ABSTRACT

WALKER, MARIAH. A Qualitative Study of Current and Post-Covid Pandemic Challenges Confronting Secondary Female Principals in their Professional Journey. (Under the direction of Dr. Lisa Bass).

This study explores the multifaceted challenges that secondary female principals face in a post-COVID educational landscape, focusing on the interplay of professional demands, gender bias, and leadership expectations. This qualitative research provides insights into how these principals navigate evolving expectations in both their professional and personal lives. The study aims to understand the strategies these women use to enhance job satisfaction, professional efficacy, and balance in their roles. Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with eight female principals in a suburban school district in North Carolina to explore their experiences, challenges, and the supports they deem necessary for personal and professional well-being.

Key themes emerged from the data, including the pressure to support comprehensive mental wellness while maintaining academic success, the increased polarization of education and communities post-pandemic, the impact of ingrained gender bias on ambition and professional practice, the importance of finding self-fulfilled joy, and the value of gender affinity mentorship. Participants expressed that their roles often required them to perform with near-perfect outcomes and that there is little room for error in secondary leadership. The concept of the "superwoman" archetype significantly influenced their perceptions of the principalship, their behaviors, and their career trajectories.

The findings of this study have important policy implications for educational leadership. Addressing gender bias through transformational learning and providing support for supervisors, such as area superintendents and superintendents, can create a more inclusive environment for female principals. Additionally, policies should focus on supporting mental health and wellness

by incorporating initiatives such as coaching and dedicated time for wellness activities sourced by the district. Mentorship and professional development tailored to the unique challenges faced by female leaders are crucial for enhancing their effectiveness and fostering long-term retention in leadership roles.

The study contributes to the understanding of how gender and post-pandemic challenges intersect to influence the experiences of secondary female principals. It provides practical recommendations for school districts to better support these leaders by addressing systemic barriers, fostering wellness, and implementing equity-focused leadership practices. This research underscores the need for ongoing attention to gender dynamics and the evolving landscape of educational leadership to ensure that female principals thrive in their roles, ultimately benefiting the broader school community. By highlighting the voices of secondary female principals, the study contributes to broader discourses on gender equity, educational leadership, and policy reform that supports the sustainability and well-being of women in leadership positions.

Title: Current and Post-Covid Pandemic Challenges Confronting Secondary Female Principals in their Professional Journey

by
Mariah Ann Walker

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DEDICATION

For all the beautiful sisters of the yam before me, and all the sisters who will come after me,

I am because you are, You are therefore I am. It’s not taboo to go back and fetch, Sankofa.

You are not alone.

BIOGRAPHY

Mariah Walker is a doctoral student at North Carolian State University, College of Education. She received a bachelor's degree in English and Secondary Education from North Carolina University, a master's in Curriculum and Supervision, and a master's in School Administration, also from North Carolina State University. Her current field placement is within the public education field, where she serves as a secondary, early college principal. She is interested in gender studies and the preparation of public-school leaders.

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To my writing encouragers and Tuffy Cohort, thank you for encouraging me. Together we pulled each other, gripping the rope tighter and digging in deeper, to get to the other side of the valley. Together we've lifted each other up.

Thank you to my amazing family for the way they believe in me and encourage me. The culmination of your love and support over these last years will remain close to my heart. To my husband, thank you for being patient with all the pieces of me (it's a lot). To my boys, thank you for sharing me with work, school, and my laptop. Everything I try to do is for you. To my mom, thank you for being my cheerleader, listener, and texter, even though I know you don't like texts!

Thank you, God, for giving me wisdom. You are a God of second change, but I thank you for the many seconds, third, fourth, and many opportunities you give me.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The disposition of the principal influences every fiber of the school community. In fact, the school principal is often the decisive element of school culture. In the sphere of educational leadership, the principal plays a pivotal role in shaping the learning environment, fostering teacher development, engaging parents, and most essentially, driving student achievement. Post-Covid educational data continues to reflect a need for strong schools across the United States. As the United States educational system continues to grapple with staffing shortages, retention of qualified candidates has become increasingly critical for the wellness and system stability of public schools. While funding competitive salaries and benefits looms as a challenging aspect of talent acquisition and management, school staff often cite working conditions as a major factor in their willingness to continue service or their desire to leave. Post-Covid data has reflected increased field stress among educators. Principals are not only less likely to recommend their role to peers or fellow educators considering the role, but they are also less likely to stay in their role until retirement (Protheroe, 2008). Principals are retiring sooner, leaving earlier, and transitioning out of the role quicker than the applicant pool for school leaders can develop candidates in waiting (Fenwick, 2000).

The school principalship remains critical for school success and progress. The role of the principal pre-Covid was already exceptionally challenging (Fullan, 2007). The principalship post-Covid exceeds the traditional principal preparatory scope. Today's principals are gridlocked with pressure to meet and exceed academic benchmarks, manage school safety, respond to the social and emotional needs of students, staff, and parents, create a welcoming climate and building culture, while also attending to their own individual growth and well-being. Yet, despite strong teachers, engaged parents, and a robust community, researchers identify the principal as

the key indicator in promoting school success (Pepper, 2010). Principals are the staple ingredient in creating strong schools and a stable educational system. There are over 90,000 principals, in the United States, serving students in elementary and secondary public schools, as well as another 10,000 leaders in private and charter institutions (NCES, 2023). In 2020, there were more female principals overall than males in both public and private schools (NCES, 2023). Women were more likely to serve as elementary school principals, with 68.6% (NCES, 2023). The number decreases to 43.7% of women serving as Middle School principals, and 35.5% serving as high school principals in the United States (NCES, 2023). Historically, secondary principalships have been held by men, but over the past few decades, there has been an increase in the number of women who become secondary principals (Kruse & Krumm, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2018). The number of secondary female principals has grown exponentially over the past 20 years from 14% in 1994, to 22% in 2000, to 26% in 2004, 30% in 2012, and 43.5% in 2018 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009, 2019). The median age represented amongst principals in the United States is 47 (NCES, 2023). The microcosm of North Carolina reflects this with 2019 data showing 62% of statewide principals as women (NCES, 2022). The statewide age average in North Carolina for principals was 43.6 in 2019, which is close to the current age average of 45 for United States Principals (NCES, 2023). Gender representation has trended positively for women in educational leadership with continued growth from National Center for Education Statistics reports from 2012, 2017, to 2022; however, representation continues to vary by region of the United States, school level, school size, economic status, rural or urban populations, and religious affiliation (NCES, 2023). While the landscape of educational leadership has evolved over the years, challenges persist, particularly for female principals. Despite significant strides towards gender equality, women in leadership

positions continue to encounter unique obstacles in their professional journey. As they navigate their career paths, female principals often find themselves grappling with societal expectations that place them on a pedestal as "superwomen," seemingly capable of effortlessly balancing multiple responsibilities and defying the limitations imposed by traditional gender norms. These leaders are expected to “burn the candle at both ends” with the face of joy and ease.

