore, participants admitted that they disregarded some leadership positions because it was presumed a male would be hired to fill the vacancy.

Discussion of the Findings

This study analyzed the experiences of six female educational leaders to gain an understanding of how those experiences influence their career aspirations. The study included participants from both the school and district level; however, the purpose of the study was to determine if experiences play a role in female educational leaders' pursuit of the principal and superintendent roles. Identifying experiences that influence career aspirations to these roles was the main objective of this phenomenological study. The discussion that follows is organized by the three supporting questions that guided this study.

Barriers and Supportive Factors

Participants in this study identified several barriers and supportive factors that influenced their career aspirations. Participants identified barriers such as pressure to prove themselves, creating work-life balance, as well as gender barriers. Participants referenced these barriers both as barriers to obtaining a leadership position and as a barrier or challenges as a new educational leader.

Participants first identified pressure to prove themselves as a barrier to the position because female educational leaders are presumed to be less assertive and less authoritative than male leaders. This aligns with Sebastian and Moon's (2018) study on leadership style, which posited that female leaders tend to be more relationship-focused and male leaders tend to be more assertive. Additionally, participants in this study noted pressure to prove themselves as a barrier or challenge for new educational leaders as they transition from the classroom into a leadership role. This constant pressure to prove themselves often stemmed from promotion within the same building in which the participants taught as leaders felt it was difficult to be seen as a leader. This aligns with research conducted by Cassidy et al. (2021) and McCullough (2020), which indicated that female leaders must continually prove themselves due to their devalued achievements.

Participants also noted work-life balance as a barrier to obtaining and transitioning to a leadership role. A top barrier associated with the literature was also family responsibilities along with creating a balance between work and family obligations (Kruse & Krumm, 2016; Martinez et al., 2020; Mayya et al., 2021; McCullough, 2020; McGee, 2010; Pirouznia, 2013; K. Robinson et al., 2017; Wyland, 2016). At least one participant mentioned delaying her career to raise her small children, which mirrored McGee's (2010) research. Furthermore, participants emphasized the need

to discuss promotions with their families to ensure the additional responsibilities would be feasible or decided outright that a promotion was not feasible due to increased commitments while also having small children at home.

Furthermore, participants recalled gender barriers, which included gender bias and stereotypes. While some participants experienced gender barriers from the community, others experienced gender bias and stereotypes throughout the hiring process when they were overlooked for positions that were given to less qualified males. This resembles Pirouznia's (2013) study, which posits that male leaders are more successful because they lead with authority. Additionally, other studies (Cassidy et al., 2021; Hagan & Oliver, 2022) noted that gender bias results from a societal culture that supports males in leadership positions.

Other barriers presented in the literature included a lack of network. Hill et al. (2016) emphasized that networking is essential for leadership advancement. Another study (Hannum et al., 2015) suggested that female leaders may lose out on positions to aspiring males with connections. This coincides with participants feeling they were passed over for positions offered to less qualified male candidates; however, this study did not specifically mention a lack of networking or that male candidates had connections that aided in their obtainment of a leadership role. However, four of the participants within this study indicated that they were encouraged and inspired to pursue leadership. This may indicate a form of networking whereas the leaders were creating networks to create a qualified leadership pool.

Aspiring female educational leaders have experienced barriers that may have influenced their career aspirations; however, they have also experienced supportive

factors that have influenced their career aspirations. Supportive factors experienced by aspiring female educational leaders in this study included the support of a mentor, being encouraged, or inspired, and district-level support.

The support of a mentor was vital as aspiring female educational leaders transitioned from the classroom into a leadership role. Mentors not only guided the new leaders as they transitioned into the role, but they also increased their confidence by providing opportunities to gain experience. This closely resembles Wyland's (2016) study, which found that 91.2% of participants designated a mentor as critical to their success. Mentors can increase confidence in aspiring leaders while holding them accountable (Wyland, 2016). Additionally, research suggests that the mentor's gender plays a role in the relationship established (Connell et al., 2015; Kruse & Krumm, 2016). An interesting aspect of this study was that the female leaders with elementary teaching backgrounds all had female mentors, whereas the female leaders with secondary teaching backgrounds all had male mentors.

