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Women in executive level education leadership positions: perceptions, challenges, and supports.

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Recommended Citation

WOMEN IN EXECUTIVE LEVEL EDUCATION LEADERSHP POSITIONS:

PERCEPTIONS, CHALLENGES, AND SUPPORTS

By

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B.S., Western Kentucky University, 2001
M.Ed., Freed Hardeman University, 2007

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Education and Human Development of the
University of Louisville
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

Doctor of Education
In Educational Leadership and Organizational Development

Department of Educational Leadership, Evaluation, and Organizational Development
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2023

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A Dissertation Approved on

April 13, 2023

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Rachel Yarbrough, Ed.D.

DEDICATION

"She believed she could, so she did." (R.S. Grey, 2014)

This dissertation is dedicated, in part; to my mother, Joetta Usher, that has served as a model of perseverance, grit, and determination as a full-time, working mother and 30-year educator throughout my life. Her strong belief of being an educated women as a necessary step for self-identify, advocating for self and others with purpose, questioning the status quo for change, and empowerment for self-actualization has always served as a foundation for me beginning at an early age.

This work is also dedicated to my husband, Scott Ray, who has showed me unconditional love throughout our relationship to ensure that I am able to reach my personal and professional goals. I could never adequately put in words how much you mean to me and can only hope you feel my love and appreciation on a daily basis for you all have and continue to do for and with me.

Lastly, this dissertation is dedicated to the young girls with dreams and women aspiring to be leaders in all professions and occupations. Despite what the world and those around you may say, your life experiences (good or bad), or your own personal thoughts there is truly no one to hold you back except yourself. Your future is bright and you are worth it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

WOMEN IN EXECUTIVE LEVEL EDUCATION LEADERSHIP POSITIONS:

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Adrienne Usher

April 13, 2023

This qualitative study explored the perceptions, challenges, and lived experiences of women, in the Commonwealth of Kentucky, holding executive level leadership positions to inform tailored support strategies. As female educators aspire to higher levels of leadership in schools and districts, limited avenues of structured informal and formal support exist. A review of literature reveals an understanding of how female educators have been historically positioned in education which provides a foundation for present day challenges. Research is lacking on utilizing these lived experiences and challenges as a source to provide informed support. In order to take educated steps to a more equal and equitable playing field for women, this study provides insights on support practices women experienced progressing through executive level leadership positions.

The multiple case study research design was selected to illuminate the phenomenon through viewpoints by assembling data from individual cases. Data was collected from interviews of ten women in executive level leadership positions at the

school and district level. Interview transcripts were analyzed individually and holistically to identify common themes of participant lived experiences and challenges.

This study finds that aspiring and current women executive level leaders need a combination of formal and informal support approaches, intentionally structured, to combat the negative impact challenges women experience. Implications for the field of education point to a stronger collaboration between schools and districts, higher education institutions, and professional organizations for recruitment and creating sustainable support systems for aspiring women leaders earlier in their career.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Women should have equal pay for equal work and they should be considered
equally eligible to the offices of principal and superintendent, professor and
president. So you must insist that qualifications, not sex, shall govern
appointments and salaries (Anthony, 1903, as cited in Biggs, 1996).

Statement of the Problem

Three years from her death in 1906, Susan B. Anthony advocated and encouraged
female educators to continue the fight for equal opportunity and access in a letter to
Margaret Haley, President of the National Federation of Teachers (Biggs, 1996). Susan
B. Anthony was one of many women suffrage pioneers and was relentless in her pursuit
as an educational reformer. Historically, the field of education provided an occupational
sanctuary for women in the role of teaching with men taking the lead in school
administration (Grogan, 2005; Rousmaniere, 2004). This continues to be prevalent across
the Commonwealth of Kentucky with 77% of classroom teachers being female and 60%
of administrators being male according to the 2020-2021 Kentucky School Report Card.
Gender equality has increased for women in accessing a variety of positions in the field
of education, but gendered stereotypes have affected the mobility of women within their
career (Dom & Yi, 2018). This study sought to explore the problem specific to women

accessing and obtaining executive level educational leadership positions through their perceptions and challenges from lived experiences.

The glass ceiling has experienced many deep fractures in the 21st century for leadership advancement considering the 2020 United States presidential election resulted in the appointment of a female of color vice president. Corporate America has seen an increase in women obtaining lower and mid-level management positions since 2016 (Thomas et al., 2021). However, as higher level positions of leadership and stature arise within corporate America and educational organizations, the rate of women holding these roles remains disproportionate to men. The field of education is embracing women leaders now more than ever, but there is still room for improvement. In a profession in which women primarily inhabit the classroom, there continues to be an underrepresentation of women who hold high level leadership positions. The American Superintendent 2020 Decennial study found 26.8% of superintendents are female yet has only increased minimally compared to 24.1% in 2010 (Kowalski et al., 2011; Tienken & Domenech, 2021).

Students spend a large majority of their social, emotional, and academic developmental years in school. These formative years in school are filled with experiential learning for children that serve as a socializing agent and is linked to future employment aspirations and opportunities (Dom & Yi, 2018). Women serving as leaders and role models help combat traditional gender roles as the weaker sex through television, movies, and narratives (Webb, 2018). Based on this understanding, it is imperative for female and male students to see women in leadership roles to aid in redefining socialized gender norms.

The stereotypical role of women often held by both men and women can lead to implicit and overtly blatant gender bias experiences in executive level leadership roles in education (Halley, 2020). Research shows that women continue to experience discrimination as they strive towards and hold leadership positions due to the expectations of women in a leadership role (Bernal, et al., 2017; Connell, et al., 2015; Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Skrla et al., 2000). Women who experience a double standard in leadership roles and the socialized ideology of women must be explored and confronted as we strive to provide equitable outcomes for women in educational organizations aspiring towards leadership (Elliott et al., 2020; Martínez et al., 2020).

Considering the work of education is centered on teaching and learning, women might be considered at a vantage point for executive level leadership positions. As women navigate the challenges of gender inequities the pathway to leadership positions combined with support is disadvantaged in many respects. Women enter into executive leadership positions later in their career than men spending more time teaching in the classroom and in positions specific to curriculum and instruction at the school and district level (Robinson, et al., 2017). As women climb this leadership ladder in education, fewer avenues of support and networking exist. Mentors can be crucial for aspiring female leaders because research indicates that successful women in leadership roles that had access to mentors were able to maneuver a male dominated role (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Muñoz, Pankake, Ramalho, et al., 2014; Reed & Patterson, 2007; Smith, 2019; VanTuyle & Watkins, 2009).

Education is the catalyst for intellectual development, civic duties and responsibilities, workforce development, and social change for society. Gender barriers

are not a new phenomenon when taking into consideration the historical roots of women gaining access to education. However, as we near completion of a quarter of the 21st century, can we confidently say the current state of education mimics the ideologies of equal and equitable opportunities for women by breaking down patriarchal barriers of a social system that impact career aspirations? As the United States continues to progress with a loud call for the education system to prepare students for the changing workplace landscape, gendered norms continue to suppress women entering the education profession.

Context

The Commonwealth of Kentucky has 120 counties, making it third in the United States with the largest number of counties (Harrison & Klotter, 1992). The public education system includes 171 school districts (county and independent) and 1,477 schools serving approximately 638,236 students (Kentucky Department of Education, 2021). A school system is tasked with educating society and requires organizational structures to be established at the district and school level creating a social system that includes roles that will fulfill the systems goals and inhabit those roles with skilled individuals (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2008). Each school district is unique in student enrollment, number of schools, student and staff demographics, working budgets, programs, and district organizational structure. Despite the differences, there are commonalities related to their organizational structure including leadership positions.

The basic ideas of leadership organizational structure permeated throughout school districts include job specialization, departmentalization, authority, and responsibility for vertical and horizontal regulation and coordination within the school

district (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2008). School districts across the Commonwealth of Kentucky employ a superintendent, district administration personnel, and school principals. There are variations of those positions depending on the size and organizational structure. School districts may have secondary superintendents titled assistant, deputy, or associate. District administration personnel also differ in position titles, but their role is to manage district programs, departments, or systems. In addition, support principal positions are sometimes a part of a school's organizational structure which include assistant, vice, or associate position titles. Despite the organizational structure of a district or school, there are educational leadership opportunities for female district employees to aspire and set goals for attaining executive level leadership positions within schools and districts. For the purpose of my study, executive level leadership positions included school or district level administrative positions that require a superintendent and/or instructional leadership certification that oversee all or some programming and operations.

Based on Kentucky Department of Education (2021) school personnel information, approximately 50% of school principal and support principal positions are held by women. In addition, women hold 54% of district administrator positions. When reviewing the highest level of executive level leadership, there is a dramatic difference at the highest level for female leadership. School districts across the Commonwealth of Kentucky employ 94 secondary superintendent positions of which women hold 54% of these executive level leadership positions similar to district administration. However, when considering the topmost executive level leadership position of superintendent,

women hold only 21% of those positions in the state of Kentucky (Kentucky Department of Education, 2021).

Within Kentucky, all women who hold a Superintendent position automatically become members of the Kentucky Women in Education Leadership (KWEL) organization, by nature of position. Kentucky Women in Education Leadership is a leadership development program of the Kentucky Association of School Administrators (KASA). The purpose of KWEL is to increase the number of women holding the highest level of executive leadership positions in school districts through leadership development, professional networking, goal setting, coaching and mentoring. The program aims to increase the competence and confidence of women who aspire to lead (KASA and the Center for Education Leadership [KASA], n.d.).

KWEL was re-instituted by retired Kentucky female superintendents, in collaboration with KASA leadership, during the 2017-2018 school year. Since then, women who hold or aspire to hold executive level leadership positions can become a member of KWEL through a yearly cohort application process which opens each fall. KWEL inducted its fourth cohort during the spring of 2021 and has grown from 24 to 110 cohort members since the spring of 2018. Cohort members inducted into KWEL are matched with a mentor, currently serving as a district leader in some capacity, participating in monthly coaching calls, a goal setting action plan, and support when needed. All KWEL members have the opportunity to participate in an annual learning conference each spring, participate in networking opportunities at the KWEL Women's Forum and KASA Summer Leadership Institute, experience constant connection through

a members-only Facebook page and KASA communities communication thread, and have access to guidance and support from their mentor and others within KWEL.

Significance of the Study

This study served as a measure of female executive educational leaders perceptions and experiences to explore shared gender barriers for increased transparency and improve support along their leadership aspirational journey. Women aspiring to be in executive level leadership roles in public education continue to experience access and opportunity barriers to these roles in the twenty-first century based on the gender gap in educational leadership (Martínez et al., 2020; Olson, 2019; Robinson et al., 2017; Superville, 2016; Young, 2005). Research up to this point has explored and examined how women experience, perceive, and cope with these forthright or subtle impediments.

Qualitative studies have explored the specific stereotypes held of women being considered for educational leadership roles. The competence of women specific to operational knowledge of schools and districts is questioned by school and district stakeholders (Nix, 2021; Skrla et al., 2000). Gender discrimination overall is perceived as a barrier for women considering executive level leadership positions (Wyland, 2016). Quantitative studies have examined the idea that women feel a sense of conformity to male expectations in educational leadership positions and view the male network along with balancing family and career as barriers to career advancement (Robinson et al., 2017; see also Loyola, 2016; Polka et al., 2008).

An increased call for equity within the educational landscape signifies there is an urgent need for research to identify the current perceptions and challenges of women in executive level leadership positions. This qualitative research study intended to examine

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and interpret experiences of women who hold executive level education leadership positions through semi-structured interviews to inform the development of effective support that meet the particular needs of women aspiring to leadership. Schools, districts, state leadership associations, and national leadership organizations may use this study to understand the challenges women experience relative to gender to increase the number of women pursuing and obtaining executive level leadership positions.

The literature provides insight into the differential treatment women have experienced after leaving the classroom, but there is a gap in how these experiences have been used to support those eager to step into leadership. There has also been a decline in mentoring for women in the past ten years along with research indicating that an influential mentor is needed to obtain an executive level education leadership position (Muñoz et al., 2014; Robinson et al., 2017). Catlett's (2017) research study provides implications that mentoring programs are still needed to support women aspiring to executive level leadership positions to enhance their skills and provide more networking avenues. My study explored the perceptions and challenges women experience in executive level leadership positions as a roadmap for functional mentoring practices that can increase women's access and opportunity to these roles.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The two major theories that have grounded and influenced the research are feminist theory and standpoint theory which intersect to develop feminist standpoint theory. Feminist theory, situated under the umbrella of critical theory, is founded on individuals exploited due to gender or sex (Kruse & Krumm, 2016). Feminist theory encompasses a wide range of application related to discussing ways to achieve equity,

theorizing from a feminist perspective, and explaining gender connected to social, cultural, economic, political and societal structures. Application of feminist theory for this study was focused on how gender is related to social inequities and used to weaken the status quo which can disadvantage women (Chafetz, 1997). Feminist theory served as the foundational theory of studying women in executive level leadership positions as a way to understand the aspect of gender on the path towards obtaining and experiencing leadership positions.

Standpoint theory is the understanding that an individual holds a perspective or understanding of a situation or the world itself from their social position (Gurung, 2020). More specifically, standpoint theory exposes a viewpoint from marginalized groups of how they experience the world (Kruse & Krumm, 2016). An individual's standpoint occurs as Wood (2005) states, "through critical reflection on power relations and through engaging in the struggle required to construct an oppositional stance" (p. 61). Standpoint theory includes a marginalized individual's perspective and blind spots, how they communicate, the knowledge and viewpoint as compared to the dominant group, and differential standpoints they can hold within their social group (Kruse & Krumm, 2016; Wood, 2005). Utilizing standpoint theory as a foundational theory to study women in executive level educational leadership was applicable because women represent a marginalized group among educational leaders, causing them to bring a unique knowledge from their social group as compared to men in leadership roles. This is demonstrated by findings that women prefer to lean on female mentors, throughout their career, which starts with their mothers due to a common understanding of experiencing life in a man's world (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; Fennell, 2008).

A feminist standpoint is developed by the social location of women positioned in society. Feminist standpoint theory is generally founded on the idea that those most marginalized congruent to their social position are likely to be advantaged in their knowledge and understanding of social reality (Harding, 2003; Rolin, 2009). In this study, feminist standpoint theory was used to examine the inequality that occurs between men and women because of power-based relationships and systems (Wood, 2005). The original development of feminist standpoint theory was founded on the relationship between a master and slave, tied to Marxist theory, which translates women are the oppressed by man as the master (Gurung, 2020).

Gurung (2020) explains how feminist standpoint theory is guided by four ideas: strong objectivity, power relations, situated knowledge, and epistemic advantage. Figure 1 illustrates how feminist and standpoint theory connect to develop an individual's or groups' standpoint which is more subjugated to provide a fair, objective and transformative version of the world (Gurung 2020; Haraway, 1998). Strong objectivity occurs when examination and analysis between the subject and the object of study occurs to provide a less incorrect view of reality (Gurung, 2020). Women who have experienced struggle in obtaining and holding executive level leadership positions can find themselves in an oppositional position to push back on the dominant view of leadership in masculine terms (Wood, 2005).

Figure 1

Illustration of Theoretical Framework Foundation
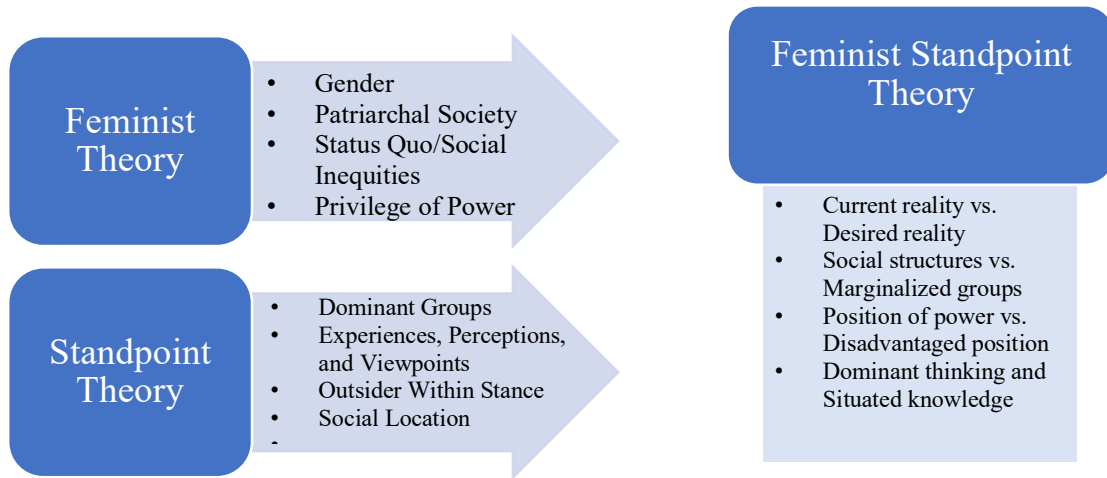
The impact of power on how knowledge is constructed can lead to silence and mistrust, therefore, causing disparate social locations for women and men because our society is organized through power relations (Gurung 2020; Wood, 2005). Women in executive level leadership positions can provide insight into what they actually experience as compared to male educational leaders claiming that men and women truly have equitable access to leadership positions. Situated knowledge allows marginalized individuals the ability to understand and question dominant groups, thinking, processes, and systems which can provide knowledge that is believed to be more correct or less inaccurate. This occurs because members of dominant groups have a conscious regard for not seeing injustice and oppression in their world and marginalized groups are more likely to experience political dissolution due to their situated social location of more powerful groups (Gurung, 2020; Wood, 2005). In educational leadership, women are situated to question the lack of appointment of females in educational administration due

to qualifications or preparation. Okahana et al. (2020) reported 68.4% of doctoral degrees in education and 76.7% of master degrees in education were awarded to women during the 2018-2019 academic year, but there still remains a lopsided percentage of females in executive level leadership positions which is not due to a lack of preparation.

Feminist standpoint theory brings the idea of epistemic advantage or authority because the perspective of marginalized groups includes their own viewpoints, as well as the ideologies from dominant groups, which creates a more all-inclusive perspective (Gurung, 2020; Rolin, 2009). Marginalized groups can experience double vision or be an "outsider-within" because they are subjected to the dominant way of thinking or doing whether it be politics, work, or education while also being a member of the marginalized social group (Gurung, 2020; Wood 2005). In a case study of a female school administrator, MacKinnon (2019) described how she navigated the role of leadership between leading like a man using strength and directness to leading like a woman with empathy and compassion based on the situation at hand or audience. Women can bring epistemic authority to describing the experience of holding an executive level leadership position being an outsider-within amidst the changing landscape of leadership valuing collaboration, flexibility, and non-hierarchical organization which can be termed as more feminine leadership (Billing & Alvesson, 2000).

Feminist standpoint theory underpinned the purpose of this research study by exploring the marginalized voices of women understanding their perceptions and challenges within their experiences. I analyzed their experiences to gain a deeper understanding of identified challenges to inform mentoring practices to support women seeking executive level education leadership positions. Gaining insight into mentoring

practices, I synthesized the data to reveal the impact of support on the professional trajectory of women from their own lived experiences.

Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions, challenges, and lived experiences of women holding executive level leadership positions in the Commonwealth of Kentucky and to inform support strategies specifically tailored for women. Considering national and state data show women as the majority gender in the field of education, it does not translate into women being positively positioned for executive level leadership positions. The three research questions that guided this study were:

1. What have women in educational leadership perceived as challenges, related to their lived experiences, as they sought executive level leadership roles?