As major gains have been made in gender equality in various spheres of American society, including education. Women have emerged as powerful and influential leaders, breaking barriers, and challenging traditional norms in pursuit of educational leadership positions; however, despite these advances, the representation and experience of women in educational leadership, specifically the role of secondary principal, continues to be disproportionate (Harris, Arnold, et al, 2002). For example, elementary principals are often female, while secondary principals are preferred to be male (Protheroe, 2008). Curriculum coaches and facilitators are more likely to be female, while assistant superintendents are more likely to be male (Protheroe, 2008). Researchers note that female administrators experience barriers to the role that their male counterparts do not site, such as differences in working conditions, community bias, administrative style, and motivation (Fuller et al., 2018). Though barriers are certainly present for both men and women, women may experience different barriers than male counterparts. For example, research notes that female caregivers may spend as much as 50% more time providing care than male caregivers (National Alliance of Caregiving, 2020). Even when supported by family and spouses, women perceive that they must maintain the role of main caregivers in their families and take on additional roles at home (DeSimone, 2020; Essedeen et al., 2018; Parker, 2015; Prado Tuma & Spillane, 2019).

Societal norms for women have played into the notion that women are best suited for primary educational positions that emphasize nurturing and care of young children with activities that are less strenuous physically and intellectually (Krüger, 2008; Weiler, 2009). Education remains a profession largely staffed by women (e.g., teachers, support personnel), yet led categorically by male constructs of leadership (Guitian, 2009). Categorically female principals are still less likely to serve as secondary principals in the United States, where males actively pursue similar positions, with similar qualifications (Protheroe, 2008). The discrepancy in women principals is especially noted at the secondary level, in suburban White school communities (Normore & Jean-Marie, 2008). Minority women remain even less likely to attain secondary principalships and data has not trended positively for this subgroup of leaders, even though the data has shown growth for women overall. African American, Hispanic, Asian, and Multiracial women account for less than 4.8% of secondary principals in the United States (NCES, 2021). The underrepresentation of women in secondary principalships, and cabinet level leadership, not only hinders their career progression but also raises pertinent questions about the inherent obstacles minority women may face in assuming and sustaining leadership roles within the current educational system. Still, more women, of all ethnicities, have pursued graduate education programs to advance their educational experience and potential (Collay & Cooper, 2008). Yet, despite returning for advanced degrees, women still experience less frequent mobility and longevity in leadership positions (Horsford, 2012).

The current educational landscape requires leaders who possess a diverse range of skills and strengths to address complex challenges of the modern educational system and role (Collay & Cooper, 2008). Despite the increased presence of women in the principalship, women continue to confront significant barriers when aspiring and occupying principalship positions (Young &

McLeod, 2001). These barriers often encompass both systemic challenges within the educational environment and individual obstacles that women principals must overcome to attain and maintain leadership roles. This is especially challenging for women who desire principalships in the secondary setting, where women have historically been less likely to serve as leader. Societal norms, institutional biases, personal and community perceptions that perpetuate gender stereotypes, and more modern obstacles experienced since the Covid-19 pandemic influence the female principalship experience.

At a systemic level, gender discrimination and bias can hinder women's access to leadership opportunities (Limerick & Anderson, 1999). Individual preconceived ideas about leadership capabilities based on gender stereotypes can marginalize women and undermine their confidence and the way they are seen by themselves and peers within the profession (Limerick & Anderson, 1999). Institutional and community structures may perpetuate male preferentiality in leadership positions, further limiting women's progress, access, and experience within the educational hierarchy. Societal structures and norms contribute challenges for women pursing educational leadership roles. Work-life balance also poses a significant challenge for women pursuing leadership roles in the education sector (Limerick & Anderson, 1999). The demanding nature of school leadership positions often requires long hours, time outside of the home, extensive responsibility, and accountability (Sachs & Blackmore, 1998). Though the role of the American woman has evolved, many American women still report a perceived responsibility to fulfill modern roles of professional success, while also fulfilling roles within a traditional view, such as homemaker, caregiver, and community builder, thus making the concept of extensive time away from home daunting (Hochschild & Machung, 2012).

Beyond the household, women also face disproportionate independence in educational leadership. A lack of mentorship and professional support can hinder career growth among aspiring women leaders. Compared to male counterparts, women must often experience learning and leadership independently, which conversely adds to feelings of isolation and required independence (Collay & Cooper, 2008). Women may encounter a scarcity of female role models in leadership positions, such as secondary principals, which can make it difficult to envision themselves and navigate the pathway to success and longevity (Allen et al., 1995). Adequate mentorship and support are crucial to foster the leadership skills and confidence necessary to navigate obstacles, attain leadership roles, and experience longevity in school leadership positions (Collay & Cooper, 2008).

Understanding the barriers female principals encounter is essential in establishing strategies, practices, and policies to promote gender diversity and inclusivity in the principalship. By investigating the challenges secondary female principals experience in the current K-12 principalship, this dissertation will contribute to the body of knowledge, generate conceptual connections, and propose pragmatic recommendations to promote women's advancement in leadership roles within the education sector.

Statement of the Problem

Even with greater representation in the principalship, female principals, specifically secondary female principals face challenges that can hinder their career advancement and professional fulfillment. The "superwoman" archetype, characterized by societal expectations of women to excel in both their professional, while still maintaining traditional indicators of success in their personal lives, has the potential to exert significant pressure on secondary female principals. These expectations may create conflicting demands, leading to emotional strain,

work-life balance challenges, and premature professional disappointment. Principals often have multiple, and often conflicting, priorities that impact the work that must be done at the school level (Prado Tuma & Spillane, 2019). Furthermore, the interplay between these societal expectations and the professional obstacles faced by female principals remains an area that demands thorough examination and understanding.

The challenges of the post-Covid landscape and increasingly stressful school environments remain common reasons for high turnover. Secondary female principals are prone to these challenges as they represent a growing presence that was not noted pre-Covid. Women already highlighted significant concern with their career field in education before the Covid Pandemic, often highlighting stress and frustration around both gender and racial challenges experienced in the workplace (Horsford, 2012). Few studies exist to capture the strategies principals use to manage school and home life demands, personal well-being, or support structures employed by sitting principals. Even before Covid, principals balanced demands both in their personal (e.g., work-life balance, caring for aging parents and young children, being a spouse, participating in civic organizations) and professional (e.g., societal bias, hiring inequalities, role conflicts, sex discrimination, lack of networking opportunities) lives (Ray et al., 2020; Schwanke, 2016; Superville, 2018).

Though women possess leadership skill and capacity, they continue to face barriers to advancement (Eckman, 2003; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2010). Women principals historically have arrived at their positions at older ages than males and retained their positions for fewer years before retirement (Brunner & Grogan, 2005). However, recent data suggests that female principals arrive at the role earlier (NCES, 2022). Arriving at the position earlier may reflect fewer years of experience and fewer years of administrative roles overall. Considering the

national shortage of teachers, a shortage of qualified school administrative candidates has also been noted (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). According to Fullan, effective school principals remain the greatest indicator of success in schools. North Carolina is not exempt from hiring shortages for teachers. According to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, at the beginning of the 2023-2024 academic year, 20% of vacancies for North Carolina public schools were noted as a leading concern for educators (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2023). Principals are also retiring sooner, leaving earlier, and transitioning out of the role quicker than the applicant pool for school leaders can develop (Fenwick, 2000). Even still, with an overrepresentation of women in non-leadership positions in public education, women note hesitancy in pursuing educational leadership opportunities (Collay & Cooper, 2008). Principals are not likely to recommend their role to aspiring leaders or fellow educators (Protheroe, 2008). In Shakeshaft's (1989) seminal work, *Women in Educational Administration*, barriers women faced in leadership positions are explored in detail. The concern about the progression of women in leadership is not a recent awareness, yet the complexities have grown to shape persistent hesitancy and hardship for female leaders.