In addition to mentors, many participants noted a particular person who inspired them or encouraged them to pursue a leadership role. This inspiration came from either family members or former administrators, either former principals or assistant principals. This inspiration or encouragement came from someone who saw in them potential that they did not see in themselves. They encouraged them and provided a confidence boost which led to their pursuit of leadership credentials. This is like to a study conducted with female leaders in higher education. This study indicated that female leaders sometimes lack a leadership identity, which means they cannot visualize themselves in a leadership

role (Hannum et al., 2015). These females would have benefited from someone to inspire or encourage them to increase their self-confidence as leaders.

The final supportive factor consisted of district-level support. These aspiring leaders felt supported by various professional growth opportunities provided at least partly by their local school districts. One school district provided a leadership cohort to support new leaders. This allowed the new leaders to better know the district office staff and the district's goals. Both school districts partnered with local universities to provide the necessary coursework for a leadership credential. Moreover, participants in one school district noted the district's emphasis on continual personal growth. This was interesting because research suggests that school districts often overlook professional development for assistant principals (Hayes & Burkett, 2020). However, principal preparation programs cannot often adequately prepare them for the specific needs of a school district or geographic region (Clayton, 2014; Marcos et al., 2011), making district-level support vital for preparing knowledgeable and effective leaders.

Leadership Qualities

Empathy and building relationships were leadership qualities participants found necessary in the development of an effective leader. Participants noted that empathy and relationships helped them establish an open line of communication and build trust with students and teachers. Furthermore, solving problems can be easier when relationships are built, and a safe space is created to facilitate a clear line of communication. Most leaders in this study described themselves as servant leaders who are supportive yet fair, so they held people accountable. Researchers describe servant leaders as putting the needs of the followers first (Yasir & Mohamad, 2016). Based on Robert Greenleaf's original ideas about servant leadership, Spears (2004) developed ten characteristics of

servant leaders: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community.

Many of the characteristics of servant leaders coincide with the characteristics of a 21st-century leader. Bolman and Deal (2017) identified four leadership frames in which leaders should consider: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic. The structural frame focused on the analytical side of organizations. The human resource frame focuses on relationships and community building. Then, the political frame brings in negotiations and creates allies. Finally, the symbolic frame emphasizes the need for establishing traditions and storytelling. Bolman and Deal (2017) emphasized the need for leaders to consider all four leadership frames to be indeed effective. This leads to the final theme of the continual need for leaders to learn and grow.

Participants reiterated the need to learn and grow to become more effective leaders continually. They noted the importance of experience in their role to grow as a leader. Additionally, they noted specific experiences with other leaders in which growth occurred. Furthermore, participants noted that working towards advanced degrees, specifically an educational specialist degree, provided theoretical knowledge that increased confidence when discussing various aspects of leadership, including budgeting and capital improvements. This aligns with the literature regarding principal preparation programs. Research suggests that while principal preparation programs cannot prepare leaders for the specific needs of a school or district, they have been successful with many aspects of leadership preparation (Marcos et al., 2011; Chen et al., 2022). However, Rushing (2022) noted that interns with extended field experiences were more confident in

their abilities. Additional firsthand experiences provided by extended field experiences allowed aspiring leaders to learn and grow through real life scenarios.

Extended field experiences may not be practical for aspiring leaders, particularly those with full-time careers and families to care for while pursuing their degree or licensure add-on. Nevertheless, school districts can offer support to new leaders. Researchers indicate that school districts often overlook professional development opportunities for assistant principals (Hayes & Burkett, 2020). Burkett (2021) noted that school districts should focus on professional development that identifies the leaders' strengths and weaknesses, allowing them to make more informed decisions. Additionally, leaders must continually learn and grow to better meet the changing needs of the school or district; therefore, professional development opportunities need to continue beyond the leader's first few years in the role (Fancera, 2022). Furthermore, this aligns with Bolman and Deal's (2017) philosophy that leaders must know their strengths and weaknesses regarding the four leadership frames. Leaders who utilize all four frames are more adequately prepared to make informed decisions (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

Gender Bias and Stereotypes

Many leaders in this study did not initially see themselves as leaders. They were encouraged into leadership by another leader or family member. For this reason, many participants believed they had already surpassed the goals they had for their careers; therefore, when asked about their career goals, many participants mentioned that they were satisfied with their current position. This aligns with research completed by De Bruyn and Mestry (2020) that found that many female leaders did not aspire to leadership roles early in their careers but were encouraged into leadership by another colleague or family member. However, one participant recalled that she once aspired to the

superintendency. She noted that experience made it evident that she would not be happy in the position due to the political nature of the position. She prioritized making decisions based on the school's or students' best interests.