2. What experiences, formal or informal, have supported women in education leadership as they progress through executive level leadership positions?

3. How might experiences that support women in educational leadership be tailored as they progress through executive level leadership roles?

The questions strived to describe how women perceive their lived experiences obtaining and holding executive level leadership positions to inform tailored support for aspiring women educational leaders. It is essential to identify and expose the obstacles that women face in education as they set professional leadership positions as goals (Robinson, et al., 2017). More importantly, equipping aspiring female leaders with knowledge and strategies to navigate these barriers through intentional mentoring practices could narrow

the disproportionate leadership gap between men and women in executive level leadership roles.

Definitions of Terms

I used the following terms in the context of this study:

Educational Leadership: is the process of engaging and influencing the capacities and abilities of students, teachers, and parents toward accomplishing common educational goals (Karem & Patrick, 2019).

Executive Level Education Leadership Position: is a school or district administrator that requires a superintendent or instructional leadership certification charged with overseeing school or district level organizations, departments, operations, curriculum, instruction, and/or assessment that may include, but not limited to, positions titled Principal, Assistant Principal, Deputy Principal, Vice Principal, Associate Principal, Director, Supervisor, Chief Officers, Executive Directors, Executive Administrators, Assistant Superintendent, Deputy Superintendent, Associate Superintendent, or Superintendent depending on the organizational structure of the school district.

Glass Ceiling: a metaphorical phrase for the abstract hierarchal invisible barrier that hinders women and minorities from career advancement within organizations or industry (Reiners, 2021)

Secondary Superintendent: a district administrator that reports directly to the Superintendent of the school district with the title assistant, associate, or deputy superintendent

Support Principal: a school administrator that serves as part of the head principal's leadership team and holds the position assistant, associate, vice, or deputy principal.

Summary

This study expanded upon prior research on the lived experiences of women in executive level leadership positions through their perceptions as a standpoint for providing aspiring women leaders effective mentoring. This study encompassed a variety of executive level educational leadership positions to give insight into how women perceive their social position within educational organizations at the school or district level. More importantly, this research provided a more holistic viewpoint and understanding of women currently in and aspiring to executive level leadership positions through their perceptions related to career decisions, challenges, and other inequities aligned to their perceptions and experiences. The information from this study benefits existing school and district educational leaders to create systems for attraction and retention of women into executive level leadership positions.

Organization of the Study

I organized my study as follows: Chapter 1 includes the introduction, statement of the problem, context, significance of the study, the theoretical and conceptual framework, research questions, definition of terms, summary, and organizational of the study. Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of the relevant literature. Chapter 3 provides an in-depth description of the research design, strengths and limitations, data sources and collection procedures, ethical considerations, data analysis process, exploring research positionality, and strategies for validation, reliability, and trustworthiness, and summary. Chapter 4 presents an overview of multiple case study design, data analysis process, collective participant description, findings for each research question, and a summary.

Finally, Chapter 5 provides a summary of research question findings and offers

implications for future research and recommendations for the field.

CHAPTER II: LITERATIVE REVIEW

This phenomenological study examined women's perceptions and challenges experienced in executive level leadership positions in K-12 education to suggest specific mentoring approaches for women. The literature review is organized into four sections. The first section provides insight into the history of women in education in the United States. The remaining sections discuss current literature on the gender gap existing in educational leadership, gender equity challenges women face in their pursuit of educational leadership positions, and the current state of mentoring provided in educational leadership and benefits of mentoring. The final section provides a brief summary of overall findings from the review of literature.

History of Women in K-12 Education

The road to equal educational access and opportunity for women in the United States has been a long, difficult journey. When reviewing how women gained access to education, history indicates educational opportunities were afforded to females based on the idea of preparation for caretaking roles (Madigan, 2009). Woyshner and Hao Kuo Tai (1997) found a common theme across historical periods stating "the education of women and girls has been defined, almost universally, as a problem" (p. x) due to a variety of concerns based on perceived low intellect, a invalid reason for why women should be education by society, and how education will impact women's authority along with its

political implications. The conflict women have experienced in obtaining educational experiences was grounded in religious teachings of colonial America that held men as authorities in spiritual and intellectual ability (Matthews, 1976; Woyshner & Hao Kuo Tai, 1997).

The beginning of education reform for females began in the 17th and early 18th century exclusively for wealthy families who had the opportunity to send their daughters to dame schools (Madigan, 2009). Girls who came from underprivileged families in colonial America relied on their mother to teach them domestic skills and their father for religion (Matthews 1976). This is also the era in which women came to secure their role as a teacher because dame schools were taught by women and as the colonies began to thrive and grow there was a need for more literate community members, which included women (Madigan, 2009).

The Revolutionary War also placed women in a situation to maintain farms and businesses while tasked with care taking of all family members and household responsibilities (Dentith & Peterlin, 2016; Rury, 1986). This caused women to experience an awareness of weakness related to their knowledge and intellectual capacity which was due to the lack of formal schooling (Rury, 1986). The close of the 18th century through the beginning of the 19th century saw girls attending dame schools and common schools, the creation of coeducation public high schools, and the creation of female seminaries and academies (Madigan, 2009; Matthews 1976). As education of women began to achieve some acceptance, women were often tracked towards academia or job employment based on their family's socioeconomic status (Dentith & Peterlin, 2016).

Horace Mann and Henry Barnard established common schools in the early 19th century to provide elementary-age children an education based on literacy and citizenship to maintain social stability, reduce crime, and limit economic hardship while teaching girls their place was in the home (Funk & Wagnalls, 2018). As the development of common schools continued to grow, women came to be viewed as natural teachers as a preparation for motherhood and family duties causing more than half of all classrooms being led by female teachers in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Matthew, 1976). Common schools created the ideology in society that education was a necessary social good and laid the framework for a public school system that enlisted women as teachers and males as administrators that matched the patriarchal standards of the time (Smith, 2021).

Education reform on behalf of females coincided with the suffrage movement giving women the right to vote increasing equality, but the efforts did not create equal access for learning to increase intellect, culture, and competence of women due to conflicting ideologies of prominent educators like Emma Willard and Catherine Beecher at the time. They focused their efforts on how schools should provide education for women to be useful (Madigan, 2009; Matthew, 1976; Sweet, 1985). Seminaries were initially created to provide instruction to women in the areas of religion, literary, domestic skills, and ornamental studies shared by Emma Willard in 1819 at her address to the New York legislature to reform female education (Willard, 2017). As the seminary movement continued to evolve, they began offering courses in math, science, and history not previously offered to females and positively influenced the movement of women gaining access to higher education and preparing women to be teachers (Funk &

Wagnalls, 2018; Matthews, 1976). The Progressive Era caused public policy to meet the diverse needs of the population but continued to reinforce traditional roles of females and their future through the lens of American Protestant values specific to social order and family (Carter, 2017).

Entry into the twentieth century saw an increase in women enrolling in higher education and a phenomenon of women expanding beyond teachers to include nurses, social workers and other types of professional roles (Rury, 1986). Although women were accessing new occupations, the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education in 1918 created a track system that steered males primarily to college preparatory paths and routed girls to vocational learning which required courses in domestic science (Madigan, 2009). The progressive era saw an explosion of female saturation at public high schools, but curriculum opportunities limited girls based on society's ideas of gender appropriate occupations (bookkeepers, typists, etc.) other than attending college to be a teacher (Carter 2017). However, the improved access and opportunity to education overall afforded women a path to independence, financial stability, and self-fulfillment (Rury, 1986). Due to this, life patterns of women drastically changed through women gaining access to the same educational opportunities and experiences as men while the profession of teaching grew to be feminized causing it to be considered a low social status occupation (Dentith, 2016; Rousmaniere, 2004).

The fact that women were not allowed to be married in the role of teacher combined with societal beliefs that teaching was not a true profession and was considered work for only women created working conditions in which male administrators micromanaged and underpaid their teachers (Rousmaniere, 2004). As women

experienced discrimination in pay and exploitation of their roles as teachers, the first teachers' unions were founded by women who fought for equal pay and fair treatment which then paved the way for women to access leadership roles in the public education system (Smith, 2021). Based on the increase of women rising to more leadership roles within education, this could also be attributed to the understanding women have started to master the world of male leadership (O'Rourke & Papalewis, 1989). Fennell (2008) reported the challenges of being the only female principal in the school district as how male peers viewed the principal as a scribe at leadership meetings as well as dismissing new ideas or initiatives. MacKinnon's (2019) findings from a case study indicated female leaders may at times wish they were a man because women are expected to lead juxtaposed between the experience and knowledge of being a woman and the expectation of leading based on masculinity. Leadership positions that are perceived to hold the most authority, power, status, and income are occupied predominantly by men (Billing & Alvesson, 2000). Therefore, it is important to explore the educational leadership role from the female perspective and context to provide an authentic understanding the role of gender in an educational leadership position.

Gender Gap in Educational Leadership

In 2021, the field of education could be considered as having an astonishing gender gap at the highest levels with having only three of 12 United States Secretary of Education positions held by women and 17 female state education commissioners. Prior to 2000, 13.2% of school districts across the country were led by women superintendents along with 26.2% of secondary schools led by women and 52% of elementary schools led by women. Women comprise the majority of classroom teachers at 76% of all teachers

(Glass, 2000; Litmanovitz, 2016; Young, 2005). Since 2000, there has been improvement in the numbers of women leading districts and schools with 26.8% of superintendents being female and 52% of women holding school principal positions (Superville, 2016; Tienken & Domenech, 2021).

Women could potentially have more access to decision-making in education as evidenced by women having a majority presence in the classroom. This majority presence could lead to increased opportunities for empowerment of women in school site governance and shared leadership. In addition, student achievement results and high stakes accountability has focused hiring on who can perform the job successfully thus making instructional leadership a must have skill of school and district leaders (Logan, 1998). Bollinger and Grady (2018) conducted a mixed methods study on women's satisfaction in the superintendency which highlighted instructional leadership as an increasing qualification for district leaders which creates increased satisfaction for women in the role.

As the presence of female leadership begins to stagnate at top tier leadership positions, their ability to impact educational policy is limited (Wyland, 2016). Although hiring the most qualified person may be the goal in educational leadership, being a woman can be a disadvantage as supported by Kowalski and Stouder (1999). This study found that female superintendents rated "being a woman" as one of the lowest characteristics in obtaining a superintendency position. Wood (2005) confirms this in findings that search consultants, which assist districts in candidate searches, often ask district representatives if hiring a woman is a viable option from the start as some believe the idea of a woman in the key leadership role "is simply too difficult to stomach" (p.

38). This is further supported in a study conducted by Morillo (2017) finding that gender attributed to multiple layers of discrimination for women in district leadership positions. More recently, Nix (2021) found that first year female superintendents identified a phenomenon traditionally known as an old boy network which promotes the gender gap by selecting men over women in leadership positions. An analysis of prior research studies provides a context that situates the lived experiences, perceptions, and challenges of women who hold executive level leadership positions related to career decisions and pathways potentially impacted by unequal access.

Research spanning more than two decades demonstrates an increased acceptance of equal employment opportunity for women, but the field of education continues to maintain gender norms that reflect stagnation (Kowalski & Stouder, 1999; Maranto et al., 2018). The gender gap present in educational leadership continues to exist for women as they navigate a professional journey that can place them in lower-level leadership roles for longer periods of time while balancing the role of a woman and a leader that values leadership through masculine ideologies (Gungor & Mericelli, 2020; Kruse & Krumm, 2016; O'Rourke & Papalewis, 1989).

Explicit Societal Bias Towards Professional Women

Though gains have been made in the workplace by women, they remain positioned in a patriarchal society as evidenced by the internalization of the perceived responsibilities of women such as child raising and managing the home (Gungor & Mericelli, 2020). As compared to male colleagues, women leaders report receiving less support at home related to taking care of the home and children. This causes self-imposed conflicts for women leaders in executive leadership positions when responsibilities at

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home do not decrease as work responsibilities increase (Derrington & Sharratt, 2008; VanTuyle & Watkins, 2009). This is supported by Catlett (2017) finding that female superintendents considered home and family responsibilities as internal and external factors that prevent women from obtaining superintendent positions. Women may then be placed in a position to sacrifice their professional goals because they cannot fully commit to motherhood and leadership successfully (Kruse & Krumm, 2016). In a study conducted by Wiener and Burton (2016) of women and men in a principal preparation program, women included their familial responsibilities as part of their decision to apply for specific principal positions as compared to men who only discussed the impact of being a principal on their family when directly asked. This sacrificial choice can cause female educational leaders to experience personal anxiety with trying to devote enough attention to family, children and their career (Catlett, 2017; VanTuyle & Watkins, 2009).

Women who hold the key leadership position of school superintendent are more prone to living alone, being divorced, or having a commuter marriage which indicates personal challenges are an obstacle for women to overcome tied to familial responsibilities (Reed & Patterson, 2007; Robinson et al., 2017; Wyland, 2016). Female leaders who were able to remain successfully married took on the job as a team effort with their spouse taking a new job, reducing hours at an existing job, or leaving the workplace to support them and take on more familial responsibilities (Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Robinson et al., 2017). For women, relocation due to a job did pose a barrier because of the upheaval and hardship that can come from relocating a spouse and children (VanTuyle & Watkins, 2009). This can be due to the perception that traditionally the male spouse's job location most often dictates the family's residence (Catlett, 2017).

The issues of family responsibilities and potential personal challenges can be attributed to women serving in the superintendent role at an average age of 48.5 years as compared to 80.6% of men who enter their first educational leadership role before the age of 36 (Connell, et, al, 2015; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; VanTuyle & Watkins, 2009; Wyland, 2016). Societal norms of gender create conditions in which "males are perceived as championing their family struggles by aspiring leadership jobs" (Muñoz, et al., 2014. p. 772) as compared to women being viewed as leaving their family duties behind to pursue career goals.

Gender societal norms can suggest women educational leaders experience gender bias, or sexism, both overtly and covertly. Skrla, Reyes, and Scheurich (2000) reported that sexism was demonstrated by school board members, community members, and school staff of female district leaders by challenging their competence, stereotyping the female gender in their role, and the use of intimidation tactics. Female district leaders report being challenged by board members and outside contractors specific to non-instructional operations by speaking to them as if they were a difficult child disobeying parents and assuming they had no knowledge of facilities or construction (Nix, 2021; Skrla et al., 2000). Halley (2020) conducted a qualitative study of female district leaders in which one aspiring leader was told by a recruiter to appear sexier in interviews and another asked "if a blonde blue eyed female could lead an athletic district" (p. 36). Connell, Cobia and Hodge (2015) studied four female superintendents who reported that gender bias was experienced through interactions with construction contractors, male high school principals, and male community members. Additional situations that can impact a woman's ability to obtain a leadership position are that many search firms are

staffed with former male superintendents combined with the fact that women administrators spend most of their networking time in male-dominated groups and can be excluded from established male social circles (Halley, 2020; Smith, 2019; VanTuyle & Watkins, 2009). Gender barriers can also create situations in which women are forced to leave a job in a familiar district to break away from local gender norms that preclude women from upper level leadership positions (Maranto et al., 2018). Women must take into consideration the progressive thinking of districts they apply to lead in, at the school or district level, in hopes of experiencing a work environment that may doubt the ability of women leaders less despite society valuing agentic leadership characteristics in general (Morillo, 2017).

In the role of district administrator or superintendent, women are subjected to greater scrutiny than their male counterparts related to their appearance, behaviors, actions, and still encounter inappropriate family-based interview questions (Superville, 2016). Bernal et al., (2017) reported an aspiring female superintendent being told by a male colleague that applying for a high school district superintendent position was not practical for a mother with children. In addition, Fennell (2008) reported in a life history study of a female principal that school and district staff attributed her being selected as a school principal to sleeping with the superintendent. Weiner and Burton (2016) reported women received more negative feedback participating in an administrator preparation program on what jewelry not to wear and to curb nonverbal communication as compared to feedback that built on leadership strengths of the male participants to refine communication and school improvement vision. These overt gender biased words and actions can promote a feeling of inequality among women in executive level leadership

positions. This perpetuates the feeling that women must work harder, be stronger, and look the part at all times to be considered effective at their job (Bernal et al., 2017; Morrillo, 2017).

More covert gender bias is evidenced through unwritten rules for women in educational leadership roles due to the fact networking groups are predominantly male (Bernal et al, 2017). Research suggests their ideas are dismissed more easily and are given tasks such as scribing information for the group (Fennell, 2008; Halley 2020). Gender discrimination was identified by 50% of female superintendents in Minnesota and 77% of female superintendents in Indiana (Wyland, 2016). These unwritten rules lead women to experience professional victim syndrome at higher rates in which their professional and personal reputation are being damaged by external or political forces. Gresham and Sampson (2019) support these experiences in reporting that gender inequity is experienced by women through stereotyping, discrimination, and being treated differently due to their gender. Gender equity and leadership development focused on a masculine agentic perspective can position men to be viewed as more suitable for leadership and experience a direct path to leadership positions as compared to the variety and complexity of roles women have access to and are positioned to take from the start of their career (Weiner & Burton, 2016; Brunner & Kim, 2010).

Pathways to Leadership for Women

The pathway to leadership for women is different and takes longer despite the abundance of women in the classroom. The pathway to executive level leadership positions in education is still a pattern for success based on the trajectories of men (Brunner & Kim, 2016). Weiner and Burton (2016) reported that females seeking

principal positions after participating in an educational leadership development cohort were informed of not being ready for the role as compared to men in the group that were hired very quickly and with little feedback. Muñoz, Mills, Pankake, et al. (2014) surveyed female and male central office administrators on superintendent career aspirations finding that males had a 70% success rate in securing a superintendent position as compared to women at 22.6%. Brunner and Kim (2010) reported that men most often start as a secondary teacher and athletic coach then move to assistant secondary principal, secondary principal and then superintendent.

The majority of women in the classroom could indicate women are pre-positioned to apply for and be selected for leadership roles, but men still lead in the role of high school principal which is a common pathway role formerly held by superintendents (Kruse & Krumm, 2016; Logan 1998). The path for women is different because they are more likely to hold elementary or curriculum level positions which are not common pathways to the superintendency (Tarbutton, 2019). On the road to a principal position, men and women have similar experiences related to being a content department lead, a club sponsor, or holding an assistant principal position, but men are promoted more quickly to the principal role as compared to women (Maranto, et al., 2018). In an assistant principal role, women are less likely to be promoted to the principal role and spend more time in a support principal specifically at the high school level as compared to men (Bailes & Guthery, 2020).

The role of high school principal tends be a commonly held position for males who become superintendents based on the idea that masculine leadership is needed to manage a large staff of adults, to oversee more facilities, and to be more visible in the

community which is in direct contrast of female principals who primarily have a background in curriculum (Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Maranto, et al., 2018). In addition, Bailes and Guthery (2020) found women were most often promoted to elementary and middle school principal roles from a support principal position, but high school principal positions were most often obtained by men. This is supported by the research of Gresham and Sampson (2019) which found that a small number of women apply and are selected for the high school principal role, but the common denominator of women superintendents is serving as a former elementary principal and assistant superintendent. Another career barrier that women experience is obtaining staff positions at central office as compared to a line position which can hinder promotion due to these positions being perceived as having less power, prestige, and visibility (Brunner & Kim, 2010; Robinson et al., 2017; Young, 2005).