Leadership training, experience, and authorship often occur in a hierarchical setting (Collay & Cooper, 2008), which does not always embody educational leadership and pathways geared toward women. Societal perspectives about education, and therefore educational leaders, are often intertwined with beliefs about women and how women should or should not exist in these roles (Collay & Cooper, 2008). Leaders are often prepared with courses, texts, and pedagogical structures to address students, staff, and expectations in schools (Collay & Cooper, 2008). Leadership and career training rarely lean into situational challenges that arise due to hierarchical expectations and societal demands based on gender and culture. Female principals

and educational leaders, therefore, find themselves in complexities as job demand, gender, and culture intersect.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist theory, as a subset of critical theory, is dedicated to addressing exploitative practices rooted in gender distinctions and inequalities. Rather than a monolithic body of feminist theory, multiple theories exist, sharing common themes. This study employs standpoint feminist theory to investigate disparities among social groups from their unique vantage points shaped by their life experiences. Standpoint feminism posits that, due to the distinct life experiences of women compared to men in nearly all societies, women possess a different form of knowledge. Narayan (2004) acknowledges that women's marginalized status enables them to perceive and understand the world in ways that challenge the prevailing male-dominated conventional wisdom (pp. 256-272).

In addition to Standpoint, feminism, this study will also incorporate the work of Irby et al. (1999) with Synergistic Leadership Theory. There are four points to this theory: (a) the involvement of female leaders in its formulation; (b) recognition that external forces, organizational frameworks, and attitudes, beliefs, and values may affect female leaders differently from male leaders and vice versa; (c) acknowledgment that female leadership behaviors may interact with these factors in ways distinct from male leadership behaviors; and (d) an understanding that leaders at various positions or levels may be influenced by these model factors in varying ways (Irby et al., 1999). Harding proposed that women's experiences can offer valuable perspectives in areas where their viewpoint has been historically omitted (Harding, 2004). Literature stemming from a patriarchal perspective frequently fails to accurately depict

women's journeys into administrative roles. Feminist standpoint theory provides a lens for understanding this transition.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to explore post-covid challenges; to uncover perceived role expectations; to unpack perceived strategies to manage home and work demands with a specific emphasis on the impact of societal expectations and the "superwoman" archetype; and to uncover supports that positively influence modern secondary female principals. By examining these challenges through this research, insights into the barriers faced by female principals and how these expectations shape their professional journey will be uncovered. Additionally, by identifying the strategies employed by female principals to navigate and overcome these obstacles, the results will illuminate the resilience and resourcefulness they exhibit in leadership roles. Finally, through naming supports that secondary female principals employ for success, other leaders will find opportunity for enrichment as they navigate their role.

Significance of the Study

The research is a highlight of the significant experiences, challenges, and successes of secondary female principals. This research will provide insight on how secondary female principals would like to be supported from their perspective. In prior decades, male administrators dominated both primary and secondary school leadership; however, in subsequent years, as more tenured administrators retired, female leaders have ascended to principalships (Protheroe, 2008). Therefore, historic research is rooted in perspectives driven by male administrators. This study is significant in that it will examine current post-COVID challenges experienced by secondary female principals, without the comparison of their peers. Data from

this study will provide insight into how school districts can recruit and retain secondary principals successfully, as well as how to ensure their wellness as they serve their districts.

The age of principals has also changed, as in prior decades, principals tended to move into the role within closer proximity to retirement, while principals now move into the position statistically earlier in their careers, with more than a decade's distance from retirement (Protheroe, 2008). Female principals entering the role at earlier ages are also subject to experiencing life changes and challenges with greater differences than their predecessors (Murphy et al., 2006). This study will seek to respond to the recent profile of secondary female principals who arrive to the role earlier in their career.

Scholars have highlighted that the leadership role and structure of the principalship are rooted in expectations for men. Women were not initially viewed as building, district, or state leaders (Collay & Cooper, 2008). Though the traditional view of women has evolved in American society over the years, the infrastructure of hierarchical expectations within familiar, corporate, and educational structures has not evolved as quickly. This study will consider how and if a traditional view of women remains impactful to theway secondary female principals view themselves or perceive they are viewed by their school community.

By discovering the ways secondary female principals have overcome this infrastructure to develop their own sense of leadership identity and success, the field of research can influence greater outcomes in recruiting and retaining principals. Additionally, adding to the framework of professional development advances the likelihood that female principals will successfully lead positive student and staff outcomes in educational settings, thus positively impacting a critical part of American society.

Research Questions

This dissertation seeks to address the complexities surrounding the experiences of secondary female principals and the obstacles they encounter in their position. The following questions will guide this research:

1. What do secondary female principals identify as the key expectation in their role?
2. How do secondary female principals believe the "superwoman" archetype, or the assumption that women should manage multiple culturally constructed roles, influence their perceptions about the principalship, behaviors in the principalship, and career trajectories?
3. What post-COVID career obstacles are currently faced by secondary female principals?
4. What personal and professional supports do secondary female principals perceive they need to maximize their success and wellness, personally and professionally?

The purpose of this research is to uncover the challenging experiences of the secondary principalship, with a scope on gender specific complexities. Given the number of female leaders currently in education, and the increasing need to recruit and retain quality leadership, it is appropriate to examine how women successfully navigate and approach leadership roles. This dissertation will contribute to existing literature on the topic by discovering opportunities for overcoming barriers, but also by exploring barriers that modern women experience during the secondary principalship. This study contributes to the current body of research by establishing similarities and differences, not only by race but by culture, thus allowing a deeper understanding of the unique challenges female leaders can be prepared to face in the principalship. The overarching goal of this dissertation is to explore the professional challenges

encountered by secondary female principals in their careers, with a specific focus on the impact of social norms and expectations, as well as to learn what supports they feel they would be most beneficial. Through background questions and semi-structured interviews this research will gain this perspective and insight from current secondary female principals in a suburban school district in North Carolina.

Assumptions of Research

This research begins with the foundational assumption that gender disparities do exist within the field of educational leadership. This research assumes that secondary female principals face unique challenges due to societal expectations, bias, and gender norms. These gender specific disparities are recognized as an intrinsic experience that may not present as tangible rationale; the study seeks to uncover the intrinsic manifestations and to illuminate their impact.

The study operates under the assumption that societal expectations play a significant role in shaping the experiences of secondary female principals. Secondary female principals are subject to societal expectations that may require them to embody the superwoman archetype, which reflects an idealized image of women who excel in multiple domains, including professional leadership, family life, and community involvement, without a need to exert attention to self. These expectations are considered driving factors in the lives and careers of female principals and dominating intrinsic desires that factor into their performance and behaviors.