Other participants noted that the community sometimes possessed gender stereotypes that viewed male and female leaders differently. Specifically, participants noted that parents would become combative and instead speak to a male leader. This preference for male leaders was also seen in research conducted by Jean-Marie (2013), which found that the community was against hiring their first female principal at the high school level. Additional research conducted by Connell et al. (2015) confirms that gender bias typically stems from the community rather than the school district. Furthermore, research indicates that societal culture has led to gatekeeping and greater support of male leaders (Cassidy et al., 2021). Eagly and Steffen (1984) posited that social role theory, which ties gender stereotypes to social roles constructed by society is responsible for a greater support of male leaders. Additionally, social role congruity theory reiterates that fact that society has specific socially constructed visions of how males and females should conduct themselves (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Society aligns leadership with the male gender; therefore, when a female leader utilizes leadership qualities typically associated with male leaders prejudice may occur. This is because of the role incongruity associated with the stereotypical male traits being used by a female leader (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

While gender bias typically stems from the community, that is not always the case. Participants noted that they felt discouraged and even defeated when leadership positions became available, and they were offered to less qualified male candidates. A

2015 study posited that female leaders have faced discouragement, sabotage, and differing expectations for male and female leaders (Hannum et al., 2015). Furthermore, one participant indicated that female leaders are viewed as less aggressive; therefore, schools would not hire more than one female leader per building. This aligns with research that suggests gender stereotypes are the result of social roles put forth by society, which views males as authority figures and females as caretakers (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

Some participants in this research study indicated that female leaders are viewed as less assertive and authoritative than male leaders. While female leaders may be less assertive and authoritative, they can still be effective leaders. Transformational leadership theory emphasizes that leaders can promote change through inspiration and meeting the needs of the individuals within an organization rather than through an authoritative stance (Bass, 1990). Eagly (2003) noted that female leaders possess many of the communal traits associated with transformational leadership. This reiterates the fact that female leaders can still be successful even if they do not fit the social roles society has set forth.

Diana, who holds a district-level leadership position, recalled working with a male leadership team where the males worked parallel to the female leaders rather than alongside them as a team. This is a prime example of a good “Ole Boys Network” (McGee, 2010, p. 9) where the males collaborated without input from the female leaders. Martinez et al. (2020) found that “Old Boy Networks” (p. 899) were a top barrier that female leaders face. Additional researchers added that female leaders may be overlooked due to male candidates with connections (Hannum et al., 2015).

Finally, the glass ceiling theory claims there is a metaphorical ceiling which prevents females from achieving top-level leadership roles (Juwitasari, 2021). The participants in this study did not appear to be hindered by the glass ceiling. While participants did indicate that they were overlooked for positions, the glass ceiling did not necessarily apply to them since four of them were not interested in pursuing higher level leadership roles. These participants were satisfied with the current positions. This could be beneficial to school districts because these leaders did not view their current position as a stepping stone which would reduce turnover in the position and lead to more knowledgeable and effective leaders.

Limitations of the Study

These findings provide meaningful insight into how female educational leaders' experiences can influence their career aspirations; however, there are limitations to this research study. First, this research study consisted of a small sample size, six participants from two different school districts. A larger sample could have offered more insight into how experience influences career aspirations. Additionally, this sample was drawn from a small region within one southeastern state. Participants from different school districts or geographic locations may have different experiences. Finally, the findings of this study were limited to the honesty and openness of the participants. The researcher conducted individual interviews and ensured participants were aware their identity would be kept confidential in order to provide an environment where the participants would be willing to share.