The path for women can require more time as women superintendents have worked their way through the ranks starting in the classroom, moving to the principal role, and then serving in a central office role or district coordinator as compared to some men who sidestep working at central office into a superintendent's role (Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Robinson et al., 2017). Women are more likely to obtain the superintendency position through encouragement of district staff, being approached to apply for the position, having favorable support of one or more board members, being a part of the district's succession plan, or through an unplanned promotion due to resignation or retirement (Kowalski & Stouder, 1999; Morillo, 2017). Simons (2020) found that female teachers most often consider a principal role after being asked or nudged by their direct supervisor to consider a leadership role. To provide women with

authentic access to be considered a high-quality candidate for executive level leadership positions, alternative pathways to leadership need to be recognized and valued by educators, board members, and communities along with a historical evaluation of promotion rates within school rates as it relates to gender (Bailes & Guthery, 2020; Tarbutton, 2019).

Superintendents identify instructional leadership as a key characteristic as to why an individual is selected for the position by board members, but superintendent evaluations do not reflect academic learning as a top priority as compared to district climate and culture, student safety, and the board-superintendent relationship (Maranto, et al., 2018; Brunner & Kim, 2010; Grogan & Brunner, 2005). In addition, 50% of women believe they are hired to the superintendent role based on curriculum and instruction knowledge combined with experience as compared to men who view their success being hired based on personal traits combined with previous experiences (Robinson et al., 2017). If instructional leadership is an essential skill in executive level leadership positions, this creates a gender equity issue with pathways to leadership for women who most often spend more years in the classroom teaching, held the role of master teacher, and held instructional positions at the district level as compared to men before pursuing leadership (Maranto et al., 2018; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Maranto et al., 2018, Robinson et al., 2017).

A survey conducted by Brunner and Kim (2010) found that 40% of women in central office positions had the credentials and aspired to be a superintendent indicating superintendent candidates are available. The knowledge women gain through their experiences, taking a more complex path to leadership, may position women to have an

advantage in preparation for executive level leadership positions as compared to their male counterparts (Brunner & Kim 2010). However, according to Tarbutton (2019) "men advance from entry-level leadership positions to advanced leadership positions at an accelerated rate compared to women" (p. 20). Evidence indicates women have found accessing assistant superintendent and superintendent positions more often comes through a district level director or supervisor position, to expand their repertoire of administrative experiences, as compared to men who are more likely to transition from a principal to an initial superintendency position (Sperandio, 2015). The variety of roles women hold and the experiences they encounter along the way to executive level leadership can set them up to bring a unique skillset to the leadership role along with increased professional preparation (Spencer & Kochan, 2000; Tarbutton, 2019).

Perceptions of Female Leaders

Companies with women in high level leadership positions consistently report increased employee satisfaction and an organizational culture of a growth mindset because female leaders have high competence in building relationships, growing and developing teams, focusing on results, inspiring and motivating employees, and demonstrating high levels of honesty and integrity (Tarbutton, 2019). In 2016, Fortune 500 companies appointed 37% of open board of director positions to females which is still below the percentage of school districts being led by female superintendents in 2020 (Steffee, 2017; Tienken & Domenech, 2020; Young, 2005;). Although women continue to experience gender equity leadership challenges in corporate America, the number of female superintendents and females in line positions at central office indicate the glass ceiling is more prevalent in K-12 school systems (Maranto, et al., 2018). The dominant

culture of masculine leadership still prevails in business and education which speaks to the separate, but collective concept of a gender role in a leadership role (Billing & Alvesson, 2000; Halley, 2020).

Billing and Alvesson (2000) reported that women managers share similar values as men in their organizations speaking to the acceptance of male norms by females in leadership roles, but females demonstrate a higher level of commitment to themselves, their work, and subordinates. Begum et al. (2018) conducted a study in which women leaders demonstrated more characteristics of the preferred leadership style of transformational leadership. This is supported by findings of successful female leadership that included a strong sense of vision, practiced collaboration and power sharing, demonstrated appreciation for others, strong commitment, and development of others (Begum et al., 2018; Billing & Alvesson, 2000; Fennell, 2008). Netto (2020) analyzed teacher perceptions on principal effectiveness in regards to leader style which found that males demonstrated more transactional leadership behaviors as compared to women principals.

Simons (2020) conducted a case study on a female principal who practiced communal leadership by creating a school work environment focused on learning, collaboration, communication, visioning, shared decision-making, and community expectations that developed leadership capacities in teachers they had never previously experienced. Shaw and Newtown (2014) reported teacher job satisfaction and teacher retention was higher in schools led by school leaders that utilized servant leadership by offering development and demonstrating encouragement. As more educational leaders push toward transformational, communal, and servant leadership styles, women may be

set up to utilize stereotypical feminine leadership characteristics of nurturing, caring, and listening which can hinder the perception of being a credible leader (MacKinnon 2019; O'Rourke & Papalewis, 1989). Gresham and Sampson (2019) found themes associated with female superintendent leadership described as collaborative, nurturing, transformational, and situational which was viewed negatively because these female leaders are more open to criticism by using a participatory leadership style. Although schools and districts are looking for leaders with leadership characteristics more aligned with female leaders, the mere fact of being female is still a hindrance along with women having to strike a balance displaying male and female leadership traits (Halley, 2020; Robinson et al., 2017; Young, 2005).

The perception of women's responsibilities is also attached to how they act and behave in a leadership role by the experiences found by MacKinnon (2019) in which a female principal wished she were a man when she realized expectations of her were different as compared to the male principal she replaced. Female leaders are expected to be friendly and caring in their leadership style and will be viewed as cold, distant, or arrogant if they do not display empathetic characteristics (Grogan, 2005). Women can be encouraged to tone down communal leadership traits in their leadership stance and communication to set an orderly tone which then double binds female leaders to stay away from being perceived as pushy (Wiener & Burton, 2016). The behavior of female superintendents is translated differently as compared to male superintendents, such as an assertive female being described as aggressive, but an aggressive male being described as assertive (VanTuyle & Watkins, 2009).

Strategically navigating accomplishing positive outcomes in a leadership role as a woman is described by a female superintendent saying "in order to get people to do things or to tell them they can't do things, females cannot be as outwardly assertive as a man...so my challenge was how to do that" (Connell et al., 2015). Women walk a tightrope in leadership roles because they must demonstrate self-confidence to gain respect from staff and colleagues, but too much confidence is viewed negatively as compared to male leaders demonstrating high levels of confidence (de Casal & Mulligan, 2004). This is confirmed by Halley (2020) in which women district leaders felt they had to code-switch to more masculine leadership behaviors by changing their appearance in regards to dress, imitating male colleague body language and communication styles, and presuming a power-centered disposition by downplaying emotions in certain situations.

Instructional leadership has become the main focus of schools, districts, and boards of education amidst the wide range of responsibilities that educational leaderships roles are charged to implement and oversee. Perceptions from male and female teachers indicate that female high school principals are more skilled at framing and communicating school goals, coordinating curriculum, implementing teacher and student incentives, being highly visible, protecting instructional time, monitoring student progress, and evaluating teachers as compared to male high school principals (Nogay & Beebe, 2008). Catlett (2017) found that women district leaders utilize more participatory leadership styles that provide stakeholders input on new initiatives and are able to increase staff ownership of overall improvement outcomes which is in contrast with a more top down approach utilized in masculine leadership practices.

Women administrators are perceived to have higher standards, tougher with students, and not as respected as male administrators, they are also perceived to understand students better along with being more approachable, understanding, supportive, organized, open-minded, and innovative as compared to their male peers (Adams & Hambright, 2004). Hutton (2017) conducted a qualitative study on principal performance comparing male and females finding that stakeholders rated female principals higher in leadership and management, student support systems, personal abilities, and community relationships and support. However, Netto (2020) reported that elementary teachers rated male principals more effective than female principals despite exhibiting preferred leadership characteristics (Begum et al., 2018).

The perceptions of women as educational leaders can attribute to them being perceived as not as ready or less effective, as compared to male leaders due to previous work experience (Kruse & Krumm, 2016). Halley (2020) reported that female district leaders "indicate respect is not automatically given to them along with the position of authority" (p. 49) which is the opposite they observe of their male peers. Young (2005) found that superintendent search committees and firms associate desired leadership characteristics more aligned to male candidates as compared to female candidates. In addition, superintendent search firms are most often staffed with retired male superintendents which could perpetuate the gender role perception in a leadership role for women (VanTuyle & Watkins, 2009). Due to the professional path women leaders take and experience on their journey to executive level leadership positions, it is essential for any female aspiring school or district leader to have support as they navigate gender

equity challenges through mentoring which has been identified as a success strategy for women (Nix, 2021).

Current State of Mentoring

Mentoring and leadership are partners to building leadership capacity in education because most often a novice leader is matched with an experienced leader to help develop personal and professional growth related to developing knowledge and skills in leading (Bertrand et al., 2018). Mentoring can occur through informal methods to provide in the moment support and guidance with limited structure (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014). Augustine-Shaw and Funk (2013) found a formal mentoring program provided first year superintendents with self-confidence, networking, a consistent support system, and reflective practice as they navigated their first year. Smith (2019) studied Kentucky's cohort induction program for first year superintendents finding that participants perceived their assigned mentors as just as important as fellow cohort members throughout their first year and into the future. Weiner and Burton (2016) suggests that aspiring school leaders are greatly impacted by assigned mentors early on in the relationship and throughout the mentoring experience based on feedback from mentees in their study. Bertrand et al., (2018) conducted a study to examine the perspectives of early career principals in a mentoring programing finding that participants gained more from the mentor-mentee relationship based on mentors having similar past experiences and were close in location to the mentee for face to face meetings.

For a mentoring relationship to be successful, a purposeful plan has to be developed by matching mentors to mentees selectively based on self-awareness, personal values, and beliefs while ensuring structures are in place for continued development,

growth and transformation of the mentor-mentee relationship (Newcomb, 2011).

Specifically for female educational leaders, women pinpoint a system of support that

includes mentoring as essential to their success and longevity in leadership roles (Grogan

& Brunner, 2005; Morillo, 2017; Sampson, 2018). Informal mentoring can happen as a

form of support for women when a female leader is prompted to provide growth and

development opportunities when seeing similarities between themselves and a mentee

early in her career (Dunbar & Kinnersley, 2011).

Research indicates there is a lack of support for women educational leaders as

compared to their male counterparts as Reed and Patterson (2007) found mentors for

women came in the form of a school attorney, colleagues, and those outside of the

education profession. The AASA 2015 Mid-Decade Study reported a decrease in

mentoring for women and further identified the support was more passive and informal

(Robinson et al., 2017). Morillo (2017) confirms mentoring as more passive support in

that female superintendents had sponsors which treated them more like daughters or

provided them with opportunities beyond their job which was viewed in some ways as

handing over tasks to be completed. Preparation for women, related to gender issues, in

executive level leadership positions is found to be non-existent in mentoring and

leadership programs considering leadership style emphasize agentic characteristics

(O'Rourke & Papalewis, 1989; Skrla, et al., 2000; Wiener & Burton, 2016). Women can

have male mentors and many do, but men cannot guide women to navigate the female

stereotypes they may experience in leadership (Mahmood, 2015).

Women educational leaders have fewer professional networking opportunities

with women in similar positions because they spend most of their networking time in

predominantly male groups (Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Smith, 2019; VanTuyle & Watkins, 2009). This is supported by findings from participants in a first-year superintendent cohort mentoring program described by Smith (2019) as "an informal fraternity of experienced superintendents who also serve as a resource to those in need." Muñoz, Pankake, Ramalho, et al. (2014) conducted a study of female central office administrators aspiring to be superintendents which indicated that it was crucial for their mentors to be invested in them, have influence, and use power relationships to realistically coordinate opportunities for these women to achieve their goals. Support systems are crucial for any individual in an executive level leadership position, but research indicates females seeking to hold these positions are interested in being in a mentoring relationship and believe a female mentor provides a foundation for a more effective mentoring relationship (Dunbar & Kinnersley, 2011). Limited mentoring opportunities for women is evidenced by female superintendents seeking authentic support systems after obtaining a position due to a small number of mentors and role models (Gresham & Sampson, 2019).

Kruse and Krumm (2016) reported that women leaders identified nurturing from mentors as an essential need for women leaders in their personal and professional life when transitioning from the classroom to leadership which included male allies that served as opportunity gatekeepers. Copeland and Calhoun (2014) reported that 84.6% of female superintendents studied had a consistent mentor when becoming superintendent and overall data indicated one aspect of success was being mentored by another female. Other sources of support reported by emerging and current female leaders included a mother, both parents, a teacher, a former principal, staff, students, families in

the communities they served, and groups within professional networks (Arriaga, et al., 2019; de Casal & Mulligan, 2004). The support mentoring provides can help aspiring female leaders find their own leadership style which was found to be important as evidenced by Kruse and Krumm (2016) in the success of female principals. Mentoring programs for aspiring and practicing women educational leaders are an area of need due to lack of role models which can contribute to limited support of teacher to administrator pipeline programs, increase feelings of frustration, and cause a lack of self-efficacy for women (Litmanovitz, 2016; Weiner & Burton, 2016).

Mentoring Benefits for Women

As leaders live in any leadership position, there are many lessons that are learned through triumphs and challenges, but especially for a female leader living in a man's leadership world. Networking and mentoring go hand-in-hand as aspiring female educational leaders climb the career ladder. This can disadvantage women in some ways as research indicates women spend less time networking as compared to their male colleagues (Elias, 2018).

Copeland and Calhoun (2014) conducted a survey of female superintendents who had participated in a mentoring program and reported benefits of the program allowing them to have a support system in their district, access to formal and informal mentoring, and the longevity of the mentoring relationships beyond the program for continued support and success in their role. In addition, two participants assigned a male mentor sought out female mentors as their main source of support as one superintendent stated, "I leaned heavily on other female superintendents because I felt like sometimes some of the same issues may not be the same for a male superintendent" (Copeland & Calhoun,

2014, p. 39). For first year female superintendents, a mentor has been found to be a significant determinant for successful entry to the position and continued achievement over time which indicates that implementing mentoring programs earlier in an aspiring female leader's career could level the playing field for access of women in executive level leadership positions (Connell, et al., 2015; Muñoz, Mills, Pankake, et al., 2014).

Mentoring can also support reasons why women choose to apply for executive level leadership positions in education. Women apply for the superintendency because it is a leadership opportunity and to promote self-development and growth as compared to men who are attracted to the position for a sense of achievement and financial aspects (Muñoz, Mills, Pankake, et al., 2014; Smith, 2019). Connell et al. (2015) reported that women who experienced mentoring throughout their leadership journey to the superintendency were able to increase their knowledge in multiple areas of leadership such as budgeting, dealing with controversy, and other areas of personalized need. Mentoring can also support women in their leadership roles by helping them lead strategically without sacrificing core values and beliefs (Wyland, 2016). Mentors open the doors for the leadership opportunity as one participant stated, "He encouraged the board to recruit me to be their superintendent" (Connell, et al., 2015, p. 48) which can positively affect the career trajectory of women into executive level leadership positions.

Encouragement for women who aspire or hold executive level leadership positions is a benefit of mentoring to increase confidence (Connell, et al., 2015; Wyland, 2016) Women in executive level leadership positions value those who will care and support them through the thick and thin while being a reliable source of guidance (Reed & Patterson, 2007). Augustine-Shaw and Funk (2013) reported that reassurance and

encouragement through mentoring were crucial for the success of first year

superintendents. For women, encouragement comes from more than just being provided

leadership opportunities, but from being involved in a mentoring relationship where

problem solving occurs, accountability is present, personal connection is valued,

reassurance is provided, and moral support lives (Fennell, 2008). These types of

mentoring relationships can benefit women in central office line positions to the

superintendency by increasing their self-confidence and self-image for increased

professional performance through improvement strategies and reflection for intellectual

support (Key et al., 2015).

Prior studies have found that women aspiring to obtain or hold executive level

leadership positions need mentoring to gain access and be successful in these roles, but

also indicate women have decreased access to female mentors and networking

opportunities because of a lack of role models (Connell, et al., 2015; Gresham &

Sampson, 2019; Muñoz, Mills, Pankake, et al., 2014). Mentoring patterns for women are

more focused on identification of their potential leadership abilities with increased

opportunities to lead, but lack in authentic, personalized growth and development that

promote emotional and intellectual support as a female leader (Key et al., 2015; Muñoz,

Pankake, Ramalho, et al., 2014). For mentoring to benefit and assist in breaking down

gender barriers for women to executive level leadership positions, mentors must have

influential power as well as the ability to empower their mentees (Muñoz, Pankake,

Ramalho, et al., 2014). In addition, as mentoring provides aspiring or current female

leaders with more skills and confidence this only increases their awareness and ability to

pay it forward by mentoring future female leaders to help further close the leadership gap for women (Morillo, 2017; Newcomb, 2011).

Summary of Literature Review

The path leading to educational leadership opportunities has been an arduous road in history for women. As society began to depend on women to fulfill the duties of men, the curtain was raised for women to begin to evaluate their own potential, abilities, and rights. Despite women gaining abilities to participate in a democracy, the education of women still faced opposition. Common schools and seminaries birthed the acceptance of women into education, but based on the female stereotype of motherhood as the most rational choice as teacher. Women have endured oppression under the guise of male-dominated ideologies and supervision from accessing formal schooling, to educating children in the classroom, and now as they master the world of educational leadership (Dentith & Peterlin, 2016; Madigan, 2009; Matthew, 1976; O'Rourke & Papalewis, 1989; Smith, 2021)

In the twenty-first century, education persists with a bewildering gender gap in executive levels of leadership considering education positions are majority female. The literature supports the idea of being female is a hindrance to the top tier positions in education based on gender stereotypes that continue to impact women in their professional goals. Just as the road to accessing education was difficult for women, the pathways women take along their professional journey can naturally set them up for disadvantage based on their entry point at the start of their career as research indicates. As women intentionally navigate their professional path in education into leadership, masculine ideologies of leadership plague women as they lead balancing the perceptions

of women leaders by staff, peers, board members, and communities (Glass, 2000; Grogan, 2008; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Gungor & Mericelli, 2020; Litmanovitz, 2016; MacKinnon, 2019; Morillo, 2017; Young, 2005).

For women educators to be successful in executive level leadership positions, improved structured support systems need to be implemented that foster a productive, positive relationship for sustainable formal and informal mentoring. In addition, aspiring female leaders need mentors who can provide personalized professional growth opportunities and open doors for career advancement opportunities while embedding the challenges of being a woman in a leadership role that is historically based on masculine principles (Connell et al., 2015; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Key et al., 2015; Kruse & Krumm, 2016; Munoz, Pankake, Ramalho et al., 2014; Wyland, 2016)

This literature review provides a perspective on understanding where women educators have been socially situated in history that have contributed to the perceptions and challenges women face in pursuing executive level educational leadership positions. There is little research on how these experiences can be utilized as a source of growth and development through mentoring to close the gender gap in executive level leadership positions for current and future female educational leaders. The findings of this study provide insight for professional organizations, higher education institutions, superintendent search firms, school boards, and school districts to understand the challenges women in education face, implement strategies to dismantle gender barriers for women, and provide structured, sustainable mentoring practices for aspiring and current executive level female leaders.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

In this study, I explored the perceptions, challenges, and lived experiences of women holding an executive level educational leadership position in the state of Kentucky and to inform mentoring strategies specifically tailored for women. I was seeking to understand how these perceptions and experiences affect women as they seek to obtain and remain in an executive level leadership position. In addition, I aimed to learn of specialized support strategies women may need from the perceptions of women in executive level leadership positions to combat challenges and obstacles associated with gender. The three research questions which guided this study were:

1. What have women in educational leadership perceived as challenges, related to their lived experiences, as they sought executive level leadership roles?