The background and foundational material assume that there is a connection between societal expectations, the superwoman archetype, and the professional experiences of secondary female principals. It is assumed that these expectations and the superwoman archetype are not

listed as characteristics to meet in isolation but rather blended in intricate ways, influencing perceptions, behaviors, self-esteem, identity, and career trajectories. This assumption emphasizes the need for an understanding of the dynamics at play in understanding the work of secondary female principals.

While the study acknowledges the influence and presence of societal expectations and the superwoman archetype, it also assumes that individual experiences vary among female principals. Not all secondary female principals will conform to demands and expectations in the same way, and experiences will be influenced by additional contributions of factors, including personality characteristics, personal preferences, leadership styles, and life circumstances.

This research exists under the assumption that female principals exhibit resilience and adaptations in response to the challenges presented by societal expectations and the superwoman archetype. It is assumed that female principals utilize various strategies to navigate these obstacles.

Statement of Positionality

As I present these findings, in the realm of self-reflection, I acknowledge my standpoint as an educated African American female secondary principal. As a principal, I have been provided with opportunity to observe various experiences of other women in the field. These experiences are intriguing to me and some of my personal experiences overlap in phenomena. I recognize that my positionality influenced my passion, interest, and research to an extent. This work is deeply personal and while it does serve as an academic pursuit, it also serves as a reflection and deeper understanding of my own experiences and those of my fellow female colleagues.

As a female principal in a large sub-urban district in North Carolina, I am keenly aware of the surmounting challenges and rewards that accompany my role. My path as an educational leader is characterized by perseverance, resilience, and a dedication to making a positive impact on the lives of students, teachers, and the greater community. Still, despite that intentionality and resilience, challenges are heavy and come with frequent self-reflection.

I bring a firsthand perspective to this research, providing an authentic and intimate understanding of the intricacies. This position allows me to approach the research and the framework with empathy and compassion. As a building leader on the front row of education in the United States, I see the petite line of balance that comes with the principalship. I see how women are expected to be "superwomen" but also the ways in which these expectations bring anxiety, depression, and disappointment to many female leaders.

Through this research, I am committed to bringing forth the voices and experiences of secondary female principals, amplifying their voice, challenges, and triumphs. This positionality statement highlights my dedication to ensuring that the research is conducted ethically, with utmost respect for the privacy and confidentiality of participants. Due to the nature of this research, I anticipate that participants may feel reservation without an emphasis on confidentiality and unidentifiable efforts. This positionality statement also asserts that since I acknowledge my position and the potential impact in brings, I am committed to conducting myself with the principles of epochē when I research. These principles will allow me to effectively contribute to the body of research ethically, while also creating opportunities to establish positive related resources for women.

Delimitations of Study

This study is delimited by its geographic focus, concentrating exclusively on secondary female principals working within a suburban public school district in North Carolina. While the experiences of female principals are influenced by a wide range of regional, cultural, and environmental factors, this research centers on the experiences of secondary female principals within the predefined educational system and position as secondary principal. Different states, regions of the United States, counties within in North Carolina; and countries beyond the United States may exhibit distinct societal and gender expectations and challenges in contrast.

This study has a specific scope on the educational setting. It explores the experiences of secondary female principals in K-12 educational institutions within the defined educational system. While this context offers valuable insights into the challenges faced by secondary female principals, it does not address the experiences of women in other leadership roles or industries where societal expectations and the superwoman archetype may also play a role in the experiences and career progressions of women. The research focuses on the experiences of female principals within the current timeframe. While societal expectations and the feminine archetype have evolved over time, this study does not provide an extensive historical analysis of these changes and how those changes may influence current experiences. Nor does this study explore how expectations may evolve in the future, therefore further impacting the outcomes and trajectory of secondary female principals. Instead, it examines the current impact of societal expectations and the superwoman archetype on secondary female principals.

This research acknowledges that female principals may adopt various leadership styles that are influenced by their own individual characteristics and preferences; however, it does not delve deeply into the characteristics of these leadership styles or how certain leadership styles

may interact with societal expectations, regional traditions, cultural norms, and the superwoman archetype. The study centers on common themes and challenges while still recognizing the diversity of leadership approach and characteristic for secondary female principals.

The study relies on self-reported data obtained through interviews and surveys with secondary female principals. While these firsthand accounts provide valuable insights, they may be subject to self-reporting bias. Participants may provide responses influenced by their perceived societal expectations or their desired perception. Participants may also provide responses with reservation due to knowledge of research use and connection potential. As a result, this dissertation is constrained by those available resources, specifically time and access to participants. A more comprehensive and robust dive requires additional resources and an extended research timeframe. Therefore, the study provides a snapshot of the experiences of secondary female principals in a suburban public school district in North Carolina.

This research aims to generate valuable insights into the experiences of secondary female principals and the impact of societal expectations and the superwoman archetype. As a result of the structures and delimitations, this research cannot generalize findings categorically to all female principals. Individual experiences vary significantly based on unique factors such as school context, leadership style, and individual personal circumstances. The study does contribute to an understanding of common themes and trends facing female principals in the K-12 setting in North Carolina.

Definitions of Terms

In examining the challenges and obstacles experienced by female secondary principals, it is crucial to employ an understanding of several theoretical and conceptual terms. These terms provide a framework for interpreting the complex dynamics faced by women in leadership

positions within educational settings. By delineating concepts such as self-authorship, leadership identity, and mentorship, researchers can better understand how female principals navigate their professional roles amidst various pressures. Similarly, the exploration of feminine identities and the impact of gender bias offer insight into the specific societal and structural challenges these women face.

The significance of these terms extends to how they shape the experiences of secondary female principals, particularly in managing the dual demands of leadership and personal responsibilities. For example, *self-authorship* highlights the process through which female principals develop their own understanding of their roles and capabilities, crucial for navigating the often-challenging landscape of educational leadership. *Leadership identity* further explores how these principals perceive and project their leadership roles, integrating their personal and professional selves. *Mentorship* is recognized as a critical support system, providing guidance and assistance essential for overcoming professional hurdles.

Feminine identities and the *superwoman archetype* frame the social constructs and expectations that female principals confront, shedding light on the pressures to conform to gendered norms while performing effectively in their roles. The concept of *intersectionality* addresses the compounded effects of race and gender, offering a lens to explore how these intersecting identities influence their professional experiences and challenges.

By integrating these concepts, the study not only contextualizes the difficulties faced by female secondary principals but also provides a comprehensive understanding of the structural and personal factors that impact their leadership. This framework enables a deeper analysis of how these leaders manage their roles and what support systems are necessary to enhance their effectiveness and well-being.