Recommendation for Future Practice

The current research reveals that aspiring female educational leaders do encounter barriers in their pursuit of a leadership role. However, participants identified several

supportive factors that have aided in and supported them in their obtainment of a leadership role. The following recommendations could provide additional supports for aspiring female leaders to ensure a more equitable representation of female leaders.

Barriers and Supportive Factors

While some barriers will always exist in aspiring female educational leaders' pursuit of leadership roles, supportive factors can play a role in overcoming those barriers. Local school districts can continue to partner with local colleges and universities to provide convenient cohort opportunities for aspiring leaders to obtain a leadership degree. This can be even more beneficial when the districts provide financial assistance to aspiring leaders who successfully complete the coursework. Additionally, local school districts can create formal mentoring programs. Researchers found that mentors were critical to the success of new leaders (Wyland, 2016). Connell et al. (2015) added that male mentors successfully encouraged female leaders to seek the superintendent position. In addition to mentors acting as a support system, networking can be valuable. Research suggests that supportive people within networks can provide aspiring leaders with the knowledge and insights to advance their careers (Hannum et al., 2015). Additionally, state and national organizations can provide aspiring female leaders opportunities to gain "knowledge, skills, influence, and recognition" (Connell et al., 2015, p.49) necessary to grow as a leader.

Leadership Qualities

District-level leaders can provide professional development opportunities for assistant principals to build a strong leadership pipeline with candidates who are highly trained to meet the specific needs of the school district (Burkett, 2021). School districts can also create leadership cohorts specifically designed to support new leaders. District

leadership cohorts ensure a shared mission and vision for the district. Additionally, by investing in creating highly trained leaders, the districts can build a solid pool of diverse leadership candidates. School districts should align professional development opportunities to address the needs of individual leaders. Hayes and Burkett (2020) emphasized the need for professional development that focuses on identifying leaders' strengths and constraints, allowing leaders to make more informed decisions.

Impact on Career Aspirations

School districts can begin to reduce gender bias and stereotypes by embracing diversity, equity, and inclusion. Researchers have emphasized the need for gender stereotype education to free female leaders from traditional views (Pirouznia, 2013). Additionally, school districts and educational leadership preparation institutions can work together to address gender inequities; however, school districts must first acknowledge the underrepresentation of females in leadership roles (Broadhurst et al., 2021). Furthermore, school districts can begin to ensure equal representation of male and female leaders within their school districts. School districts can achieve this by investing in professional development opportunities for new and aspiring leaders. In conjunction with other supportive measures, professional development opportunities can ensure a diverse leadership pipeline for the school district. Additionally, these professional development opportunities can aid female leaders in overcoming gender-based barriers (Hagan & Oliver, 2022).

Recommendations for Future Research

The study participants consisted of female educational leaders who had obtained leadership roles. Future studies should include participants who aspire to an educational leadership position but have not yet obtained the role. Participants in this study indicated

that some of their experiences have left them feeling defeated and discouraged. By looking at participants who are qualified for the position but have not yet obtained it, researchers could determine if the barriers encountered were enough to deter aspiring leaders from continuing their pursuit of a leadership role.

Additionally, half of the participants in this study were new to a leadership role, having worked for no more than three years as an administrator. Future research could be done to see if more experience in a leadership role influences career aspirations. Research suggests (Rushing, 2022) that extended field experiences lead to increased confidence. Therefore, researchers could determine the effect of increased experience on career aspirations.

Furthermore, the types of district-level support for the two districts involved in this study varied drastically. District A led a district-level leadership cohort to support new leaders and allow them to build relationships with district-level leadership. Additionally, the district partnered with local universities to offer teachers a more convenient path to leadership credentials. District B also partnered with local universities to offer a convenient path to leadership; however, new leaders in this district did not receive as much additional support from the district level. It would be interesting to know if the more supportive environment, from the district level, influenced new leaders' career aspirations. Additionally, specific interventions aimed at addressing barriers could be studied to determine their influence on career aspirations.

Future studies could also consist of a longitudinal study tracking the career aspirations of female teachers could uncover experiences that influence their career aspirations. A longitudinal study would allow researchers to pinpoint changes in career

aspirations. These changes could potentially identify specific experiences that alter the career aspirations of females in the education field.