2. What experiences, formal or informal, have supported women in education leadership as they progress through executive level leadership positions?

3. How might experiences that support women in educational leadership be tailored as they progress through executive level leadership roles?

The purpose of Chapter 3 is to detail the research procedures that I used to answer the research questions regarding perceptions, lived experiences, and challenges of women in executive level educational leadership positions to inform mentoring strategies. In terms of structure, I organized the chapter as follows. First, I began by identifying and justifying the selection of my research design (a qualitative multiple case study) and the

limitations of this approach. I then discuss the data source and aligned data collection strategies that I used to procure my data. I gave thorough consideration to the ethical considerations in collecting data from participants. I also discuss the process by which I analyzed the data collected. In addition, I review the process by which I explored my positionality and relationship to the study as a female researcher holding an executive level educational leadership position. Lastly, I address the strategies by which I safeguarded credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings generated from the study.

Research Design

Creswell and Poth (2018) explain that qualitative research gives closer consideration to interpretive exploration based on where the researcher situates the study and their reflexivity in the accounts. Hancock and Algozzine (2017) describe the design of qualitative research as a process to illustrate a deeper understanding of a topic through investigation in a natural context. This hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study is rooted in seeking to uncover the human experience through participants' lived experiences and interpretations of these experiences creating socially constructed realities (Hatch, 2002). Therefore, I took a sociological case study approach "that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources" (Baxter & Jack, 2015, p. 544; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Baxter and Jack (2015, p. 556) explain that case studies "enable the researcher to answer "how" and "why" type questions, while taking into consideration how a phenomenon is influenced by the context". Specifically, I utilized a multiple case study approach to allow for the phenomenon to be illustrated and exposed through multiple perspectives by combining

information from individual cases (Baxter & Jack, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017).

A bounded context is set to serve as "parameters" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 97) for case study research, so the researcher can focus the study on what will and will not be studied along with a location, timeframe, space, or other construct (Baxter & Jack, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). In this study, the bounded context was location, time, and population specific to women who currently hold executive level leadership positions across school districts in the state of Kentucky and hold membership in KWEL. In this study, a multiple case research design in which each individual case was set in a different setting allows a comparison of the phenomenon to be studied within and across settings (Baxter & Jack, 2015; Yin, 2018).

Yin (2018) identifies the development of a theoretical proposition as an essential characteristic to case study research to govern the design, collection of data, and data analysis. In my study, feminist standpoint theory was used as the premise and informing theory to explore and understand the phenomenon. I compiled the perceptions of women who hold executive level leadership positions to understand their impact on decision-making processes and career decisions through participant experiences and viewpoints. In addition, I made meaning of the perceptions and experiences to inform mentoring strategies that women need to overcome perceived challenges.

Strengths and Limitations

The term, case study, can create concerns for researchers because it can be used to describe non-research studies that lack a prescribed research design or method (Yin, 2018). Case study "is a distinctive mode of social science inquiry" (Yin, 2018, p. 18), but

can be viewed as less advantageous as compared to other research methods. The concept of rigor has historically been a contention with case study research primarily due to researchers not utilizing systematic procedures when conducting studies, but case study has increased in acceptance and approval within published research over the last three decades (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018).

Case study research is advantageous because it is an investigation of a real-life topic or issue that involves collecting data through multiple sources and has been used across many disciplines connected to anthropology and sociology origination (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, when multiple sources of data are interpreted through a theoretical proposition, researchers can use analytical generalizations, in case study research, to mimic statistical generalizations in quantitative studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Rigorous case study research is discerned through the criteria of reliability, construct validity, internal validity, and external validity when designing and conducting the study for trustworthiness (Yin, 2018). In this study, the strengths of using a multiple case study as my research design was tied to using multiple sources of data, pattern identification, theory proposition, reasoning replication, external reviewers, and protocols for evidence collection and analysis.

Data Sources

Data sources included interviews of female executive level leaders who hold an executive level leadership position in the state of Kentucky, who hold a superintendent or instructional leadership certification in a position to oversee district or school leadership operations or departments, and are a member of KWEL. The process of collecting data through interviews allowed me to "uncover the meaning structures that participants use to

organize their experiences and make sense of their worlds" (Hatch, 2002, p. 91). I

employed semi-structured interviews that include guided, but adjustable questions so that

participant responses can elicit deeper exploration and understanding based on leads from

answers (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Hatch, 2002). This type of interview is structured

because the event is pre-planned with participants for a specific date and time and will be

recorded (Hatch, 2002). This qualitative case study research used semi-structured

interviews so participants could voice their perceptions and experiences candidly to

interpret their own perspectives without interviewer perspectives (Hancock & Algozzine,

2017). The sampling strategy I applied for the semi-structured interviews was multiple-

case, purposeful sampling to inform findings through comparison of similar and

contrasting cases to provide insight into the how and why aligned to my research

questions (Miles et al., 2014).

Data Collection Procedures

The primary data collection method employed was a semi-structured interview to

answer my research questions. Data collection procedures for using semi-structured

interviews were founded on outcomes of interviewing related to participant explanations

of the present and past, future predictions, member checking, and verification of

information compared across interviews (Hatch, 2002)*.* A semi-structured interview was

implemented because it is more suitable for case study research with predetermined

questions, but also allows the researcher to ask follow-up questions to delve into a deeper

meaning highlighted by participants (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). I identified 10

women who hold executive level leadership positions in schools districts across the state

of Kentucky with knowledge, experience, and viewpoints related to the research

questions below. An interview protocol (Appendix A) was established ahead of time with a purpose statement, theoretical framework, research method, and focused on the research questions.

The purpose of developing the interview questions ahead of time was to ensure consistency between participants and allow follow-up questions for further clarification or understanding (Mertler, 2019). In addition, the developed questions were clear and concise, but also encouraged participants to be involved in a conversation around the phenomenon (Hatch, 2002; Mertler, 2019). A combination of essential, extra, and throw-away questions were created to help in focusing questions on the phenomenon, exploring areas of importance more in-depth, and to put the participant at ease from the start with context or demographic questions (Hatch, 2002). The setting of interviews was taken into consideration based on participant choice due to geographical location and comfort level for the interviewee and occurred by phone or through a virtual platform. Hancock and Algozzine (2017) explain that a secure and interference free location for interviewees will allow a more relaxed setting and increase "the likelihood of attaining high-quality information" (p. 47).

Approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at University of Louisville was gained before contacting research participants to begin study procedures. After approval was achieved, I contacted potential study participants by email to give them information about my study in regard to purpose, process, anonymity safeguards, and collaboration with them throughout the data collection process to protect them from any type of social or emotional harm. This initial contact served to provide participants with general information about the study, why they were selected, what to expect, and next

steps after the interview occurs. In addition, I offered to answer any questions and send them a follow-up email with information discussed in the phone call as well. If contacted potential participants were interested in participating, I emailed or mailed (per their request) an informed consent document (Appendix B). Potential participants also had the opportunity to ask questions regarding the informed consent document with me.

Ethical Considerations

Attention to ethical considerations is a necessity in qualitative research from initial planning of a study, during the study, after the study, and final publication of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). When participants agree to be a part of a qualitative research study, they are giving up their own time and providing researchers an open door into their feelings, trust, beliefs, and values which can impact an individual's emotional security. The ethical consideration of who is benefiting from the study has the potential to be the nucleus of the level of participation required by participants to ensure an overall ethical stance is taken by the researcher (Hatch, 2002).

Consideration of ethical issues that could potentially arise throughout different phases of a study must be planned for proactively (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Hatch (2002) suggests researchers need to think about why they are conducting the study or research to reflect on the overall ethical purpose of the study. As I think about the reason for the study I conducted, my goal was to understand what women perceive, feel, and experience in their social context when holding an executive level leadership position to inform improved mentoring practices for aspiring women leaders in education. Creswell and Poth (2018) discuss the necessity of contacting the participant(s) to disclose the purpose of the study and obtaining informed consent when beginning a study. To address this

ethical consideration, I gained informed consent from participants prior to interviews by sharing the purpose of the research study and ensuring confidentiality and anonymity.

Ethical issues can arise regarding confidentiality and power imbalance between the interviewer and participant due to the nature of the interviewing process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I asked interview questions in a straightforward manner, with the goal of asking non-leading questions, and only having the participant elaborate on answers already given for more clarification to limit any power imbalance between the interviewee and myself. Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that study information should be shared with participants but allowing participants to review and give reactions to their answers and interpretations is part of qualitative data analysis (Hatch, 2002). I shared interview data with participants after the interview data was transcribed for individual approval and adjustments for member checking.

I also employed a Structured Ethical Reflection (Appendix B) process to identify values aligned to my research questions because I felt this would help me navigate the challenges of the vast number of available values (Stevens, et al., 2016). The values I selected are respect, self-awareness, trust, transparency, open-mindedness, justice, and integrity. I felt these values were important for interactions with participants, collecting data through interviews, conducting data analysis independently and collaboratively with participants, and data interpretation. Overall, focusing on these values at the start of my research study allowed me insight into the trustworthiness and reliability of my study.

Data Analysis

Hatch (2002) describes data analysis as a search for meaning using a systematic process so that data can be organized and examined to discover themes, patterns,

relationships, or interpretations. Data analysis includes asking questions of the data as well as finding logical depictions and explanations that encompass variance and voids in phenomenon (Hatch, 2002; Miles et al., 2014). Data analysis actions consist of assigning codes or themes, isolating patterns, journaling reflections, memoing, and creating generalizations from sets of assertions for comparing conjectures to form an idea (Miles et al., 2014).

Coding is an interpretive process that "can summarize, distill, or condense data (Saldaña, 2016, p. 5) through a word or short expression to give meaning or description of language or text data. Coding serves as the language between the data collected and the interpretive meaning of the data that occurs through first and second coding cycles (Saldaña, 2016). Coding serves to prepare the data for analysis, but it also "is a form of early and continuing analysis" (Miles et al, 2014, p. 93) that allows the researcher to metamorphose his or her perspective. Overall the coding process reveals patterns or trends in the lives of people which creates "concrete instances of meaning" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 6) for trustworthy evidence.

More specifically, an inductive approach was utilized at the start of data collection so that first and second coding cycles along with continued data analysis from specific to general reveal repeating experiences to discover repetitive relationships (Hatch, 2002; Miles et al., 2014). Hatch (2002) states "inductive data analysis is a search for patterns of meaning in data so that general statements about phenomena under investigation can be made (p. 161). Implementing the inductive process allowed me to start with a frame of analysis grounded in the purpose of the study and my research

questions so that as data was read multiple times new insights or concerns elicited a "causal network" (Miles et al, 2014, p. 238) at the end (Hatch, 2002).

Interview Data Analysis

Analysis of the data began once interviews concluded by transcribing them to produce written texts. I used a modified version of a self-reflective strategy by summarizing sections of the transcripts of what I interpreted participants to say and then noted my emotions to cast a light on potential hidden bias based on similar experiences that match the participants (Medico & Santiago-Delefosse, 2014). This strategy was crucial because of my analytical lens to "perceive and interpret what is happening in the data depends on what type of filter covers that lens" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 7). In addition, throughout data analysis, I maintained grounded within the research questions of the study to code and recode through first, second, and third cycle coding methods, as appropriate.

Next, I coded the qualitative interview data. Coding is used by the researcher to generate words or phrases to categorize data to assist with interpretation, patterns, categories, etc. (Saldaña, 2016). The first step in my coding process was to employ initial coding or open coding analysis by rereading each transcript, line by line, highlighting direct quotations from the participants, and assigning an open code for first cycle coding. A combination of first cycle coding methods was implemented such as descriptive, in vivo, emotion, and/or process coding to understand and describe participant emotions, actions, and experiences as women holding executive level leadership positions using their own language. Initial coding was used to break down the data into distinct parts to help me compare the data along the way while allowing a variety of codes to appear so

that the direction of the study becomes clearer (Saldaña, 2016). Through initial coding, I identified first impressions for continued data condensation seeing more focused, organized data to begin the second coding cycle (Miles, et al., 2014).

Second cycle coding began with axial coding used to identify similarities and differences so subcategories could be identified for further data condensation which expanded the analytical process that occurred with initial coding (Saldaña, 2016). Axial coding involved assigning new codes to the existing open codes "to strategically reassemble data that was split or fractured" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 244). The purpose of this was to help identify dominant themes and common experiences participants perceived to be challenges and similar experiences that cemented their career decisions along with the impact of support. In addition, axial coding helped determine which data was less important for overall reorganization of the data and create conceptual categories so the researcher can know all dimensions of how categories and subcategories are connected (Saldaña, 2016). After reviewing axial codes, coding reconciliation was completed through recoding and recategorization for final categorization of data by identifying the most pertinent categories "without distracted attention at this time to their properties and dimensions" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 240). At this point, themes were analyzed through the lens of feminist standpoint theory to answer the research questions.

Process for Exploring Researcher Positionality

An individual's positionality is based on a combination of ontological and epistemological assumptions along with suppositions about the way individuals interact and relate to their surroundings meaning that a researcher positions themselves in a way that can impact the method of research, outcomes, and findings. Therefore, it is essential

for researchers to not use their own perceptions to predetermine a participant's perspective (Holmes, 2020). This was something for me to consider because my positionality provides me a "double vision" by serving as an outsider within considering my current role as a female holding an executive level educational position (Bowell, n.d.). I am keenly aware of the issues that gender plays on the ladder of advancement based on personal experiences and shared experiences of others throughout my career. My double vision allows me to see what women aspiring to be leaders perceive and experience, as well as the experience of holding an executive level leadership position in education. Despite my positionality as a woman holding an executive level leadership role, I am a white, female leader. Because of this, I recognize that I will not fully understand the perceptions, lived experiences, and challenges of non-white women holding and progressing through executive level leadership positions. As a researcher, it was important for me to reveal my own positionality to understand my influence on my research as Holmes (2020, p.3) states, "Open and honest disclosure and exposition of positionality should show where and how the researcher believes that they have or may have influenced their research."

Another aspect of positionality that I considered as the researcher is understanding a conflict of membership as the researcher versus the professional, which could influence my results by my own emotions (Bille & Steenfeldt, 2013). Since I do hold the position of Assistant Superintendent, as a female, I worked to maintain awareness of my own thoughts and feelings as I conducted the research. Since I have not held a Superintendent position of a school district, I do lack in understanding the scope of professional experiences specific to that position. This allowed me to lean into the study

as a researcher, but my professional position also allowed me to have knowledge from the sidelines. In addition, I am actively involved in a state organization that is working towards supporting women in their leadership goals which is why the study is based on interpreting the perception and experiences for intentional mentoring to help women overcome obstacles. Using a reflexive approach throughout my research continued to open my eyes to my own bias and perceptions, so I could take them into consideration to be a more skilled researcher (Holmes, 2020). Engaging in self-reflection, was necessary before, during, and after the study which allowed my own implicit and explicit consciousness to be revealed "which can have bearing on an entire study" (Milner IV, 2007, p. 395).

Despite a personal interest in this topic, there are still disparities between the number of women in educational leadership positions as compared to men which needs to be improved. Due to this I took into account Milner's (2007) question, "How do I negotiate and balance my own interests and research agendas with those of my research participants, which may be inconsistent with or diverge from mine" (p. 395) throughout the data collection and analysis process. I addressed this issue by utilizing a modified version of a self-reflexive strategy for my study from the work of Medico and Santiago-Delefosse (2014) to understand my bias as my experiences meet the experiences of the study participants. The purpose of this strategy was to elicit resonances, which is to feel like the participants, by summarizing what I understood my participants to say and summarize my feelings of what was said by participants after reading transcribed interviews. The importance of defining resonance "allows us to bridge the gap between textual data, with its appearance of objective truth, and the impression that what must

really be understood is situated elsewhere" (Medico & Santiago-Delefosse, 2014, p. 354). Since my study was focused on making multiple meanings of a phenomenon, through an individual's experience and consciousness, this strategy allowed me to analyze my interview questions and other research details that could influence the process and results to promote a more valid and reliable study (Darawsheh, 2014).

Strategies for Validation, Reliability, and Trustworthiness

Validation, reliability, and trustworthiness are terms qualitative researchers use to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in naturalistic research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend two validation strategies for qualitative research which will be member checking and collaborating with participants for my study. Member checking occurred when transcribed interviews were provided to the interviewee to be reviewed for clarifications and accuracy to ensure a credible account of their perceptions and experiences which naturally elicits collaboration with participants.

The qualitative research study was reliable related to data processes so bias and errors could be minimized with explicit explanation of procedures through data collection and analysis (Yin, 2018). In addition, computer programs were used to record, transcribe and analyze the data along with gaining insight from expert coders within the axial coding process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Overall, my focus on reliability occurred by making "as many processes as explicit as possible" (Yin, 2018, p. 48) through in-depth description of data processes.

The case study research design included a variety of strategies that promoted a value of truth by nature (Baxter & Jack, 2015). Trustworthiness for the study was met by

illuminating an audit trail for the reader to "determine how far the data and constructs emerging from it may be accepted" (Shento, 2004, p. 72) to address dependability. The strategy of including a reflective description of my positionality as a researcher and explaining strengths and limitations of the research study created confirmability and credibility. In addition, a rich description of the study context supported transferability of the phenomenon so comparability is possible. Trustworthiness is essential and was preplanned by creation of protocols related to data collection and analysis to ensure a rigorous study employed before, during, and after the completion of my study (Amankwaa, 2016).

Summary

This chapter explains the research methods and procedures that were used to explore the perceptions, lived experiences, and challenges of women holding an executive level educational leadership position and to inform mentoring strategies specifically tailored for women. This chapter also described the prospective research design, data sources, data collection and analysis procedures within the study context. Lastly, this chapter gives insight into the proposed study's strengths and limitations, ethical considerations, and researcher positionality. The research questions and study findings are presented in Chapter 4. Finally, Chapter 5 summarizes the findings of my study and offers implications for future research and practice.

CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Despite improvements made towards gender equality in various occupations, women remain marginalized in the field of education obtaining and holding executive level leadership positions in the field of education. This perpetual gender gap in educational leadership elicits questions around how the current field of education can provide equal and equitable career advancement opportunities for women. Due to this, there is compelling need to explore the issue of gender inequity to support and further women's elevation in educational leadership. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions, challenges, and lived experiences of women holding an executive level leadership position in the Commonwealth of Kentucky and to inform mentoring strategies specifically tailored for women. The following chapter provides the findings of this phenomenological research study. The three research questions that guided my study are:

1. What have women in educational leadership perceived as challenges, related to their lived experiences, as they sought executive level leadership roles?

2. What experiences, formal or informal, have supported women in education leadership as they progress through executive level leadership positions?

3. How might experiences that support women in educational leadership be tailored as they progress through executive level leadership roles?

The organization of this chapter begins with a condensed review of the study design, data analysis process, and a collective participant description. A discussion of data themes is disclosed and explored to address findings for each research question.