The terms utilized in this study are consistent with qualitative research study practice. Additional terms relevant to the study topic and material reviewed include:

- Self-Authorship: A theoretical construct referring to the process by which individuals actively construct, reinterpret, and internalize their own understanding and meaning of their experiences, thereby shaping their personal identity and growth. This concept emphasizes the evolving and self-determined nature of personal narratives (Baxter Magolda, 2008).
- Leadership Identity: The conceptual framework through which individuals form and perceive their ability to lead, integrating their self-concept with practical experiences and theoretical understanding. This identity encompasses personal self-perception, application of leadership principles, and the intellectual grasp of leadership roles (Komives et al., 2005).
- Mentorship: A structured and intentional relationship where a more experienced individual or entity provides guidance, support, and professional development to a less experienced individual, fostering their growth, problem-solving abilities, and success within a particular field or context (Kram, 1985).
- Feminine Identities: Socially constructed categories and roles that define and categorize women's behaviors, attributes, and experiences within various cultural and societal contexts. These identities reflect the societal expectations and norms imposed on women (Butler, 1990).
- Double Jeopardy: A theoretical framework describing the compounded disadvantages experienced by individuals who belong to multiple marginalized or minority groups simultaneously, resulting in intersecting forms of discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989).

- Epochē: A philosophical concept referring to the suspension of pre-existing judgments or biases to achieve a more objective and unbiased understanding of a phenomenon. This approach allows for a clearer analysis of experiences and knowledge (Husserl, 1931).
- Intersectionality: A framework for analyzing the interconnectedness of various social categories such as race, gender, and class, and how these intersections create unique and cumulative experiences of oppression or privilege for individuals and groups (Crenshaw, 1991).
- Prescriptive Gender Bias: Beliefs of how men and women should present themselves (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001).
- Transformational Learning: An educational theory that focuses on significant changes in an individual's perspectives and understanding as a result of challenging and inspiring learning experiences. This theory emphasizes the importance of deep, contextual learning processes (Mezirow, 1991).
- Feminist Thought: An analytical framework that explores dimensions influencing female, specifically Black female perspectives, and identities, including lived experiences, dialogical processes to assess knowledge, the ethic of care, and personal accountability (hooks, 2000).
- Secondary Principal: Principals who support institutions that serve students in grades 6 through 12, encompassing students in middle school, grades 6-8; and high schools, grades 9-12 (US Department of Education, 2020).
- Standpoint Theory: A feminist theoretical perspective that asserts that knowledge and understanding are shaped by one's social position and perspective, particularly

highlighting how marginalized groups contribute unique and critical insights to broader epistemological discussions (Harding, 2004).

- Superwoman Archetype: A modern cultural construct that embodies the expectation that women must excel in multiple demanding roles simultaneously, often resulting in an idealized and unrealistic standard of perfection and competence (Rado, 2018).

These terms are essential to research on the qualitative study of secondary female principals because they provide a framework for understanding the complexities of their experiences and the range of factors that shape their leadership journey. These terms have been identified through the review of existing research and literature to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of concepts applied to honor the integrity of this study.

Chapter Summary

This chapter introduces the purpose of the research and the essential questions that the study sought to address. The next chapter will provide an overview of the relevant research and existing literature on the topic of feminine identity and leadership identity for principals. This dissertation delves into the challenges women principals experience in leadership roles and the obstacles they face in their career pathway. Acknowledging these hurdles are crucial steps towards achieving gender equity in educational leadership, ultimately fostering a more inclusive educational environment for future generations. Through literature, research, and analysis, this study seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of the intricate issues surrounding gender disparities in educational leadership and support opportunities to empower and uplift women in the field of education. The next chapter will provide a tapestry of literary research and structures that support the research and provide greater understanding into the connected concepts and framework.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The current educational landscape requires leaders who possess a diverse range of skills and strengths to address complex challenges of the modern educational system (Collay & Cooper, 2008). Enhancing the quality of education for American students and ensuring that every student reaches their full potential is a matter of paramount importance for several compelling reasons. It directly impacts the nation's overall growth, the well-being of its citizens, and the country's ability to maintain a competitive edge on the global stage (Pepper, 2010).

Effective and vested leaders in education play an indispensable role in shaping the future of our schools and, ultimately, the success of our students. Understanding the intricacies and challenges of leadership not only empowers individuals to become positive leaders but also enhances the quality of education and the overall school experience. By nurturing and retaining strong, dedicated leaders within our educational institutions, we create a ripple effect of positive outcomes that benefit both students and the broader community. The importance of leadership in education cannot be overstated, as it serves as the catalyst for transformative change and lasting progress in our schools. Exploring barriers to effective school leadership helps us develop reinforce the American educational system. Educational institutions in the United States exhibit an intricate tapestry of diversity and complexity. Whether they are public, private, or charter these schools share a common mission: to accelerate learning and achieve a student’s full potential. At the forefront stands the school principal, entrusted with the paramount task of translating the mission of providing equitable opportunities for students into tangible reality (Miranda et al., 2018). School principals routinely grapple with a multitude of responsibilities, often entailing conflicting demands that shape the course of action at the school level (Miranda et al., 2018). They deftly navigate between numerous roles, including leading adult staff,

cultivating a positive school culture, forging, and nurturing community partnerships, addressing the needs of families, fostering an environment conducive to learning and growth for all, and managing the relentless pressure to continually enhance student achievement (Wallace Foundation, 2013).

Female principals bear a multifaceted burden as they navigate the challenging terrain of educational leadership. The role of a principal is inherently demanding, but for women in this position, additional layers of complexity often emerge. Beyond the standard responsibilities of leading a school, they grapple with a distinct set of stressors stemming from societal expectations, gender biases, and personal life commitments. Balancing professional duties with family responsibilities can lead to role conflict, forcing female principals to juggle their roles as educators, administrators, caregivers, and partners. These educational leaders may encounter barriers, both internal and external, that set them apart from their male counterparts. While some internal barriers like self-image and confidence persist, external challenges, such as historical gender biases, have somewhat evolved over time but continue to pose obstacles. Despite these trials, women principals remain resilient, contributing significantly to the educational landscape and shattering glass ceilings along the way. Despite the potential benefits of gender diversity in leadership roles, women continue to confront significant barriers when aspiring and occupying principalship positions (Young & McLeod, 2001). These barriers often encompass both systemic challenges within the educational environment and individual obstacles that women principals must overcome to attain and maintain leadership roles.

The aim of this qualitative study is to explore the firsthand experiences of female principals in relation to their leadership role in the educational setting. The subsequent literature review commences with an overview of leadership, leadership impact, social roles, and further

delves into research studies that underscore the intersection of gender in educational leadership. The review delves into the principal's role and its influence, and it examines the intersection of the principal experience with gender and race. Additionally, the review delves into the influence of gender and stereotypes on perceptions of female leadership and opportunities for leadership roles. This section unpacks the ways women lead and offers a comprehensive analysis of how the leadership experience is unique to female principals. Finally, the review concludes by addressing the obstacles that women encounter in attaining and maintaining principal positions and suggests optimal approaches for the development of female leaders. As a result of understanding the experiences of women principal, the existing body of research underscores the unique experiences of Black women principals. Black women represent a growing population in school administration programs, as well as principal positions in the United States (Neely, 2018). Therefore, in addition to exploring gender specific experiences and social roles, the review will also include attention to the experiences unique to Black women principals to fully capture the experiences of female principals.