Finally, many of the barriers addressed by aspiring female leaders are potential barriers for males as well. Due to societal norms, males are not typically viewed as the primary caregiver for children within a household. However, if the goal is to reduce gender stereotypes for females then we should also avoid gender stereotypes for males. To determine how the barriers identified influence aspiring male leaders, a comparative study could be conducted to find common barriers faced by aspiring leaders of both genders. Additionally, studies should be conducted to determine how gender intersects with race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and socioeconomic factors.

Conclusion

The underrepresentation of female educational leaders, particularly in the secondary principal and superintendent positions, has been an ongoing issue (Hill et al., 2016; K. Robinson et al., 2017). Recent literature indicates barriers (Connell et al., 2015; Hannum et al., 2015; Kruse & Krumm, 2016) aspiring female educational leaders face and supportive factors (Connell et al., 2015; Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; De Bruyn & Mestry, 2020; McGee, 2010) to overcome those barriers. Additionally, the literature identifies gender bias and stereotypes (Cassidy et al., 2021; Jean-Marie, 2013; Pirouznia, 2013) that impede aspiring female leaders' success.

This qualitative phenomenological study described and analyzed influences on female educational leaders' career aspirations in a southeastern state. The study was guided by an overarching question along with three supportive questions. The study explored the lived experiences of female assistant principals and female assistant superintendents from two neighboring school districts.

New and aspiring leaders encounter various experiences that influence their career aspirations. Aspiring female leaders face barriers such as pressure to prove themselves, create work-life balance, and gender barriers. However, female leaders identified several supportive factors to overcome these barriers. Supportive factors include having a mentor, being encouraged, or inspired, and district-level support. Additionally, new leaders found specific leadership qualities essential for successful leadership. Leaders learned to practice empathy, build relationships, and the need for continual growth and development as leaders. Finally, leaders revealed that gender bias and stereotypes led to feeling discouraged and defeated, especially when they were overlooked for positions in which they were qualified.

The findings revealed implications for future practice for developing a diverse, successful leadership pipeline. First, emphasis on creating support and professional development opportunities which increases the confidence of aspiring leaders. Next, embracing diversity, equity, and inclusion along with other educational awareness can reduce gender bias and stereotypes created by society. Finally, creating an environment where all leaders are respected can positively influence aspiring leaders' self-perception.

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APPENDIX A. INDIVIDUAL SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Review Process: Audio recording and field notes are used to create interview transcription; member checking will ensure the accuracy of information gathered, and follow-up interviews may be necessary for clarification.

1. What is your age?
2. What is your race?
3. Do you have any children? If so, how many?
4. How many years of experience do you have in education?
5. How many of those years were in a classroom?
6. What grades and subjects have you taught?
7. How many years were you or have you been an assistant principal? At what grade levels?
8. How many years have you been a principal? At what grade levels?
9. How many years have you been at your current school/district level?
10. What is the highest degree you have completed?
11. When did you decide to become a teacher?
12. Describe your experiences in education/teaching.
13. When did you decide you wanted to become an administrator?
14. Did anyone (family, peers, or administrator) influence your decision? Encourage you?
15. Did you encounter any obstacles along your journey?
16. How did you overcome those obstacles?
17. Did you have a mentor? How did they influence you as a leader?
18. How would you describe your leadership style? Has it changed with experience?
19. How has experience impacted your leadership abilities?
20. Have you encountered gender stereotypes or biases throughout your leadership journey? Explain.
21. Where do you see yourself in 5 years? 10 years?
22. How has your leadership journey played an impact on your career aspirations?
23. Is there anything else you would like to include about yourself or your career in education?

APPENDIX B. APPROVAL FOR RESEARCH (IRB)



**Human Subjects Committee (HSC)
Institutional Review Board (IRB)**

Dear Chevy A. Benson,

Proposal Title: Diminished Aspirations or Something More? A Phenomenological Study to Examine how Educational Leadership Experience Influences Career Aspirations.

Submission date: Friday, December 8, 2023, 8:56 AM

The Human Subjects Committee (HSC) has received and reviewed the above-titled research proposal. I am happy to inform you that AU's IRB has voted to **APPROVE** your abovementioned proposal. Your approval number is **AU202349IRB**. Please, whenever you contact us about this proposal, use your IRB approval number.