Overview of Multiple Case Study Design and Data Analysis Process

Extracting and sense-making of an individual's lived experience is the foundation of gaining a deeper meaning into reality in the phenomenological process (Laverty, 2003). This multiple case study founded in phenomenology is focused on identifying a phenomenon of human experience to describe a common meaning across individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2018). In addition, a phenomenological study rooted in hermeneutics digs deeper to highlight the details and small aspects to not only create meaning through description of the what and how, but to achieve an understanding and meaning of the phenomenal through interpretation (Laverty, 2003). The approach of a multiple case study design rooted in hermeneutic phenomenology allowed interpretation of each participant's text to be analyzed, individually and collectively, so purpose and meaning was fully understood through the interrelationship between the conscious experience and the causes that account for the experience collectively (Creswell 2018; Moustakas, 1994). An inductive approach was utilized towards the multiple case study design so an overall understanding of the phenomena under examination could be made by finding patterns starting with individual case study data then moving to patterns across multiple cases through data condensation (Hatch, 2002).

Data collection began with conducting semi-structured interviews with ten participants who met study criteria of holding an executive level leadership position and

were members of the Kentucky Women in Educational Leadership (KWEL). The only data source were interview transcripts from each participant. As participants were interviewed, open coding occurred initially of each transcript from words or phrases. Open coding was used to designate labels for segments of data to identify recurring patterns so that "similar codes are clustered together to create a smaller number of categories" (Miles et al., 2014, pg. 73). The purpose of open coding is to discover the phenomenon under study by summarizing data segments. The open codes provided insight into the lived experiences through participants thoughts and feelings in their interview responses aligned to the research questions.

In second cycle coding, I devised axial codes to identify patterns from the open codes across all interview transcripts so the data could be reconstructed to make connections. Inductive and deductive reasoning was used through the second coding cycle so relationships could be found between existing and emerging codes to create categories aligned to the first research question. Throughout this process, re-coding of axial codes occurred through analysis to condense the data to create more refined codes for "sorting and labeling them into conceptual categories" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 245). I determined a third coding cycle, focused coding, was needed to categorize the data specifically for the second research question. The purpose of this was to classify the lived experiences related to the support women experienced through their professional leadership journey and existing roles. Through focused coding, categories were developed specific to support based on a conceptual category to understand formal and informal support experiences of women to understand more tailored support approaches from participant experiences (Saldaña, 2016). When condensing data for the third

research question, axial codes and focused codes were re-coded to gain a synthesized understanding. The recategorizing and re-coding process created a more integrated and centralized identification of themes that emerged throughout data condensation and analysis.

Collective Participant Description

The ten participants interviewed for the study were employed in an executive level leadership position in nine different school districts across the Commonwealth of Kentucky. Nine participants identified themselves as white with one identifying as black. The purposeful sample included participants that have membership in KWEL and represented the leadership roles of assistant principal, principal, director, supervisor, chief officer, assistant superintendent, and superintendent. Participants represented six rural school districts, two suburban school districts, and one urban school district.

All, but one participant had over 20 years of experience in K-12 public education. All participants began their professional career as an elementary, middle, or high school classroom teacher with five participants transitioning to executive level leadership into an assistant principal role from the classroom. Six interviewees transitioned to district leadership roles from a principal position. Participants interviewed in an executive level leadership position, at the district office, were working in curriculum and instruction with the exception of one. Four of the ten participants had experience as an instructional coach or school counselor on their path towards obtaining an executive level leadership position. Study participants collectively represented 24.2 years of experience across seven executive level leadership roles, at the school or district level, throughout their professional leadership journey including current role.

RQ1: Perceived Challenges in Seeking Executive Level Leadership Roles

The first research question was focused on understanding lived experiences specific to the perceived challenges of participants in seeking executive level leadership positions. Responses to interview questions provided insight into the challenges from each individual's understanding and discernment of situations. Analysis of participants' responses revealed a variety of different, but similar challenges resulting in themes across all cases. When assigning a consolidation of meaning to all experiences specific to challenges, Table 1 details the five main themes that emerged with the frequency to which similarities of participant experiences were identified among responses. Increased clarification of these challenges under each theme is described collectively to provide insight into the reality from their lived experiences.

Table 1

Axial Codes Aligned to RQ1

Axial Code Theme	Frequency
Double Standard	16
Gender	24
Job Role vs. Gender	18
Perception of Executive Leadership	20
Self-Confidence	15
Total	93

Double Standard

The theme of double standard became clear when condensing the data for the first research question connected to the perceptions female executive level leaders have developed from their lived experiences in comparison to colleagues. The concept of double standard is supported from previous research that women feel as though they are held to a different standard and expectation in a variety of aspects as compared to males in the same leadership roles (Grogan, 2005; Halley, 2020; MacKinnon, 2019; VanTuyle & Watkins, 2009). One participant perceived this idea of double standard stating "females have to accept the situation of doing more" to be considered for executive level leadership positions. As a collective group, study participants all described their aspirations to seek executive level leadership revolving around the idea of working hard and having the ability to handle more work. One participant stated, "women can't say no to extra work as a leader" in describing her view of how women leaders are challenged in this area to go through "extra hoops." A participant summed up the theme of double standard connected to perceived expectation of doing more by saying, "My leadership journey was putting in long hours day in and day out, as compared to male colleagues on the same level, and almost became expected of me to be considered for other leadership positions in my district."

Seven of ten executive level leaders interviewed shared their understanding associated with lived experiences of a double standard in their behaviors. One participant shared an experience of a female colleague, who in her early career began aspiring towards leadership, was told by peers "women that want a leadership role just want power." Two participants specifically shared experiences where they were held back due

to their strengths and assertiveness because they were told it made others "feel uncomfortable." Participants who held district executive level leadership roles explicitly discussed the double standard concept when holding people accountable or having a difficult conversation as a female leader. One participant stated she had been called "a bitch" more than once by individuals she was holding accountable along with one individual stating, "you are just a jealous, power hungry woman." One participant synthesized the perception of a double standard stating "there really is a lack of middle ground for female leader behaviors." This double standard that female executive level leaders experience can impact aspirations as one participant stated, "When women are held to a different standard, this pressure keeps them from aspiring early on because of the risk involved and unequal treatment."

Gender

Study participants provided insight into how gender still continues to be a challenge for women in seeking executive level leadership roles which is supported from previous research of female superintendents reporting their gender as a deterrent in obtaining a superintendent position (Kowalski & Stouder, 1999; Nix, 2021). One participant described the challenge of gender in seeking leadership positions as "being seen as a leader, not female." Another participant described overhearing a district leader state, "there is no way she could be a leader with such a young, feminine appearance." A similar situation was experienced by another participant in which she was discredited as an aspiring leader due to her age and appearance as a female. A more explicit example was shared by a participant explaining the frustration she felt when a male colleague told her he would not work for a woman after confiding in him about her intent to apply for a

leadership role in the district. Gender was identified as a challenge by participants from board members and parents. One participant described how gender was a challenge based on a personal experience when observing board members "pushing back on female leaders" being promoted to leadership positions by a male superintendent. Another participant stated that she knows of a "general dislike of females by a male board member."

Since boards members are elected to their seats from the community, the challenge of gender from community members was identified as an additional challenge and being "conscientious of our presence" as one participant stated. One participant shared an experience of a board member assuming she was the secretary that was tasked with taking notes while sitting in a meeting with a group of male colleagues. Participants described similar situations in which families and community members assumed the male assistant principal or male district leader would be applying for an open executive level leadership position. In these experiences, when participants informed the individual(s) they were applying for the open position there was an apology made, combined with an assumption that participants were not ready yet due to family responsibilities or time involved in the role. One participant described the challenge of gender as "an overall thinking women can't take on executive leadership" from those inside education and stakeholders outside of education.

These assumptions are connected to other lived experiences of participants specific to family responsibilities and pathways to leadership due to their gender. One participant shared their experience of being "ringside to conversations" where the discussion of female candidates being in their "childbearing stage of life" came up often

when hiring for executive level leadership positions. The overall perception that "teachers are female" along with gender even being a greater challenge at the high school level as compared to elementary was shared by six participants. Gender as a challenge to seeking and obtaining executive level leadership roles was the first prominent theme from participants' lived experiences and perceptions.

Job Role vs. Gender

The theme of gender, identified through data analysis, provided a perspective of participants as women seeking the role of leader. However, the theme of job role vs. gender provided deeper insight into the juxtaposition of seeking the role of leader combined with leader as female. The challenge of job role vs. gender was described by one participant as "job duties associated with gender predispositions" and experienced by another participant stating, "I have witnessed and experienced bias in seeking a position based on my gender in relation to an operations role."

Collectively, participants shared their frustration of having experience or being known as leaders of instruction or curriculum created a challenge in obtaining positions that contain "masculine perceived job duties." This was explained by one participant seeking a principal role being told "having limited knowledge of management and school budgeting experience" would be an issue due to primarily having worked in instruction. All participants discussed how jobs that dealt with student discipline, management, facilities, and budgeting were perceived to be male duties based on their lived experiences in seeking executive level leadership positions. One participant shared, "Combatting the perception of job roles connected to gender is necessary for women to have equal access to higher levels of leadership in public education."

Perception of Executive Leadership

The responses of participants revealed the perception of executive leadership as a challenge which developed over time from the start of their career combined with experiences as they aspired to seek and obtain an executive level leadership role throughout their career. Eight of the ten participants mentioned having a "disconnection from executive level leadership" early in their career that continued even into the assistant principal and principal role for three participants. This disconnect with executive level leadership created a perception of an "us vs. them" mentality as one participant described combined with intense feelings of fear. In addition, the perception of executive leadership was connected to being completely removed from students due to working in an office as compared to a classroom.

Through the interview process, participants shared how they gained a better understanding of executive level leadership that includes women as leaders at the school and district level as compared to their initial perceptions of males only to executive level leadership from observations and comments of colleagues. One participant visually described executive level leadership as a "lot of men" while another participant heard colleagues say "we need a male for this" when beginning the hiring process for a principal position. Overwhelmingly, all participants described the perception of executive level leadership as a challenge specific to the societal and educational existing mindset of leaders as male combined with it being a "boys club" or "good old boy system" as described by participants. The initial perception of participants was more individualized to their context, but over time a shared perspective was derived. As a participant stated, "Perceiving leadership as male continues to be a challenge for women seeking executive

level leadership roles in education despite the advances that have been made by women in educational leadership."

Self-Confidence

Self-confidence emerged as a challenge of participants by internalizing their lived experiences into feelings impacting how they perceived themselves in seeking an executive level leadership position. Participants used terms of "lowliness", "frustration", "defeat", and "pressure" to name the feelings felt that affected their self-confidence negatively. Two participants explicitly described failed job attempts that set them back which created negative self-talk revolving around flaws and lack of experience. The challenge of self-confidence before seeking leadership positions was explained by a belief of needing to always perform well, having experience in all aspects of the position, and a perception that "everyone's watching to see if a woman fails" according to one participant.

Work experience impacted one participant in her self-confidence which translated into thoughts of moving away from executive level leadership roles. She stated, "I lost my self-purpose under bad leadership which caused me to have severe self-doubt that I began to think about going back to the classroom." More than half of study participants identified self-confidence as a challenge but were contextualized from an individual reflection standpoint as compared to taking into consideration external factors. The impact of self-confidence through personal reflection was purported by a participant stating, "I look to see what I am doing wrong or don't have when comparing myself to others in pursuing my leadership goals."

RQ2: Formal and Informal Support Experienced Progressing Through Executive Level Leadership Positions

The second research question concentrated on examining the lived experiences of support that had occurred throughout women's leadership paths from early in their career to present day. Participant responses demonstrated support perceived to be something they experienced internally within themselves and externally from others. When analyzing patterns of participating executive level leader experiences, Table 2 explains the themes that emerged collectively from each case with assigned formal or informal support code with frequency. An explanation of axial code themes, categorized as informal or formal, through the perceptions of participants, provides insight into how these support experiences created momentum in their aspirations and progress through executive level leadership positions.

Table 2

Axial Code Themes and Focused Coding Aligned to RQ2

Axial Code Theme	Focused Code	Frequency
Authentic Connection	Informal	7
Coaching and Feedback	Informal	10
Coursework and Training	Formal	10
Encouragement	Informal	10
Female Role Models	Informal	10
Learning by Experience	Informal	16
Mentoring	Formal	18

Networking	Informal	9
Personal Motivation	Informal	32
Supportive Supervisor	Informal	18
Work Experience	Formal	15
Total		154

Formal Support

The themes that condensed under the focused code of formal support were lived experiences that provided a more structured approach to support for participants as they progressed through leadership roles. A review of axial codes that was assigned a focused code of formal support were not as prevalent across all participants. Highlights of data assigned to formal support demonstrate participants did not perceive to experience prescribed support until selection and induction in the Kentucky Women in Education Leadership (KWEL) organization. In addition, participants viewed readiness for executive level leadership connected to legal requirements, general training specific to their job role, and work responsibilities. An in-depth review of themes that make up formal support are provided to give clarity of participant lived experiences in meeting their professional leadership goals.

Coursework and Training. The theme of coursework and training was elicited through responses of experiences that prepared participants for their past and current executive level leadership roles. Although coursework was a required aspect of obtaining a leadership role, participants described how their educational courses in seeking certification provided them schema on effective leadership. One participant shared how

working on her certification for an executive level leadership allowed her to learn new skills and apply to the role she held at the time. Two participants discussed how taking educational coursework to pursue their leadership goals was a priority for potential, future jobs and perceived this as valuable to supporting their leadership progression to the next level.

Some of the formal training experiences of participants included coursework in leadership or more job role specific training for professional growth. Participants shared how professional learning and training had allowed them to focus on growing their individual skill set. A general perception was held by participants that gaining knowledge from training provided a more structured approach to their support. This was supported by participants describing feelings of competence in previous roles which elevated their confidence to take a chance at the next level. Only one participant had participated in a training program specific to leadership development of aspiring leaders and described this support as "an opportunity that propelled my leadership capacity forward unlike any other training opportunity."

Mentoring. The formal support mechanism of mentoring for women in executive level leadership was defined by one interviewee as "strategic growth and development". Participants provided insight into the distinct lived experiences of being mentored strategically that led to their success in obtaining leadership roles. Three participants had received formalized mentoring as support through a structured program prior to their induction into KWEL. Both participants shared how the experience provided them targeted growth for their goals along with general support navigating their careers. These participants discussed how they received explicit guidance and instruction from their

mentors in the areas of effective leadership practices, problem solving, conflict resolution, and decision-making. As one participant stated, "I was highly prepared for the current district role I have because of the formal mentoring program and my mentor." Another participant stated, "My mentor exposed me to the demands of being a school leader that have served me well in all the leadership roles I have had up until now."

Participants that have received structured mentoring after being selected into KWEL revealed the perceived impact they have experienced professionally and personally. An executive level leader stated, "I have been provided with a colleague that has supported me with honesty and tells me things I need to hear and doesn't just go along with what I think." Other participants shared how the mentoring experience has provided them with reflection and feedback on a consistent basis. As one participant commented, "My mentor is always encouraging, but makes me think about how I show up to be aware of how I am leading in different situations." Mentoring that provides organized support was regarded by one participant as "crucial for me getting my current position" when describing support received progressing through leadership roles.

Participants who partook in a mentoring program emphasized that a successful mentor is more important than gender. This was verbalized as "a skilled mentor is more important than being male or female" by a study participant. In addition, participants articulated how trusting the perspective of mentors is important for individuals receiving the support. Mentoring was perceived to be a positive experience by those who had been provided or selected for participation in a formal support program and was described by one respondent as "a good experience that changed the trajectory of my career."

Work Experience. Support in progressing from one role to another was connected to work experience responsibilities, as a form of formal support, based on data synthesis. One study participant summarized work experience responsibilities as support by stating, "I learned through previous responsibilities to grow my abilities." All participants described prior experiences specific to role responsibilities in which they were required to do or implement that increased their readiness to take the next level. All participants had been provided leadership experience beginning at the classroom level by leading committees, becoming a department chair, or being involved in planning at the school level. Participants described experiences where they were tasked with making a master schedule, leading a committee on reading instruction improvements, and being responsible for presentations at staff meetings. District leaders articulated that school leadership roles had provided foundational knowledge for central office positions in instruction or management. One participant discussed how serving as assistant principal had provided her exposure to instructional knowledge, discipline techniques, and management aspects which allowed her "to be ready for a principal job." The role of being successful in a superintendent position was perceived to be supported by working in a district position close to the superintendent position. One participant stated, "I worked very closely with my superintendent, so I was not completely surprised in all aspects of the superintendent role."

Work experience responsibilities also provided formal support in regard to creating curiosity and inspiration to take the next step in leadership. Participants exposed to leadership opportunities at the classroom level were motivated to take leadership courses. The role of assistant principal and associated responsibilities changed one

participant's belief of leadership and the impact of the role inspiring her to move into an executive level leadership district position. One participant stated, "The principal responsibilities ignited my aspirations to do more for students at the district level." Collectively, the data revealed participants perceived work experience responsibilities as a method of formal support to further and advance themselves in executive level leadership roles.

Informal Support

Based on frequency of codes assigned to informal, the data revealed that females aspiring to and obtaining executive level leadership positions experienced informal support more often throughout their leadership development years. As a study participant stated, "Women need informal support from men and women to learn and grow." However, the data indicated that internal motivation could be a strong informal support mechanism that is shaped by a combination of lived experiences personally and professionally. Parallel to the different categories of informal support, collectively, participants described how they began to have a new perspective of themselves created from a professional experience or interaction that one participant articulated as "something stuck with me." The informal support axial codes illustrated in further detail provides an understanding of how participants lived experiences translated into their perceptions in advancing in executive level leadership roles.

Authentic Connection. The theme of authentic connection radiated from data analysis defined by a participant as "support that allows vulnerability." Authentic connection was used in context with other women by a desire to face fears collectively along with growing from each other's negative and positive experiences. Participants

valued being open with their professional goals and asking for help from individuals with whom they felt safe and knew their information would be kept confidential. More than half of study participants shared lived experiences of having a colleague in their same role in a nearby district who they could expose the good and bad. Authentic connections were characterized by "hearing the negatives", "learning from failures of others", and "bearing my soul' as a form of unguarded informal support. This type of informal support was explained by a participant as, "the person I can call and be me, outside of work, who understands my work and struggles" to exemplify the candidness of authentic connection as informal support.

Coaching and Feedback. The term "critical friend" was used by eight of ten participants as a form of informal support that women need in seeking leadership roles, but also in navigating the lived experiences of women occupying leadership roles. The idea of a critical friend revealed itself connected to coaching and feedback for "leadership path guidance" as articulated by a participant. Participants jointly associated coaching and feedback as a needed informal support from other women. One study participant stated, "I need female to female feedback so I can navigate situations as a woman in leadership pursuing my goals of being a superintendent." Coaching and feedback was desired by participants from women leaders for providing insight into avoiding mistakes in seeking leadership roles and positive reinforcement for demonstrating effective leadership strategies, behaviors, or actions.

Coaching and feedback was presented by participants in their responses as a more professional based form of informal support. In addition, this type of informal support was perceived to be an avenue of receiving hard conversations from colleagues or peers

to improve and grow in leadership development. Several participants experienced uncomfortable, but necessary conversations that propelled them in their performance and adaptability in situations that depended on their leadership for others. This was evidenced by participants sharing experiences of having a colleague or supervisor that used coaching and feedback as a natural part of their leadership style. One participant stated, "Coaching as support for anyone is important, but especially for women because it is a way for us to seek and receive help from those, we interact with daily to catch our strengths and weaknesses in the moment like I experienced," to provide insight on how this form of informal support was crucial to her seeking and growing in leadership roles. In summing up coaching and feedback, one participant described it as "informal mentoring" that provides critical insight for women progressing through executive level leadership roles.