Leadership Styles of Women

Females demonstrate unique leadership styles that are noted to have positive impacts in the workspace (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). According to the findings of Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt's 2001 study, there are distinct differences in leadership characteristics between females and males. Females tend to excel in certain areas, such as motivating subordinates through nurturing relationships, maintaining a positive outlook, and actively mentoring and addressing individual needs. They also outperform males in providing rewards for exceptional performance within a transactional leadership framework. On the other hand, male managers are more likely to closely monitor employee mistakes and difficulties, often

intervening only when problems escalate and being less available during crucial times. The most significant difference lies in the passive-management by exception scale, where males exhibit a greater tendency. Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt argued that women's higher performance in leadership roles can be attributed to the elevated expectations they face in acquiring and maintaining these positions. Additionally, men's occasional use of ineffective leadership styles, such as passive management and laissez-faire, might allow them to retain leadership positions despite subpar performance. Another study, by Mouton in 2010, offered an investigation into the relationship between principals' gender and success rates. This work underscored the effectiveness of feminine leadership, particularly in terms of student achievement outcomes. This study explored the impact of principals' gender on campus success rates based on state accountability systems in Texas.

Leadership style plays a pivotal role in the success of principals in public schools (Sergiovanni, 2007). Principals are not just administrators; they are the driving force behind a school's culture, direction, and overall performance (Sergiovanni, 2007). Effective leadership enables principals to articulate a clear vision for their schools, inspiring both educators and students to work towards common goals. They must create an environment that fosters collaboration, innovation, and continuous improvement. Leadership also involves making tough decisions, managing resources, and ensuring that all students receive a high-quality education. In today's complex educational landscape, principals must navigate various challenges, from evolving curriculum standards to diverse student populations. Strong leadership equips principals with the skills to address these challenges head-on, adapt to change, and ultimately, drive positive outcomes for both educators and students. As stated by Sergiovanni (2007), the principal's role as an instructional leader, with a primary focus on meeting students' academic

needs, can be effectively fulfilled through the practice of transformational leadership. This leadership approach emphasizes the sharing of leadership responsibilities between the administration, faculty, and staff, with a central focus on developing a robust curriculum that places a significant emphasis on instruction (Sergiovanni, 2007).

Transformational principals aim to unite the organization around a common goal by promoting empowerment and collaboration, striving for meaningful change. They also work to inspire teachers to align their efforts with the school's shared beliefs and overarching purpose. This approach grants teachers the autonomy to determine the most effective path toward achieving the established goals, ensuring that their strategies are in harmony with the school's core values and mission. As a result of the application of the transformational leadership style within the school, a strong and cohesive school culture is cultivated, along with a deep commitment from all stakeholders (Sergiovanni, 2007).

According to Northouse (2010), once an individual has identified their inclination toward transformational leadership through the MLQ assessment, they can initiate the process of applying and enhancing their transformational leadership skills. The transformational principal embarks on this application process by closely examining their own behavior in relation to the needs of both students and teachers within the school community. The emphasis placed on ideals, inspiration, innovation, and individual concerns serves as a catalyst for reshaping the overall dynamics of the schools they lead (Bass, 1985; Northouse, 2010). The transformational principal embodies the highest capacity of leadership to leverage outcomes for the entire school community, including students and adults.

Contemporary leadership calls for leaders to transcend historical figure head practices and embody more hands on instructionally based skills. The role of an effective school leader has

evolved beyond the conventional duties of a manager responsible for operational decisions within the school. It now encompasses leadership responsibilities aimed at enhancing the entire organization through activities such as sharing a vision, strategic planning, and fostering consensus among stakeholders (Trinidad & Normore, 2004).

Impacts of the Global Pandemic

Approximately 78% of individuals have reported that the coronavirus pandemic constituted a significant source of stress in their lives, as per the American Psychological Association (2020). Recent research focused on secondary school principals reveals that during the 2020-2021 school year, a striking four out of five secondary principals experienced frequent job-related stress (Woo & Steiner, 2022). Even before the pandemic, the role of a principal was known to be challenging. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the stressors experienced by principals. The most common stressors encountered by principals as a direct result of the pandemic included the responsibility of supporting teachers' well-being and students' social and emotional development, managing pandemic-related conditions, and handling administrative tasks such as staffing management, attendance tracking, and school scheduling (Woo & Steiner, 2022). Furthermore, the study indicates that principals experienced heightened stress when they perceived that their teachers were under increased stress. Throughout the pandemic, principals have been tasked with exemplifying strength, resilience, and positivity while providing unwavering support to students and faculty during uncertain times. Consequently, it is not surprising that 72% of principals expressed significant concern about job-related burnout stemming from the stress associated with their roles (Kaufman et al., 2020). Additionally, 36% of female principals disclosed that they continually experienced job-related stress one year into the COVID pandemic (Woo & Steiner, 2022).

In various sectors, there has been a significant surge in employee resignations and retirements. In January 2022 alone, 4.3 million individuals voluntarily left their employment positions (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). This phenomenon, often referred to as "The Great Resignation," continues unabated, affecting even school principals. A recent survey conducted by the National Association of Secondary School Principals revealed that job satisfaction among principals has reached an all-time low, with just 24% expressing their intent to remain in their roles until retirement (NASSP, 2021). Given the heightened concerns surrounding mental health, a lack of clear direction, and diminishing public trust, educational districts are anticipating a substantial exodus of principals over the coming years (NASSP, 2021).

Stress and The Shifting Role of Principals

The primary responsibility of a principal involves offering strategic leadership within the school system. Principals are responsible for crafting standardized curricula, evaluating teaching approaches, tracking student progress, promoting parental engagement, revising policies and protocols, managing the budget, recruiting, and assessing staff, and supervising school facilities (Oplatka & Mimon, 2008). Additionally, they play a crucial role in formulating safety protocols and procedures for emergency responses.

School principals also invest a significant amount of time in engaging with students, parents, and members of the community. In recent times, there has been a shift in the role of principals, moving from instructional to a more transformational style of leadership. Whether the emphasis leans toward transformational or instructional leadership, the principal's key responsibilities encompass establishing a shared vision or a sense of purpose within the school environment. An effective principal is one who is readily visible and sets high expectations for

both students and staff in terms of teaching and learning (Kouali, 2017). Being visible and conveying these elevated expectations may involve attending various school events outside regular hours, such as basketball games, concerts, theatrical productions, parent conferences, and school board meetings. This visible presence demonstrates a genuine interest in and commitment to the welfare of the students. Frequently, unforeseen challenges arise that demand immediate attention, such as student disciplinary issues or concerns from parents about a child's academic struggles. Additionally, principals bear the responsibility of executing the school district's agenda and ensuring that their staff members are held accountable for achieving district objectives.