Also, be reminded that if at any point during the research, the risk level to any human subjects involved changes, either physical harm or loss of anonymity, or should you find it necessary to make any adjustments to the study as approved, please contact the HSC/IRB Chair in advance of implementing such changes. This may require that you submit an IRB Modification form.

We wish you well in your research.

If you need clarification regarding the committee's decision, please contact Dr. Gilbert Eyabi, IRB Chair, at HSC@andersonuniversity.edu.

Sincerely,



1/8/2024

Gilbert Eyabi, PhD
Professor of Mathematics,
Assistant Provost,
IRB Chair, Anderson University.

APPENDIX C. PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear Participant,

My name is Chevy Benson. I am a doctoral candidate at Anderson University. I am kindly requesting your participation in a doctoral research study that I am conducting titled: Diminished Aspirations or Something More? A Phenomenological Study to Examine How Educational Leadership Experience Influences Career Aspirations. The intention is to examine female educational leaders' experiences to determine how these experiences influence their career aspirations. The study involves participating in an individual 30 – 60 minute interview session describing your experiences as an educational leader including any personal experiences that may have impacted your career aspirations. Participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. Your participation in the study is completely confidential and all references to information obtained will include pseudonyms for both participants and their school districts. If you would like to participate in the study please read the Informed Consent letter attached to this email. To begin the study, please respond to this email with your preferred contact information along with the best time to reach you regarding scheduling your interview. Your participation in the research will be greatly appreciated. Thank you for your time and participation.

Sincerely,

Chevy Benson

Doctoral Candidate, Anderson University

APPENDIX D. PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM



INFORMED CONSENT FOR Diminished Aspirations or Something More?

You are invited to participate in a research study to examine how the leadership experiences of school administrators influences career aspirations. This study poses minimal risks, however I may ask you personal questions regarding your experiences throughout your career path. This information will help me identify experiences that negatively impact career aspirations.

This study is being conducted by Chevy Benson under the supervision of Dr. Jeremy Watts Ph.D., Associate Dean of Graduate Studies. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a female school administrator with a minimum of one year experience as an educational leader.

If you decide to participate, I will send an electronic questionnaire to collect demographic information along with contact information that will be used to schedule an in-person interview. The interview will last approximately 30-60 minutes with follow-up interviews scheduled as needed for clarification purposes only. All interviews will be audio recorded for data analysis.

Your participation in this study may involve potential risks or discomforts. These include: possible identification of participants. However the researcher plans to store all identifiable information in encrypted files on a password protected computer which should mitigate the risk. Additionally, all audio recordings completed during the interview process will be deleted immediately following verification of transcriptions.

Any information obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential. Information collected through your participation may be used to: fulfill the dissertation requirement as part of the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program. If so, none of your identifiable information will be included.

All data that includes identifiable information will be stored in encrypted files on a password protected computer. Identifiable information such as the contact information obtained to schedule the interviews will be deleted after the conclusion of the study. Additionally, audio recordings will be deleted immediately after transcriptions have been verified. As a participant, you may withdraw from participation at any time without penalty. This includes the right to withdraw any data which has been collected, as long as the data is identifiable.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not jeopardize your future relations with Anderson University or your school district.

If you have any questions I invite you to ask them now. If you have questions later, (Chevy Benson, [REDACTED] cbenson100@andersonuniversity.edu or Dr. Jeremy Watts, (864)231-2000 jwatts@andersonuniversity.edu) will be happy to answer them. You will be provided a copy of this form to keep.

For more information regarding your rights as a research participant you may contact the Chairs of the Human Subjects Committee/Institutional Review Board by phone or e-mail. The HSC

Chairs, Dr. Joni Criswell and Dr. Robert Franklin, can be reached at (864) 231-2000 or through email at hsc@andersonuniversity.edu.

HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, YOU MUST DECIDE WHETHER OR NOT YOU WISH TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY. YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES YOUR WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE.

Participant's signature Date

Investigator's signature Date

Print Name

Print Name