Encouragement. The theme of encouragement was discerned through patterns of all participants using the expression "encouragement" when sharing lived experiences which is supported by Wyland (2016) and Cornell, et al. (2015) research of encouragement as a success indicator within the first year of district female executive level leaders. One participant shared her perception of encouragement in that "women need champions" progressing through a leadership role along with setting their sights on other top leadership roles. Encouragement was seen by study participants as needing to come from male and female colleagues. One participant stated, "I have lived through the ups and downs of my role by connecting with experienced male colleagues for encouragement." Seven out of ten interviewees described how they rely on other women

as a primary source of encouragement due to women having a better understanding of women experience in leadership roles.

Informal support of encouragement from a variety of sources was ascertained when analyzing specific lived experiences of study participants. Students as a source of encouragement were noted by five of the ten participants. All five participants reminisced of specific comments from a student in their current leadership role at that time that encouraged them, but also created curiosity for their future. Another participant also spoke of how "encouragement from my principal created curiosity to take the next step" when pursuing executive level leadership positions. Encouragement from colleagues and peers was mentioned by four study participants as something they had experienced but one shared, "This is not the reality for all women seeking leadership positions in my conversations with other women leaders." A general understanding of encouragement was explained by a participant stating that "encouragement was the nudge I needed to grow more" as an informal support mechanism.

Female Role Models. Patterns in interview data highlighted the access of female role models as a personal form of informal support. Observing and studying female leadership within close proximity was mentioned by seven of ten participants as a source of motivation for seeking and advancing to their current role. One participant described her path to the principal and district administrator role as positive with less challenges because she saw effective and successful female leaders in the district. Another participant stated, "I was able to see myself in the female leaders around me when I was assistant principal that personally made me want to be in those positions."

Women seeing women leaders changed the trajectory of two participants starting in the classroom and has sustained them vying for executive level leadership roles. This was evidenced by one participant stating "she's the reason I wanted to become an administrator" and another reported "my family member's female principal became my role model for leadership." Inspiration for participants from female role models came from current colleagues in similar or different roles. One participant shared how being able to observe a female colleague in a similar role has become inspiration for continuing to develop herself as a leader. Another participant stated, "I always pay attention to female leaders, more so than men, to learn what to do and not to do since I am starting my leadership career in education." Female role models as informal support is perceived as important for women in seeking, obtaining, and being successful in executive level leadership roles as summarized by a participant stating, "Women need to see another woman in the role they want to be in or are in as a form of support."

Learning by Experience. The theme of learning by experience provided an in-depth understanding into the perceptions of how negative and positive lived experiences served as a form of informal support for participants. Learning from non-examples and negative experiences was evidenced through participants' description of specific observations and interactions with other leaders and colleagues. A reflection on these situations were internalized on their leadership path to create their individualized leadership practices.

Learning by experience supported participants through their leadership progression along with creating self-confidence and developing a self-awareness of personal leadership style. A participant defined learning by experience as support by

stating, "Most of the support I have gained in my current leadership role came from the experience of having roles near my role previously." The experience created feelings of self-affirmation, self-acknowledgement, and an overall changing of belief in themselves as being a capable leader. A participant demonstrated this by saying, "A changing path was a part of my journey, but I felt competent in my experiences that I could be successful in different roles in different places."

Learning by experience was also connected to being provided opportunities to learn or "chances to lead" stated by a participant. Nine of ten participants discussed how they were provided leadership opportunities early in their career. One participant shared how she had worked for a male leader who provided equal opportunity for leadership in the role of assistant principal as compared to being assigned a specific set of responsibilities. Another participant shared a lived experience related to how she had learned leadership skills that teachers valued that impacted her positively when becoming a school principal. Learning by experience, as a source of support, for participants progressing through executive leadership roles developed through observation and participation from participants conjointly.

Networking. Participant responses demonstrated the general concept of networking as a source of informal support, but specific to networking with other female executive level leaders. Lived experiences of networking for several participants led to obtaining leadership positions. One participant stated, "Networking with other women in leadership has opened my eyes to new opportunities to pursue." Networking was perceived by some participants as support that women have to seek for themselves by "putting yourself out there". One participant shared that networking had become critical

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to her professional development which provides insight into the perceived value of this type of support.

The support of networking created a sense of relief and comfort through the realization of the women in similar roles, but different places were experiencing similar issues. One participant specifically shared an experience at a networking event where she described her "eyes being opened" to common experiences. Another participant discussed how networking has allowed her to hear about the triumphs and challenges of other women giving her a sense of greater understanding in her own professional development. Collectively, participants described a feeling of inspiration and motivation after spending time with female colleagues networking. One participant stated, "I have worked to network more informally because of the positive impact it has on me personally and professionally."

Personal Motivation. The term "motivation" was stated multiple times by participants from the beginning of their career to their present role based on their individual lives, but all participants perceived their personal motivation to be an important source of support. Five participants discussed how serving and providing opportunities for students was a primary motivation as they have progressed through various leadership roles. One participant shared her initial personal motivation for getting into leadership was "fueled by working with high school students transitioning to adulthood." Another participant discussed how she intentionally schedules time to be out with students at schools because, "Students are the focus of my leadership and personally motivate me as a leader."

Personal motivation aligned with developing and growing others to grow themselves as a leader was noted by participants. Four participants used the word "passion" to describe their motivation for developing the capacity of colleagues. Leadership preparation coincided with the willingness to teach, guide, and grow others, translating into support of their own growth as an executive level leader. One participant revealed that a true self-awareness of her leadership style came about in the principal role in growing teacher leaders. Seeing positive changes in the organizations they lead, based on the personal motivation to build into others, was clarified by a participant stating, "I feel a sense of support and encouragement when I support others in achieving their professional goals."

Perseverance through difficult situations combined with a mindset of determination was an aspect of personal motivation that supported women in executive level leadership roles. The lived experiences of participants experiencing ineffective leadership served as support for their own leadership goals to change the perception of what a leader should look and act like. Another participant discussed how working for a principal that lacked leadership created a feeling of frustration, but also supported her leadership abilities by giving her the confidence to pivot to a principal role. Proving a point was phrased by participants as the personal motivation that supported them during challenging times in a variety of situations. Participants who had experienced being discounted as viable leaders or perceived to be placed in a bad situation used personal motivation as support to prove their abilities as a leader or "turn the challenge upside down" as stated by a participant. Based on the data, personal motivation as informal

support provided women with an intrinsic belief of competence and confidence taking on and progressing through executive level leadership roles.

      Supportive Supervisors. The role of participant supervisors' in providing informal support was distilled throughout the analysis of interview data. Specifically, the theme among supportive supervisors was focused on participants experiencing team-oriented working conditions with a focus on high expectations. As participants recounted their lived experiences working in these environments, they progressed into leadership roles due to a culture of support around them along with being inspired towards leadership. One participant shared how the positive working conditions were created by female and male colleagues pushing each other to be better.

      Supportive supervisors also supported participants through their actions towards them individually. These actions revolved around pushing to participate in more training to develop skill, pushing them into more responsibilities, having explicit conversations in helping them see their leadership potential, and aiding getting into leadership roles. Four participants shared they had been recruited or approached for their current leadership position because of these supportive supervisors in their past. The informal support women experienced from male and female supervisors who supported their individual development contextualized in a positive working culture allowed participants to flourish organically for their next leadership position.

RQ3: Tailored Support for Progressing Through Executive Level Leadership Roles

      Understanding how to tailor support of female executive level leaders progressing through leadership roles through the experiences and perceptions of participants was the basis of the third research question. All participants indicated a belief that more

formalized support is needed for women in education looking to lead. One participant verbalized, "Tailored support is necessary to not only keep women at the table but increase their presence in higher positions." When condensing the data, four themes emerged through re-coding of axial codes combined with focused coding to provide insight into supports that need to be tailored for women aspiring, obtaining, and progressing through executive level leadership roles. The themes of female support, identification and recruitment, professional organizations, and same role support are described to provide a greater insight from participants associated with tailored support.

Female Support

Participants who were provided formal or informal support by females early on, during, or in their current role experienced personal confidence specific to their professional growth. This finding was supported by participants describing how they looked up to successful women leaders as a way to discern their own leadership style. This was explicitly revealed by participants perceiving strong women leaders throughout their professional career as inspiration and serving as a role model. The idea of seeing a woman in leadership resonated with participants receiving female support. As one participant stated, "The work we do as female leaders is not easy and sometimes other women are the only ones who can understand this," to explain how females need other females as support. This was further supported by four participants sharing experiences of how male colleagues had created obstacles for them in certain situations.

When reviewing interview data, eight participants stated that "women need a female mentor" to survive and thrive through the challenges of being a leader and female. Feelings of belittlement, loneliness, and lowliness occurred through a variety of lived

experiences being referred to as a "pretty little lady" when voicing an opinion, exclusion in planned activities due to being the only woman in attendance, having a promotion alongside a male colleague to maintain status quo, and not receiving a position despite experience and credentials. The additional pressure of family responsibilities was mentioned by nine interviewees as a challenge only women can understand. One participant stated, "I was determined to never let my family or being a mother interfere with work because I knew that would always be in the background of people's minds if I wanted to move up in leadership." Participants who were conscientious of familial duties voiced their consideration of family decisions before applying for leadership positions whether it be children, their spouse, or aging parents.

The concept of learning strategy from other women to combat gender bias was utilized by participants when describing how they reacted or resolved specific situations. Interviewees shared how female mentors had explicitly taught them about the importance of dress, staying composed and professional at all times, using specific communication techniques, being conscientious of tone when speaking up for self, and having courageous conversations in a non-threatening manner. One participant emphasized the impact of female support on her success by stating, "I have learned from my mentor, who is a woman, how to leverage my assertiveness and be heard by all colleagues."

Identification and Recruitment

Three participants specifically commented that identification and recruitment of aspiring women leaders early in their career was limited and perceived it to impact the trajectory of women in education overall. Six of the ten participants used the term "tapped on the shoulder" to explain how they were recognized and made aware of their

leadership potential combined with being provided leadership opportunities. Participants perceived to be identified for leadership early in their career because of the work context or supervisor they had at that point in their career. A perception of being "at the right place at the right time" was described by one participant as though her trajectory may have been different if not provided the right situation. Overall, participants described personal identification through self-reflection and determination to aspire for leadership as compared to being intentionally recruited.

Participants described how being encouraged to apply for participation in KWEL was a confidence builder and perceived the application process to be valuable for identification of supporting and growing female leaders across the Commonwealth. In addition, there was a collective belief that the identification and recruitment process needed to have high standards. One participant summarized this collective belief by stating, "There are many women in education, but that doesn't mean they all have the skills or disposition to be a leader." This statement was supported by anecdotal stories of witnessing or experiencing woman on woman disrespect, working for women leaders who created negative work environments, observing women leaders creating clique-like groups for the purpose of excluding other women, and female leaders sending female colleagues to go home and change because their dress was more professional. Another participant clarified the importance of targeted identification and recruitment by commenting, "One female can hurt us all so we have to be careful what women leaders we promote and align ourselves with."

Identification and recruitment were perceived to be an opportunity to help women obtain leadership roles more quickly and successfully based on participants' leadership

career progression. Seven of ten participants demonstrated perseverance throughout their career despite not obtaining jobs. In fact, four of five participants had applied for a job multiple times in which they were eventually hired. One participant articulated, "I was not going to give up…I was going to be a leader eventually so I kept applying." This determination to keep applying for leadership positions was aligned with feelings of frustration because of observing less qualified males obtaining the positions. Identification and recruitment as a tailored support strategy for women progressing through leadership roles was described by one participant as "crucial for the trajectory of all women now and in the future to successfully gain leadership positions in Kentucky."

Professional Organizations

The concept of unstructured and structured support that professional organizations provided participants was gleaned through analysis of lived experiences and perception. All but two participants mentioned professional organizations as a source of support. The role of professional organizations was described by one participant as "a source of guidance, support, and networking for women." Informal support to "help guide" was described of participants who had been or were members of Kentucky Association of School Administrators (KASA), Kentucky Association of Professional Educators (KAPE), Kappa Delta Pi, Kentucky Association of School Superintendents (KASS), or KWEL. The informal support provided by these organizations allowed interviewees to feel they were gaining advice or consultation from trusted sources with common goals in mind for students and schools. The informal support of professional organizations created a sense of safety to seek help and created an awareness of common experiences of women in their leadership roles which contributed to feeling less lonely.

The informal support of professional organizations provided networking and guidance from male and female colleagues. Four participants discussed how strategically connecting with skilled and reputable leaders in these organizations had been pivotal for their careers. Collegial relationships for participants had developed through events hosted by professional organizations to meet other leaders across different contexts. These connections had also equipped participants to have an increased awareness of what jobs to apply and not apply for as women aspiring to obtain district executive level leadership roles. One participant summarized this by stating, "I have created wonderful professional connections that have steered me to success in my career as a woman." Professional organizations were perceived by participants to be a key factor in supporting their leadership progression and a part of their ability to obtain higher executive level leadership roles.

The structured support of training and professional learning provided by professional organizations was mentioned by over half of participants as a part of their growth and development as leaders. Three interviewees had participated in a leadership development program through KASA early in their executive leadership careers that had provided a strong foundation in understanding effective leadership practices. All participants described how attending learning had equipped them in gaining knowledge for their current or future roles. One participant shared how she felt more confident in her leadership role due to attending learning opportunities through professional organizations and perceived that learning as a contributor to obtaining her current leadership role.

The structured support of professional organizations was primarily connected to the KWEL program through direct statements from all participants. KWEL provided

participants with elements of structured and unstructured support through analysis of interview data. As one participant described participation in KWEL as "the most positive and beneficial leadership program I have ever experienced in my career." Several interviewees reported training targeted to and for women was beneficial and they were able to use the learning immediately in their roles. The ability to have an assigned mentor for monthly coaching sessions and on-demand support was characterized by an interviewee as "a deliberate focus on my growth in collaboration with my mentor who lets me be open with my work, my frustrations, my celebrations, and my goals." The overall impact of KWEL was viewed by one interviewee as "critical to my self-concept as a female leader."

The ability to have an opportunity to mentor rising female leaders in KWEL was viewed as inspiration and creating feelings of fulfillment by study participants. One participant stated, "When I found out I was going to mentor another woman, I was humbled, nervous, and determined to do my best because of the great mentor I had and still lean on for support." Study participants who had the opportunity to mentor new KWEL members chronicled their own personal leadership growth, as mentors, along with being tasked to grow their mentee. Self-reflections from these lived experiences developed a greater sense of the need for female to female mentoring and the collective impact of women leaders working together to combat the challenges existing for women in educational leadership. One interviewee demonstrated the impact of being a mentor by avidly saying, "I didn't realize how much I really needed a female mentor in my past because I have become a better leader in my role by doing this!"

Same Role Support

Lived experiences of participants highlighted the formal and informal support received from colleagues in the same role and from mentors who had held the role in recent years. The same role support was developed by participants in taking initiative to seek out others sharing their role combined with networking provided through professional organizations, regional trainings, or other leadership role specific meetings. "Colleagues, male or female, who have the same role in other schools and districts are a part of my knowledge and leadership development," paints an understanding of the effect of same role support as shared by a participant. This sentiment was common for participants who had experienced formal or informal support from a supervisor or colleague who had the knowledge of understanding of that particular leadership role. This was attributed to one participant's success by sharing, "I would not have been hired for my current role if my former supervisor had not taught me about the role I was in before this one because he had it before me."

Executive level leadership roles at the district level were perceived by participants to be easier to navigate if experiencing the same role support from another female. One interviewee recounted how fortunate she was to have an experienced female in the same executive leadership role nearby who serves as a "trusted colleague, resource, and mentor." Another participant stated, "There is a critical need for female mentoring based on an individual's current role." Female district leaders relied on female colleagues in their same role for encouragement, acknowledgement of shared challenges, and the ability to be vulnerable in times of need.

The effect of same role support was further demonstrated by participant experiences of being mentored by an individual in KWEL who had worked in a similar leadership position before their current role. Five participants had been assigned a mentor through KWEL with a similar career trajectory and were able to really grow in "position knowledge and leadership" as one interviewee commented. The unawareness of gender barriers for two participants, until obtaining district level executive leadership roles, were supported by their KWEL mentors to work through situations of disparagement and disrespect from male colleagues.

Changes in leadership thinking or impact were attributed to same role support based on the perceptions of several participants. For some, this change became internalized creating a passion to do more to have a greater impact on students, staff, and communities. Participants narrated lived experiences of viewing their role as more crucial to their school or district, understanding themselves as leaders specific to their role, or feeling more confident in abilities to aspire for other leadership roles. "I feel intentional support of those doing the same work isn't there for women especially as they climb the ladder because learning from those who have walked in your shoes can push and help you to do more," was voiced by a study participant to illustrate the impact same role support can provide women executive level leaders.

Summary of Findings

After reviewing and reflecting on the themes that emerged in answering the research questions, challenges connected to gender are vividly present in educational leadership based on the personal situations of all participants. Based on findings, these challenges are most often experienced from male colleagues, but can be experienced

through women colleague dynamics. The internalization of these obstacles and setbacks impact women personally and professionally despite the determination to keep aspiring for leadership. The traditional school structure of hierarchy leadership, combined with our patriarchal society, may be a contributor to this continued challenge.

Formal and informal support mechanisms were evident as women progressed through their leadership roles. The participants reported these supports provided them with social, emotional, personal, and professional learning experiences from a variety of sources. The work environment provided by supervisors and colleagues could have a positive or negative effect on rising female educators for their future as a leader being female. The need for female-to-female support was a common thread throughout the interview data, combined with structured training for women by women, to help them steer through general and gender-based issues. Based on lived experiences and perceptions, a multi-pronged approach may be beneficial to truly tailor support for female executive level leaders starting from identification and recruitment to on-the-job support. Female leaders have a perspective of the educational leadership system they exist in while being able to see the conflict women collectively experience. A summary of findings for research questions, implications for future research, and recommendations for the field are discussed in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER V: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

In this study, I sought to answer the following research questions. These were:

1. What have women in educational leadership perceived as challenges, related to their lived experiences, as they sought executive level leadership roles?

2. What experiences, formal or informal, have supported women in education leadership as they progress through executive level leadership positions?

3. How might experiences that support women in educational leadership be tailored as they progress through executive level leadership roles?

In this chapter, I present a summary of the findings for each research question and then discuss the implications of my findings for practice and future research.

RQ 1: Perceived Challenges in Seeking Executive Level Leadership Roles

My first research question explored lived experiences of study participants, seeking executive level leadership positions, connected to their perceived challenges. The findings provided insight into the continued challenges directly related to being held to a different standard. Study participants internalized the perception of being expected to do more work longer and harder to receive the same credibility as males peers vying for leadership positions supported by previous research (Bernal., 2017; Morrillo, 2017). Women can be hindered because of gendered norms as they interact and react with colleagues in leadership roles which impacts their pursuit of executive level leadership positions. Women must intentionally and consciously be aware of their tone, words,

nonverbal gestures, and emotions to combat the double standard of a female leading in a society that values masculine leadership traits and behaviors. Their aspirations of pursuing executive level educational leadership roles intertwined with being held to a different standard creates a sense of risk and vulnerability for females.