In the United States, researchers have been discussing the stress that principals face for decades. Stress is not a recent concern; in fact, nearly half a century ago, Gmelch (1978) acknowledged the challenge of managing personal stress among many principals and cited factors such as headaches, change, conflict, and various health issues as contributing factors (Wells, 2013). An earlier study reviewed the major stressors reported by high school principals, which included "management of time, relations with supervisors, relations with subordinates, and matters of finance" (Wells, 2013, p. 336). The mental strain of the job has been described as akin to firefighting by Weick (1996) and Armenta and Reno (1997). However, in recent times, the stress experienced by principals has been attributed to the highly political nature of the position, exceedingly high expectations for their performance, and a lack of adequate resources to address pervasive social inequities (Bolman & Deal, 1994; Wells, 2013). Recent researchers note that principals experience significant positional stress. This was noted in an international study of Australian Principals. The role of a school principal is undeniably observed with an immense amount of stress (Sytsma, 2009). The study focusing on Australian principals discovered that these educational leaders experienced stress at a rate 1.7 times higher than the

general population. Furthermore, there has been an alarming increase in reports of thoughts related to self-harm and concerns about the quality of life among school leaders, doubling compared to previous years (Riley, 2019). International research indicated a rise in thoughts of escapism, self-harm, and lack of coping strategies both before the Global Covid Pandemic, and even more pronounced after (Foti et al., 2023).

Many principals contend that they grapple with numerous, at times conflicting, priorities, acknowledging that not everything can be executed with excellence (NASSP, 2021). School principals continually shift, merge, and blend various roles on a daily basis, shouldering the responsibility of leading adults, fostering a positive school culture, and nurturing an environment conducive to the growth and learning of both students and adults. Within their personal lives, school principals must strike a delicate balance, encompassing concerns such as maintaining a work-life equilibrium, tending to the needs of aging parents and young children, fulfilling their roles as spouses, and participating in civic organizations. Simultaneously, in their professional sphere, they grapple with societal biases, disparities in hiring practices, role conflicts, gender discrimination, and a scarcity of networking opportunities (Blase et al., 2010; Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010). These internal and external demands associated with the job can influence personal and professional relationships and one’s overall quality of life.

School principals exhibit a unique ability to respond to stressors using various coping mechanisms, encompassing both problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies (Kaufman, 2019). On a daily basis, these educational leaders must navigate the complex landscape of decision-making and address unforeseen challenges. The stress that accompanies these responsibilities can potentially impede their ability to make sound decisions.

Stress has become an inherent aspect of a school administrator's professional life. These stressors encompass a wide range of factors, including but not limited to, time management, relationships with superiors and subordinates, financial management, conflict resolution, the necessity of making tough decisions, adherence to local, state, and federal regulations, and the delicate task of harmonizing the expectations of multiple stakeholders (Mahfouz, 2018). Over time, these expectations and stressors have grown significantly. In the post-COVID era, principals face the added challenges of implementing safety protocols, contact tracing, managing quarantined students through flipped classrooms, daily testing procedures, vaccination campaigns, and addressing the emotional trauma experienced by both faculty and students. Many principals contend that the sheer volume of decisions they are called upon to make, often in complex and politically charged environments, places an overwhelming burden of accountability for issues that may appear insurmountable at the school level.

A seminal study by Carr (1994) delved into anxiety and depression among school principals, exploring the extent of stress and its consequent manifestation as anxiety and depression within this professional group. Carr's findings indicated that a substantial number of principals grappled with "difficulty in adjusting to the realities and demands of work" (Carr, 1994, p. 14). Carr posited that the stress experienced by principals is a byproduct of their professional social class. Although principals are not laborers, they lack control over the bureaucratic intricacies that permeate school environments, leading to frustration and stress in managing and supervising the daily technical challenges.

To mitigate the effects of stress and anxiety, principals must discover empowerment and increased leadership effectiveness through the provision of healthy outlets. It is essential not to underestimate the significance of health and wellness when evaluating principal effectiveness,

long-term career satisfaction, and overall job contentment. Achieving work-life balance is a multifaceted challenge for female managers, encompassing various facets of their lives, including their careers, families, and well-being.

Leadership Theory and Women Leaders

According to the findings of Shakeshaft et al. (2007), there has been a shift in research focus regarding women, moving away from merely comparing men and women and towards gaining a more profound understanding of women's unique experiences. Instead of looking at women in comparison to men, Shakeshaft et al. (2007) offers that more relevant insight is available when women are studied independently. To gain insight into these experiences, it is crucial for research to seek knowledge directly from women themselves, rather than evaluating their experiences in comparison to those of males. Shakeshaft et al. (2007) emphasized this perspective. Collay and Cooper (2008) also offer this concept in understanding adult learning theory for women. Shakeshaft et al. (2007) stated a mono-gender sample and/or analysis framework is not likely to capture gender issues that impede or support change.

In response to this concern, Irby et al. (1999) introduced the Synergistic Leadership Theory, which was founded on several key assumptions pertaining to women and leadership:

- Effective leadership results from the interplay of leadership behavior, organizational structure, external influences, attitudes, beliefs, and values.
- Women contribute a distinct set of leadership skills to leadership roles.
- Existing literature does not adequately incorporate feminine leadership behaviors or the female perspective.
- The feminine leadership style encompasses elements of transformational leadership.

- The greater the manifestation of feminine leadership traits, the better the alignment of the leader with postmodern organizations.

There are four points to this theory: (a) the involvement of female leaders in its formulation; (b) recognition that external forces, organizational frameworks, and attitudes, beliefs, and values may affect female leaders differently from male leaders and vice versa; (c) acknowledgment that female leadership behaviors may interact with these factors in ways distinct from male leadership behaviors; and (d) an understanding that leaders at various positions or levels may be influenced by these model factors in varying ways (Irby et al., 1999). Researchers used this to expand theory around understanding the leadership of females. Ardovini et al. (2010) summarized that the Synergistic Leadership Theory addresses the requirement for equilibrium within the prevailing leadership theories (p. 28). Their study sought to unpack the perceptions and differences between male and female leadership experience. Through a qualitative study, they determined that while there were discrepancies between males and females regarding the precise mechanisms through which the four factors of the theory are interconnected and interplay, both genders unanimously agreed that all four factors within the Synergistic Leadership Theory indeed exhibit interactivity.

Additional researchers have also discovered context of experience and leadership characteristics of female leaders. A prominent researcher in the realm of gender and leadership, Eagly (2007), pointed out the emergence of additional traits associated with female leadership. For instance, women in leadership roles are occasionally perceived as lacking the conventional leadership attributes of assertiveness and directness. In other words, they may not conform to the stereotypical tough and commanding demeanor often associated with leadership (Coleman 2007; Eagly, 2007). Interestingly, when women leaders do exhibit these traits, they are sometimes met

with disapproval and are viewed as adopting more masculine qualities. Eagly observed that this disapproval directed at women leaders for displaying stereotypically masculine behaviors is compounded by disapproval for exhibiting traditionally feminine traits, such as nurturing and support. Consequently, these dual challenges place female leaders at a crossroads when determining the most effective leadership approach.

Gender and Leadership Traits

According to Hoyt (2005), female leaders often face elevated stress levels due to the prevailing stereotypical expectations and biases. Nevertheless, despite social changes in America, the idealized image of a leader continues to lean toward a male archetype. Hoyt's argument poses that women's self-perception in leadership roles is negatively influenced by the assessments and perceptions that others hold regarding their leadership abilities.