Data analysis and statements from participants indicate gender still prevails as a primary barrier to women seeking leadership roles in education juxtaposed with the perceptions of the role of women in society, covertly and overtly. Participants felt they were not seen for their past work experiences or leadership skills but were seen first as a female. This is supported by Halley (2020) and Fennel (2008) finding that women are dismissed more easily and given more secretarial type tasks which aligned to participants in this study sharing being asked to scribe for a group, being task with organizational duties for meetings or events, or receiving pushback on their thoughts in a variety of professional situations. In addition, a common perception by participants were women being disliked as leaders by colleagues, parents, board members, and community members which created a determined attitude of proving their capabilities. This study confirms predispositions of gender roles in society create a challenge for women seeking executive level leadership positions despite the abundance of women in education.

Congruent to the perceived gender roles, there are a variety of instructional and operational roles that exist in schools and districts that perpetuate a perception of job roles for women and men. Based on the lived experiences of participants, roles associated with operational duties (budgeting, facilities, transportation, student discipline, etc.) were perceived to be somewhat out of reach for aspiring women leaders. In addition, participants viewed the proximity between job role and gender to disadvantage them in

equal access to all roles in education executive leadership. The fact that education is tasked by society to educate current and future generations, instructional roles, even at the executive leadership level, continue to be reserved for women which mimics the decision that women should be teachers when commons schools were created in the early 19th century (Matthew, 1976).

The findings related to the overall perception of executive leadership by participants was a discovery not found in previous research. Statements indicated that observations and experiences with executive level leaders had created feelings of distance, uneasiness, and some trepidation early on careers based on their positional locale within the overall organization. Furthermore, there was evidence of division and apprehensiveness between school and district based executive level leaders which was impacted by these early career personal accounts. These experiences combined with predominantly witnessing males in executive level leadership roles from the school level was associated with the inability for many participants to see themselves in those roles one day. However, as participants were encouraged by mentors or supervisors to aspire for leadership opportunities a new image of self as executive leader ensued despite past personal perceptions of executive level leadership which is supported by the findings of Simons (2022) that teachers considered a leadership role when prodded by their principal. Participant accounts of developing female leaders for the future indicate that executive level leadership is associated with being male and believed to be unattainable by women educators early in their career.

Self-confidence was found to be an internalized challenge for women seeking executive level leadership positions despite their keen perceptions of the barriers

experienced due to being female and leader. Statements from participants revolved around negative ideations of their self-image, skills, abilities, and confidence when not obtaining a position or experiencing a bad career situation. These negative ideations occurred due to a belief to know and have experience in all aspects of desired role and being held to a higher expectation as a woman. Participants demonstrated a tendency to look inward and focus on weaknesses as compared to assessing all aspects of a disappointment or negative situation.

The perceived challenges experienced by participants in seeking executive level leadership positions provide insight into findings support by existing and new research. Each participant's case revealed individual lived experiences in their own context and professional leadership journey. However, all cases collectively indicate that the challenges experienced can have a negative impact on aspiring towards executive level leadership personally and professionally.

RQ 2: Formal and Informal Support Experienced Progressing Through Executive Level Leadership Positions

My second research question sought to reveal supports, formal and informal, participants had experienced as they advanced through executive level leadership positions. Overall, formal supports provided to participants were experienced through natural work structures or opportunities provided in work environments. In general, structured mentoring was considered invaluable through the statements of participants. Informal supports were experienced on a variety of levels and sporadically by participants individually internally and externally, but provided relevant support to all participants collectively based on data results.

The required certification requirements and role-related trainings were valued by participants in growing their knowledge and skill. More specifically, this type of formal support provided an avenue of personal development and the ability to feel more proficient in their role at the time. Participating in coursework and training provided participants with a sense of proficiency which served to elevate their self-concept. Leadership skill was more often developed through coursework, as compared to trainings, which was perceived to be a worthwhile investment of time and resources. Only one participant actually participated in a leadership development program for aspiring leaders that provided insight into gender issues as supported by the scarcity of gender support for women in leadership (Skrla, et al., 2000; O'Rourke & Papalewis, 1989; Wiener & Burton, 2016).

Formal support provided through a structured mentoring system was recognized, by study participants, as a highly beneficial experience personally and professionally. The structured mentoring experienced came through their involvement in Kentucky Women in Educational Leadership (KWEL) when inducted into the program and being paired with a mentor. Mentoring provided a focused and intentional relationship for participants to receive feedback for growth specifically to their leadership style, skills, and practices. Interviewees echoed sentiments of feeling more prepared, experiencing growth, and being positively impacted through career advancements which is supported by previous research of female educational leaders contributing mentors as vital to their success and sustainability in executive leadership (Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Morillo, 2017; Sampson, 2018). In general, the expertise and support of a successful and

experienced mentor combined with a formal system was considered a positive and significant professional experience by all study participants.

Previous work experience was perceived to be a formal support mechanism to be able to progress to and through executive level leadership positions. Based on each participant's individual path, all encountered work requirements that included new learning and leading colleagues which allowed them to begin practicing and learning leadership skills inducing interest and aspirations for executive level leadership. Moreover, work experience as formal support resonated with interviewees as a strategy to develop professional skills, combat existing ideology related to women in operational roles, and develop feelings of competence. A belief by participants in the highest level of executive level leadership indicated that success in an aspired superintendent position is associated due to working close to an individual currently holding that position. For women, this belief is supported by findings that women in support superintendent positions can be promoted to superintendent when viewed as necessary to leadership succession of a district (Morillo, 2017).

Informal mentoring summarizes the themes that were gleaned through data to describe informal support. Furthermore, informal support was predominantly viewed and experienced from female colleagues as compared to male colleagues. More specifically, the informal support women experienced progressing through executive level leadership positions were grounded in a trustworthy relationship. Participants highly regarded connections with a colleague in which they could openly discuss experiences, good or bad, without fear of exposure. Additionally, the informal support was mutually beneficial for both parties to support and learn from each other. Participants desired specific

coaching and feedback from other women for advice and direction specific to being a woman in a leadership role along with strategy to progress in leadership aspirations. Equally, the viewpoint of improving leadership effectiveness through direct conversations by colleagues was wanted and sought after by participants through the form of coaching and feedback. Statements from participants demonstrate that taking a learning stance of their own personal leadership style as a female leader was critical to progressing in executive level leader roles.

The influence of encouragement from a variety of sources resonated with all study participants as vital informal support that changed their trajectory by motivating them to go for the next leadership step or serving as an avenue of reassurance at different points in their leadership path. Encouragement was a desired and needed support strategy from male and female colleagues based on participant statements. Furthermore, direct and indirect student encouragement provided participants with an inspired encouragement to do and strive for more for themselves personally and professionally. The support of encouragement banded participants together in their individual paths continuing towards previous and current executive level leadership positions.

Female role models were considered by interviewees as informal support in a more personal way which motivated them professionally. Overall, the idea of watching and listening to other female leaders was considered a priority whether new or experienced in executive level leadership. Participant experiences indicated that experienced female leaders had identified successful and effective female leaders as their sources of models. Consequently, those with less experience viewed other female leaders as examples to learn how not to be a credible female in an executive level leadership

position. Furthermore, role models encompassed current colleagues in similar positions as well as those from their personal and professional past. The influence of female role models on participants as they worked to obtain and progress through leadership roles served as sources of inspiration, elevation, and a catalyst for stepping into leadership.

A synthesized learning of all lived experiences was manifested through analysis for the main purpose of improving leadership practices from participants. This occurred informally as if participants had mentally logged each beneficial and unfavorable lived experience then creating a personalized guide for their own leadership beliefs and behaviors. This was evident when participants had experienced more toxic or difficult work environments, supervisors, or situations in which they were able to lean on their learned experience to move forward. A common experience from all participants is all were provided an opportunity lead early in their career which allowed them learning through experience. Furthermore, participants who were provided co-leadership opportunities and not contained to a specific set of duties or responsibilities in a particular leadership role perceived this type of experience as extremely supportive setting them up to feel more confident and knowledgeable as a leader. Overall, learning by experience came from on the job situations, excellent and poor supervisors, different roles within a school or district, interactions with teachers as a leader, and working alongside peers.

The informal support that networking had provided was perceived to be very positive and almost a new experience which is supported in findings that female educational leaders have less networking opportunities (Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Smith, 2019; VanTuyle & Watkins, 2009). Networking with other women educational leaders exclusively was connected to participation in KWEL. Accounts from participants

indicated a new understanding of the challenges women face despite their location, feeling less lonely, empowered, and inspired after a networking opportunity, and using the support gained from networking to make decisions for professional growth. However, networking was viewed by participants as support that women leaders have to intentionally do and provide time for on a regular basis and not just when scheduled or provided through events.

Personal motivation, alone, as internalized informal support was a discovery not found in previous research congruent to how participants harnessed this progressing through executive level leadership roles. The development of personal motivation came from students, growing capacity in others, and persevering through challenges experienced directly tied to be female and leader from participant lived experiences. Half of participants shared how serving and providing opportunities for students has always and still continues to fuel their personal motivation to tackle the hills and valleys of leadership. Growing capacity and leadership in others was also seen as a strategy to grow individually as leaders which is supported by research that women apply for executive level leadership roles as a way to increase their own development as leaders (Smith, 2019; Muñoz, Mills, Pankake, et al., 2014). Personal motivation explicitly created an attitude of perseverance and not giving up when it came from a perceived challenging experience or unequal treatment. Although participants gleaned their personal motivation in different ways based on their individual leadership pathways, it served as a characteristic all participants grounded themselves in progressing through executive level leadership roles.

The informal support of supervisors was particular to supportive working conditions participants experienced created through their supervisor's leadership style. All participants had at one point experienced a working environment in which a supervisor, male and female, created conditions for them to lead others, learn more, realize their leadership potential, and assisted with goals of obtaining an executive level leadership position. This type of informal mentoring is supported by findings of Connell (2015) that mentoring creates open access to leadership opportunities for women. Moreover, participants credited their success in obtaining a leadership position right after and have kept the experience in mind as they create working conditions for those they lead and serve today.

In summary, data suggests women aspiring to and progressing through executive level leadership positions need formal and informal support approaches. A hybrid approach of both supports can help aspiring leaders early in their career to gain access to mentors who are effective and successful leaders. Even though each participant's leadership journey was individualized, within the Commonwealth, this approach could limit happenstance support based on context or supervisor.

RQ 3: Tailored Support for Progressing Through Executive Level Leadership Roles

When synthesizing and analyzing tailored support for women progressing through executive level leadership roles, informal and formal approaches are weaved sporadically throughout the themes of female support, identification and recruitment, professional organizations, and same role support. Tailored support approaches leaned more towards female to female support as compared to male to female support. Furthermore, the female

to female support was perceived to be more critical related to the perceived challenges experienced as female and leader.

Participant accounts of experiencing female support consistently throughout their professional career invoked an early development of leadership understanding and leadership style. The female support was perceived by participants as encouragement and motivation from female role models as informal support noted by findings in the second research question. The female support early on was perceived to provide learning and problem solving connected to the challenges of gender, double standard, and job role vs. gender from first research question themes. Overall, consistent female support provided an avenue of authentic connection, coaching and feedback, and encouragement which aligned to results from the second research question.

Participants who had experienced female support initially through KWEL, after being selected and inducted into the program, reported the positive impact of female focused training and the immediate application of this learning in improving their professional practice and self-concept. A general perception prevailed that only other females could truly understand and relate to some experiences women executive level leaders can experience while leading as female. These findings are supported by research indicating the women aspiring to lead hold the belief that another female creates a strong foundation for a mentoring relationship (Dunbar & Kinnersley, 2011).

Identification and recruitment was gathered through data synthesis which highlighted lived experiences and beliefs related women aspiring and progressing through executive level leadership roles. Depending on the participant's personal leadership path, the push or encouragement to consider and pursue leadership came in a variety of forms

and from different sources. Most often, participants had to internalize the external nudge first due to not considering leadership. Some had pursued leadership based on experiencing negative leaders with the goal to change what a leader looks and sounds like. In addition, the informal support of personal motivation incited a relentless pursuit of executive level leadership for four participants directly connected to not receiving jobs related to gender barriers.

Identification and recruitment was perceived necessary because of negative experiences with female colleagues and leaders throughout their career. Despite the perception that females can sometimes only understand particular situations, a collective belief was held that not all women in education who pursue leadership are suitable or demonstrate successful leadership in executive level leaders. The KWEL application and selection process was perceived by participants as an effort to help identify quality women with the necessary dispositions and recommendations aspiring to or holding executive level leadership positions.

Professional organizations were viewed by eight of ten participants as an on-going form of tailored support that chiefly provided informal support. Kentucky Women in Educational Leadership, an organization offered by the Kentucky Association of School Administrators (KASA), was viewed by participants as providing more formal, tailored support with informal support being a byproduct experienced through participation. Professional organizations, as a whole, were associated with providing networking and connections with credible male and female colleagues that had provided guidance and an understanding of what leadership positions to pursue and pass over when open. The perceived formal support of training and professional development

opportunities found in findings from the second research question, was directly connected to the tailored support that professional organizations had provided.

The intentional support approach provided through the KWEL organization provided relevant and timely mentoring, gender specific training, general leadership development in conjunction with space for networking, personal connections, and encouragement with goal-oriented female colleagues. Equally, participants who had been selected to mentor new members experienced personal motivation, encouragement, and improved self-confidence due to viewing the relationship as a learning experience to improve their own leadership skills. This personal investment of the mentor to the mentee demonstrated through these participants is supported by research that dedicated mentors are crucial to a woman's success in reaching their goals (Muñoz, Pankake, Ramalho, et al., 2014).

Same role support was identified in previous research as a necessity for women and emphasized by over half of study participants as a strategy for tailored support. Depending on the participant, she had to individual seek out same role support, experienced it organically progressing in leadership with co-workers who had previously held the role, or had been assigned a mentor with experience in their current executive level leadership role. Participants that had taken initiative to network with male and female colleagues holding the same role in other districts viewed the support as a way to gain knowledge and understanding of role responsibilities related to their leadership. Executive level leadership roles at the school level provided opportunities for supervisors to train up the next candidate for their role as evidenced by several participants obtaining a leadership role after their supervisor was promoted.

Participants serving in district executive level leadership positions valued male and female colleagues as a source of same role support, but indicated same role support from a female can be more helpful. This finding is supported by preceding research indicating one aspect of female superintendent success was attributed to being mentored by another female superintendent (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014). Moreover, female-to-female, same role support suggests a relationship that provides aspects of formal and informal support including mentoring and authentic vulnerability. Although no participants had been assigned a mentor through KWEL with their exact same role, half experienced a mentor with a similar career pathway which allowed them to grow in knowledge of the role and leading as female. Overall, same role support provided to participants created opportunities for personal reflection, learning, leadership development, and creating internal confidence to aspire to higher executive level leadership roles.

Support approaches might be tailored for women as they progress through executive level leadership positions utilizing formal and informal approaches in a coherent system. In addition, data suggests tailored support which combines navigating gender challenges, leadership development, and training for knowledge and application could equip women strategically for current and aspired roles. Tailored support provided by and to females is valued and considered priority to produce the positive impact formal and informal approaches have on women in executive level leadership positions.

Implications for Future Research

The implications for future research due to the design and findings of this study revolved around the location of the study, the number of cases, study limitations, and

participant race. My study was conducted in the Commonwealth of Kentucky with participants from different school districts. Although each participant had their own leadership and support experiences, this does not provide an overall picture of what women seeking and holding executive leadership positions across the United States have experienced as challenges and supports in their perspective situations. Conducting a future study to validate the challenges and supports that women in school and district executive level leadership position in different regions of the United States could be explored to inform national supports of educational and professional organizations.

In this multiple case study, there were 10 cases (participants) representing nine different contexts, districts, and leadership paths. The results of my study could represent the experiences of women leading in executive level leadership roles in all 120 counties across the Commonwealth in a school or district. However, future research may be needed to provide greater insight for female executive level leaders in Kentucky on a larger scale by including participants from each county comparing urban, rural, and suburban. This information would provide clarity of lived experiences and increased reliability of findings to provide a more general understanding of the phenomenon.

Since I used a multiple case study research design, it could be advantageous to create a mixed method study to include semi-structured interviews and survey data analysis through quantitative methods for a more procedural supportive study of findings. Furthermore, this type of study could include more women in executive level leadership potions across more school districts in the Commonwealth or in the United States. Potential findings could elicit further areas of study or findings to provide improved support practices.

In regard to my researcher positionality for this study, I am a white woman conducting research investigating perceptions, lived experiences, and challenges of women in executive level leadership positions. Nine study participants were white and there was one black female executive level leader. Research that includes majority or all women of color would provide more in-depth perceptivity and discernment to their perceptions and challenges. This would provide increased knowledge and application of strategies for improved and tailored support connected to their individual and collective experiences.

Recommendations for the Field

The findings from the research questions individually and collectively provide implications for practice in supporting women as they aspire, obtain, and progress through executive level educational leadership positions. The perceived challenges of women from their lived experiences, in seeking executive level leadership positions, points to employing practices that give insight into the experiences of women and working to change the perception executive level leadership can have on aspiring leaders. The formal and informal support approaches discovered through the study provide insight into implementing more effective support practices early in the career of aspiring women executive level leaders. The themes from tailored support inform support practices through the collaboration of schools/districts and professional organizations.

The findings suggest that gender barriers women experience continue to permeate the ranks of executive level education leadership. This study does not shed new knowledge on these challenges, but does provide a deeper question of why this is still occurring in a society and occupation that speaks to value and educate for social justice.

Leadership development programs, organizations, higher education institutions, and other groups tasked with or take recognition in developing leaders for the next generation of schools need to train and teach how gender bias occurs covertly and overtly by both genders. Until the experiences of women seeking executive level leadership roles can be shared and discussed openly without repercussions, an awareness to utilize more inclusive recruiting and hiring practices and working conditions will remain as the accepted status quo.

Executive level leadership positions can often create a top-down leadership perception by those who are led by educators in these roles. Findings suggested that participants struggled to see themselves in these roles due to their standpoint within the hierarchical organization. As education experiences a current crisis of teachers, this will soon translate to school and district leaders as well. Creating an organizational culture that promotes leadership and capacity building early on from it most high executive leadership position is crucial for leadership succession and creating the next generation of leaders. Those who currently hold executive level leadership positions must identify and create connections with aspiring female leaders to give them targeted learning and opportunities.

Formal and informal support approaches put into practice can ensure that aspiring female leaders have an assigned female mentor earlier in their leadership path who has the capability to guide and mentor. In addition, this approach could include feedback from site supervisors to co-coach as the mentee maneuvers through leadership situations and sets goals towards other executive level leadership positions. This allows mentees to

have access to a female along with growing in their application of knowledge connected to school or district duties and responsibilities.

For more tailored support to occur for women progressing through executive levels of leadership, a strong collaborative support system between aspiring leaders, schools/districts, mentors programs, and professional organizations could benefit the trajectory of women obtaining and experiencing leadership success. Since educational organizations currently collaborate with schools and districts to assist with recruiting and hiring, teaching and supporting effective leadership practices, and training for role specific positions this would be a natural fit to develop aspiring and current female executive level leaders by providing shadowing opportunities or on-the-job training matched to personal leadership goals. However, ensuring that gender specific training is provided, targeted training for female mentors as they guide striving leaders, and exposure to female and male leaders on similar and different leadership pathways to help close the operations and instructional role knowledge gap.

An inclusive pathway to providing formal and informal approaches that resonated with study participants collectively and aligned with study results from their perceived challenges would start with providing early leadership pathways structured through the human resources department for males and females. Identification and recruitment would occur through an application, interview, and performance-simulation process to help identify individuals with leadership capacity. These leadership pathways (instructional and operational) would provide job-embedded and paid opportunities to experience a variety of learning from and with executive level leaders. In addition, candidate leadership dispositions would be assessed for individual areas of strength and weaknesses

to provide them with personal insight on early development of their own leadership style and goals. As participants voluntarily began to chart their own leadership path a more tailored approach would be provided for women aspiring for leadership.

This tailored approach would occur in collaboration with professional organizations, higher education institutions, regional cooperatives, and/or agencies as appropriate. Aspiring women leaders would be matched in small groups with a cluster of female leaders that represent a variety of executive level leadership roles. This would provide formal and informal opportunities that would span over a longer period of time to establish more authentic relationships. An integral part of the formal support would be to provide trainings and mini-conference events specific to being female as an aspiring or current executive leader. As a part of the regional support through cooperatives there would be network meetings to emphasize leadership style development, role specific trainings, and providing learning on topics wanted by aspiring and current executive level leaders. Furthermore, those who are selected to serve as cluster mentors would be provided targeted training to equip them with the skills to mentor successfully.

In conclusion, the practices discussed above may provide schools, districts, and educational organizations with opportunities to improve their current efforts in leadership development related to initial identification and develop on-going support to promote equal access to executive level leadership roles for women. The lack of knowledge or acceptance of the challenges women experience seeking leadership roles may impact the future of female students who are interested in pursuing education as an occupation, current female teachers aspiring towards educational leadership, and current executive level leaders. Therefore, taking a comprehensive approach of sharing gender challenges

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through a supportive, solution-oriented approach can assist future and current female

leaders to avoid leadership pitfalls while experiencing success being leader as female.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Purpose Statement: The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study is to explore the perceptions, challenges, and lived experiences of women holding executive level leadership positions in the Commonwealth of Kentucky and to inform support strategies specifically tailored for women.

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Standpoint Theory

Research Methodology: Multiple Case Study/Semi-structured Interviews

Research Questions:

1. What have women in education leadership perceived as challenges, related to their lived experiences, as they sought executive level leadership roles?

2. What experiences, formal or informal, have supported women in education leadership as they progress through executive level leadership positions?

3. How might experiences that support women in education leadership be tailored as they progress through executive level leadership roles?

Interview Questions:

1. Describe your professional journey to the executive level leadership position you currently hold.

2. How did you view executive level leadership positions when you entered the profession?

3. What caused you to believe you could be a school or district leader?

4. What experiences, positive or negative, as a woman in educational leadership have you encountered along the way?

5. What factors, if any, have impacted your goals to be in educational leadership in the past or present?

6. How were you prepared for the leadership roles you have and/or currently hold?

7. Describe how you define the word challenges that you and/or other women experience aspiring to, obtaining, and/or holding executive level leadership positions.

8. Describe an experience, if any, in which you felt you were treated differently as a female in an educational leadership position.

9. What specific challenges, if any, have or do you experience? How did you overcome these challenges?

10. What factors, if any, do you feel impact women applying for executive level leadership positions in the field of education?

11. Reflecting on your own experiences, what specific supports do you feel women need to successfully purse their leadership goals in the field of education?

12. Are they any experiences and/or thoughts you would like to share?

Semi-Structured Interviews

Project Title:

WOMEN IN EXECUTIVE LEVEL EDUCATION LEADERSHIP POSITIONS: PERCEPTIONS, CHALLENGES, AND SUPPORTS

Investigator(s) name & address:

Dr. Debbie Powers
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University of Louisville
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Adrienne Usher
213 Choctaw Rd
Louisville, KY 40207
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Site(s) Where Study is to be Conducted: In-person, phone, or through virtual platform.

Phone number for subjects to call for questions: Adrienne Usher (270) 925-3528

Introduction and Background Information:

You are invited to participate in a research study regarding women in executive level leadership positions in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. The study is being conducted by Adrienne Usher, a doctoral student at the University of Louisville, who is being supervised by Dr. Debbie Powers, Associate Professor in Educational Leadership. The study will take place in-person, by phone, or through a virtual platform based on participant request. Approximately 10-12 participants will be invited to participate.

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the perceptions, challenges, and lived experiences of women holding executive level leadership positions in the Commonwealth of Kentucky and to inform mentoring strategies specifically tailored for women.

Procedures:

In this study, you will be asked to participate in semi-structured interviews. This is an individual interview in which I will ask you to respond to 12 questions about your perceptions, experiences, and challenges in an executive level leadership position to provide insight on future mentoring practices. I will audio and/or video record the interview in order to conduct an analysis of all interviewee responses later.

Potential Risks:

There are no foreseeable risks other than the sacrifice of your time to participate.

Benefits:

There are multiple potential benefits of this study: (1) the findings may provide a deeper understanding of women experience aspiring to or obtaining executive level leadership positions; (2) the findings may be helpful to school districts, schools, and professional organizations to develop formal mentoring programs for women; (3) participants may reflect on their own experiences and increase their own personal efforts to mentor aspiring women; and (4) inform leadership development programs, educational leadership recruiting firms, and Boards of Education insight into biases women may experience gaining executive level leadership positions.

Compensation:

You will not be compensated for your time, inconvenience, or expenses while you participate in this study, but drinks and refreshments will be provided during the semi-structured interviews. Some small tokens of appreciation will also be provided to show gratitude for your participation.

Confidentiality:

Total privacy cannot be guaranteed. Your privacy will be protected to the extent permitted by law. If the results from this study are published or used in reports, presentations your name will not be made public. Results will only be shared in aggregate form. The data will be stored on a recording device to allow the researcher to accurately transcribe the information from the recordings. Once transcription is complete, the video and audio recording will be erased. Only the researcher will have access to the initial data and paper records will be shredded.

Voluntary Participation:

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to be in this study, you may stop taking part at any time. If you decide not to be in this study or if you stop taking part at any time, you will not lose any benefits for which you may qualify. You will be told about any changes that may affect your decision to continue in the study.

Contact Persons, Research Subject's Rights, Questions, Concerns, and Complaints

If you have any concerns or complaints about the study or the study staff, you have three options. You may contact the principal investigator at (502) 295-7770 or debbie.powers@louisville.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a study subject, questions, concerns or complaints, you may call the Human Subjects Protection Program Office (HSPPO) (502) 852-5188. You may discuss any questions about your rights as a subject, in secret, with a member of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) or the HSPPO staff. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, staff of the institutions, as well as lay members of the community not connected with these institutions. The IRB has reviewed this study. If you want to

speak to a person outside the University, you may call 1-877-852-1167. You will be given the chance to talk about any questions, concerns or complaints in secret. This is a 24-hour hotline answered by people who do not work at the University of Louisville.

If you have questions about the study, you can ask me now or anytime during the study. You can also call me at (270) 925-3528 or e-mail me at adrienne.b.usher@gmail.com. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the IRB Office at University of Louisville. You will receive a copy of this form for your records. This informed consent document is not a contract. This document tells you what will happen during the study if you choose to take part. Your signature indicates that this study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in the study. You are not giving up any legal rights to which you are entitled by signing this informed consent document. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

Acknowledgment and Signatures:
This informed consent document is not a contract. This document tells you what will happen during the study if you choose to take part. Your signature indicates that this study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in the study. You are not giving up any legal rights to which you are entitled by signing this informed consent document. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

_____   _____   _____
Subject Name (Please Print)   Signature of Subject   Date
Signed

_____   _____   _____
Name of Investigator   Signature of Investigator   Date
Signed

List of Investigators   Phone Numbers
Dr. Debbie Powers   (502) 295-7770
Adrienne Usher   (270) 925-3528

Appendix C: Structured Ethical Reflection

Values	Developing Partner-ships	Construct-ing Research Questions	Planning Project/ Action	Recruit-ing Partici-pants	Collecting Data/ Evaluating Action	Analyzing Data/ Evaluation Action	Mem-ber Check-ing	Going Public (Presen-tation & Publica-tion)
Respect	Be aware of partner needs and time constraints	Create questions that allow participants to reflect and benefit from the interview	Being aware of potential participant time and my responsibilities to them	Seek participants in a variety of leadership roles aligned to research	Honor requests of participants in regards to time and interview format	Be true to participant viewpoints	Provide revised transcripts to participants based on feedback	Keep to the authenticity of participants viewpoints and voice
Self-Aware-ness	Be aware of positionality when developing partners	Create questions that reflect purpose of study	Write about positionality as researcher before conducting study	Be aware of communication style; understand feelings of conflict of potential participants	Utilize my emotional intelligence to strengthen the interview process	Participate in self-reflective strategy of participant data initially	Review coding alignment with first cycle and second cycle coding	Understand others may have differential opinions of the data
Trust	Understand how a trusting foundation is created	Ensure questions are worded to develop trust	Plan for confidentiality measures of participants	Ensure participants understand confidential safeguards	Maintain participant requests and agreement	Focus on research questions with data analysis	Inform participants on their role in reviewing data for changes	Provide clear picture of product in regards to confidentiality
Trans-parency	Make the purpose of the study very clear	Ensure interview questions are aligned to research questions	Provide clear explanation of study process and product	Contact potential participants to share information	Ask clarifying questions for accurate understanding	Be precise in data analysis steps	Allow participants to review interview data for adjustment	Communication of study, purpose, process and findings
Open-Minded-ness	Awareness of those with different/similar viewpoints	Develop questions that do not lead participants	Take into consideration the input/perspectives from committee	Look for participant opportunities reflect varying	Listen to the meaning behind the words of participants	Delay conclusions of data until after member checking	Stay grounded in feminist standpoint theory	Understand findings may compare and conflict with previous

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			members	perspecti ves			related to social position	research
Justice	Take into considerati on fairness to partners	Create questions that decrease participant vulnerabil ity	Ensure participant s thoroughl y understan d informed consent	Needs of participa nts come before study objective s	Awareness of participants vulnerabilit y in interview	Provide a clear picture of what participants experience and perceive	Ensure particip ants have confide nce of data	Remain true to the research method and plan
Inte-grity	Complete agreed upon actions and follow-up with partners	Construct questions that are open-ended and adaptable to the research environme nt	Keep study purpose in mind in all research study actions	Confirmi ng that participa nts are clear about the purpose and process of study	Ensure all interview questions are asked of each participant	Aware of responsibili ty weaving different individual perspective s together	Receive final agreem ent of data transcri pt from particip ants	Stay true to the research plan and actions from beginning to end

Appendix D: RQ1 Axial Code Theme and Participant Quotes

Axial Code Theme	Participant(s) and Quotes
Double Standard	Participant 2: "Females have to accept the situation of doing more"
	Participant 5: "Women can't say no to extra work as a leader"
	Participant 4: "My leadership journey was putting in long hours day in and day out, as compared to male colleagues on the same level, and almost became expected of me to be considered for other leadership positions in my district."
	Participant 8: "Women that want a leadership role just want power"
	Participant 3: "You are just a jealous, power hungry woman."
	Participant 7: "There really is a lack of middle ground for female leader behaviors."
	Participant 9: "When women are held to a different standard, this pressure keeps them from aspiring early on because of the risk involved and unequal treatment."
Gender	Participant 1: "Being seen as a leader, not female"
	Participant 3: "Pushing back on female leaders"
	Participant 10: "Conscientious of our presence"
	Participant 9: "General dislike of females by a male board member"
	Participant 7: "An overall thinking women can't take on executive leadership"
	Participant 4: "Childbearing stage of life"
	Participant 2: "Teachers are female"
Job Role vs. Gender	Participant 1: "Job duties associated with gender predispositions"
	Participant 10: "I have witnessed and experienced bias in seeking a position based on my gender in relation to an operations role."
	Participant 3: "Masculine perceived job duties"

	Participant 6: "Having limited knowledge of management and school budgeting experience"
	Participant 5: "Combatting the perception of job roles connected to gender is necessary for women to have equal access to higher levels of leadership in public education."
Perception of Executive Level Leadership	Participant 1-3, 5-10: "Disconnection from executive level leadership"
	Participant 4: "Us vs. them"
	Participant 8: "Boys club"
	Participant 10: "Lot of men"
	Participant 7: "We need a male for this"
	Participant 3: "Good old boy system"
	Participant 5: "Perceiving leadership as male continues to be a challenge for women seeking executive level leadership roles in education despite the advances that have been made by women in educational leadership.
Self-Confidence	Participants 1, 3, 5, and 8: "Lowliness"
	Participants 1-4, 5, 7, and 9: "Frustration"
	Participants 2 and 6-9: "Defeat"
	Participant 9: "Everyone's watching to see if a woman fails"
	Participant 6: "I lost my self-purpose under bad leadership which caused me to have severe self-doubt that I began to think about going back to the classroom."
	Participant 7: "I look to see what I am doing wrong or don't have when comparing myself to others in pursuing my leadership goals."

Appendix E: RQ2 Axial Code Theme and Participant Quotes

Axial Code Theme	Participant(s) and Quotes
Authentic Connection	Participant 4: "Support that allows vulnerability" Participant 9: "Hearing the negatives" Participant 1: "Learning from failures of others" Participant 6: "Bearing my soul' Participant 8: "The person I can call and be me, outside of work, who understands my work and struggles"
Coaching and Feedback	Participant 7: "Critical friend" Participant 2: "Leadership path guidance" Participant 9: "I need female to female feedback so I can navigate situations as a woman in leadership pursuing my goals of being a superintendent." Participant 1: "Coaching as support for anyone is important, but especially for women because it is a way for us to seek and receive help from those, we interact with daily to catch our strengths and weaknesses in the moment like I experienced," Participant 1-4, 6, and 8-10: "Informal mentoring"
Coursework and Training	Participant 4: "An opportunity that propelled my leadership capacity forward unlike any other training opportunity". Participant 10: "The certification to have in hand was priority for me to even be considered for a job and be considered qualified." Participant 7: "Women focused training was such a positive experience for me." Participant 6: "A leadership training program that I participated in early in my career helped me so much." Participant 3: "Attending trainings and taking classes has helped me grow my skillset and keep me focused on growth in my leadership skills."

Encouragement	Participant 10: "Women need champions"
	Participant 7: "I have lived through the ups and downs of my role by connecting with experienced male colleagues for encouragement."
	Participant 4: "Encouragement from my principal created curiosity to take the next step"
	Participant 2: "This [encouragement] is not the reality for all women seeking leadership positions in my conversations with other women leaders."
	Participant 6: "Encouragement was the nudge I needed to grow more"
Female Role Models	Participant 1: "I was able to see myself in the female leaders around me when I was assistant principal that personally made me want to be in those positions."
	Participant 5: "she's the reason I wanted to become an administrator"
	Participant 7: "My family member's female principal became my role model for leadership"
	Participant 8: "I always pay attention to female leaders, more so than men, to learn what to do and not to do since I am starting my leadership career in education."
	Participant 10: "Women need to see another woman in the role they want to be in or are in as a form of support."
Learning by Experience	Participant 7: "Most of the support I have gained in my current leadership role came from the experience of having roles near my role previously."
	Participant 4: "A changing path was a part of my journey, but I felt competent in my experiences that I could be successful in different roles in different places."

	Participant 7: "Chances to lead"
Mentoring	Participant 8: "Strategic growth and development
	Participant 4: "I was highly prepared for the current district role I have because of the formal mentoring program and my mentor."
	Principal 3: "My mentor exposed me to the demands of being a school leader that have served me well in all the leadership roles I have had up until now."
	Participant 6: "I have been provided with a colleague that has supported me with honesty and tells me things I need to hear and doesn't just go along with what I think."
	Participant 10: "My mentor is always encouraging, but makes me think about how I show up to be aware of how I am leading in different situations."
	Participant 8: "Crucial for me getting my current position"
	Participant 5: "a skilled mentor is more important than being male or female"
	Participant 1: "A good experience that changed the trajectory of my career."
Networking	Participant 10: "Networking with other women in leadership has opened my eyes to new opportunities to pursue."
	Participant 8: "Putting yourself out there"
	Participant 1: "Eyes being opened"
	Participant 3: "I have worked to network more informally because of the positive impact it has on me personally and professionally."
Personal Motivation	Participant 6: "Fueled by working with high school students transitioning to adulthood"
	Participant 2: "Students are the focus of my leadership and personally motivate me as a leader."
	Participant 9: "I feel a sense of support and encouragement when I support others in

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	achieving their professional goals."
	Participant 3: "Turn the challenge upside down"
Supportive Supervisors	Participant 4: "I experienced positive team leadership from my supervisor that inspired me towards leadership."
	Participant 1"The ability to work under a supervisor that was focused on growth and high expectations was so helpful."
	Participant 7: "My supervisor pushed me to see myself as a leader."
	Participant 3: "Executive leaders in my district and school were supportive and created a positive culture for growing leaders."
	Participant 1, 2, 4, 5-7, and 8-10: "Encouraged by supervisor"
Work Experience	Participant 4: "I learned through previous responsibilities to grow my abilities."
	Participant 8: "I worked very closely with my superintendent so I was not completely surprised in all aspects of the superintendent role."
	Participant 6: "The principal responsibilities ignited my aspirations to do more for students at the district level."

Appendix F: RQ3 Re-Coded Axial and Focused Themes with Participant Quotes

Axial Code Theme	Participant(s) and Quotes
Female Support	Participant 6: "The work we do as female leaders is not easy and sometimes other women are the only ones who can understand this,"
	Participants 1, 3-7, 8, 9, and 10: "women need a female mentor"
	Participant 8: "I have learned from my mentor, who is a woman, how to leverage my assertiveness and be heard by all colleagues."
Identification and Recruitment	Participants 1, 2, 4, and 7-9: "tapped on the shoulder"
	Participant 3: "At the right place at the right time"
	Participant 7: "There are many women in education, but that doesn't mean they all have the skills or disposition to be a leader."
	Participant 5: "One female can hurt us all so we have to be careful what women leaders we promote and align ourselves with."
	Participant 10: "[identification and recruitment] crucial for the trajectory of all women now and in the future to successfully gain leadership positions in Kentucky"
Professional Organization	Participant 6: "a source of guidance, support, and networking for women"
	Participants 3-5, 7, and 9: "help guide"
	Participant 9: "I have created wonderful professional connections that have steered me to success in my career as a woman."
	Participant 4: "The most positive and beneficial leadership program [KWEL] I have ever experienced in my career."
	Participant: 7: "A deliberate focus on my growth in collaboration with my mentor who lets me be open with my work, my frustrations, my celebrations, and my goals."

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Participant 1: "Critical to my self-concept as a female leader"

Participant 8: "When I found out I was going to mentor another woman, I was humbled, nervous, and determined to do my best because of the great mentor I had and still lean on for support."

Participant 5: "I didn't realize how much I really needed a female mentor in my past because I have become a better leader in my role by doing this [KWEL]!"

Same Role Support

Participant 8: "Colleagues, male or female, who have the same role in other schools and districts are a part of my knowledge and leadership development,"

Participant 9: "I would not have been hired for my current role if my former supervisor had not taught me about the role I was in before this one because he had it before me."

Participant 6: "There is a critical need for female mentoring based on an individual's current role."

Participant 7: "[same role support] grew me in position knowledge and leadership"

Participant 4: "I feel intentional support of those doing the same work isn't there for women especially as they climb the ladder because learning from those who have walked in your shoes can push and help you to do more."

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