Before Hoyt's (2005) research on women's self-perception, Rosser (2003) endeavored to explore perceptions of effective leadership and examined how gender impacted how others view leadership effectiveness based on seven leadership dimensions. To understand the leadership styles of male and female deans, Rosser (2003) conducted evaluations among faculty and staff members at a major university. The evaluation encompassed 22 deans, including 16 males and six females. Participants were surveyed to ascertain their perceptions of the deans' effectiveness in fulfilling their leadership responsibilities. Rosser (2003) identified seven leadership dimensions, revealing that female deans were more likely than their male counterparts to: (a) enhance educational quality; (b) engage in research, community involvement, and professional activities; (c) advocate for and sustain institutional diversity; and (d) oversee personnel and financial resources fairly and efficiently. These four factors significantly influenced how faculty and staff differentiated between male and female deans. The results of Rosser's study indicated

that participants perceived women deans as more effective leaders, ultimately making the case that women are perceived as more capable leaders.

Additionally, Embry et al. (2008) unveiled that a feminine leadership style was not only viewed more favorably but also deemed more effective than a masculine one. Through an examination of leadership behaviors using vignettes, 180 participants at a Midwest university were asked to determine whether gender role stereotypes were strong enough to deduce the leader's gender based on basic gender-related traits and behaviors. The study's outcomes revealed that masculine leadership characteristics were more prominent in instrumental traits and transactional leadership style, whereas females scored higher in expressive traits and exhibited a more transformational leadership style. Leaders who adopted a feminine style had a significantly more positive impact on their followers. These findings suggest that both genders can benefit from embracing a more feminine approach to leadership.

Abbelbaum et al. (2002) arrived at the conclusion that women's leadership styles do indeed differ from those of men, yet men can derive valuable benefits from adopting the approaches to leadership that women employ for achieving effectiveness. The qualities of outstanding leadership are not confined to a single gender; both genders can gain insights from each other. Women's leadership styles prove to be particularly effective in the context of compromise-driven organizations, which are more prevalent in today's landscape. Furthermore, Abbelbaum et al. emphasized that societal perceptions of women's leadership styles, though not always based on factual evidence, continue to exert significant influence on society. An undeniable reality is that the absence of women in higher-ranking positions is still notably conspicuous (p. 49).

According to researchers, in situational settings with a choice between masculine and feminine traits, the capacity to apply feminine characteristics proves to be the most advantageous approach for both males and females when reviewing the impact of a leader's style and personal identification within the organization (Kark et al., 2012). Furthermore, the findings indicated that women face a more significant penalty when they do not appear androgynous compared to men in terms of personal identification. A closer examination of relationships within the same gender versus those involving individuals of different genders revealed that non-androgynous male managers received higher ratings from their male employees than from their female employees. The research outcomes suggest that a blend of both masculine and feminine behaviors would enhance the perception of both men and women as more effective leaders (Kark et al., 2012).

Self-Authorship Theory and Gender

Collay and Cooper present the adult learning theory of self-authorship requires complex knowledge, evaluating evidence, and a keen sense of identity to develop knowledge construction (Collay & Cooper, 2008). The theory also extends that self-authorship requires a level of interdependence with others to gain perspectives (Collay & Cooper, 2008). According to Collay and Cooper, the founder of the self-authorship theory, Baxter Magolda (2004), presents that self-authorship is experienced with many challenges, softened by learning, reflection, and support from learning structures and programs.

Collay and Cooper present the work of Hayes and Flannery as well as Brooks, in context of their study and the focus on women as learners (Collay & Cooper, 2008). Gender emerges as an important consideration in the expression of the self-authorship theory. Hayes and Flannery emphasize the power of voice and connection in Chapter 4 of their text, Women as Learners: The Significance of Gender in Adult Learning. Hayes and Flannery create the meaning of voice in

terms of talk, identity, and power (Hayes & Flannery, 2000). Through voice, women learn the power of naming their experiences, which allows their identity to change (Hayes & Flannery, 2000). Hayes and Flannery highlight the purpose of amplifying personal voice, “There is a sense of reclaiming voice, where many women have lost or been denied their voice in response to oppressive nature of social and cultural expectations (Hayes & Flannery, 2000). The text extends to discuss the power of connection for women. Hayes and Flannery present that women establish connections through themselves and others by processing patterns and structures, subjective knowledge, and intuition (Hayes & Flannery, 2000). In their text, additional research suggests that women learn most effectively through employing connections for change (Brooks, 200). The contributions of Brooks emphasize that the narrative process is important for women. Brooks shares that narrative creates a safe space and process for women learners to articulate their experiences with institutionalized oppression (Brooks, 2000). Leadership training, experience, and authorship often occurs in a hierarchical setting (Collay & Cooper, 2008). Societal perspectives about education, and therefore educational leaders, are often intertwined with beliefs about women and how women should or should not exist in these roles (Collay & Cooper, 2008). Leaders are often prepared with courses, texts, and pedagogical structures to address students, staff, and expectations in schools (Collay & Cooper, 2008). Leadership and career training rarely lean into situational challenges that arise due to hierarchical expectations and societal demands based on gender and culture. Female principals and educational leaders, therefore, find themselves in complexities as job demand, gender, and culture intersect.

Feminine Gender Roles and Role Conflict

Role conflict can be defined as a situation in which an individual faces contradictory, competing, or incompatible expectations stemming from two or more roles they hold

concurrently (Bell, 2019). The intricacies of managing dual roles can manifest whenever a person assumes additional roles that have the potential to clash with one another. This notion of role conflict is of utmost significance in the context of this study because the way in which women navigate the intricate roles of being a mother and a principal, a wife and a principal, or even the trifecta of mother, wife, and principal can heighten the existing occupational stressors in the workplace. Managing the workload alongside the demands from both immediate family and the school community can pose significant challenges for women. While both men and women grapple with role conflict, men tend to find themselves more drawn toward work-related demands, whereas women often find themselves pulled in the direction of family-related demands (Parker, 2015).

Role conflict is a highly intricate phenomenon that can culminate in role overload. According to the theory of role conflict, women often grapple with conflicts arising from the intersection of their careers and family responsibilities (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). As a consequence of juggling demanding roles both at work and home, many women face an elevated likelihood of experiencing role overload (Vilhjalmsson & Kristjansdottir, 2006). Role overload materializes when an individual simultaneously fulfills multiple roles but lacks the resources necessary to effectively manage them. It can originate from both overwhelming time demands and excessive psychological pressures. Role strain, a consequence of both role conflict and overload, tends to ensue (Creary & Gordon, 2016). Among employed adults, working mothers are particularly prone to experiencing role overload, primarily because children demand a substantial amount of their time and attention (Vilhjalmsson & Kristjansdottir, 2006).

When reviewing the literature, significant attention is directed towards the competing and contradictory pressures stemming from work and family responsibilities. The literature

underscores the advantages of effectively navigating the roles within both work and family domains. While these advantages do not entirely eradicate the presence of role conflict, they do prove valuable in alleviating the associated stressors. Conflicts rooted in time, such as extended work hours, rigid schedules, overtime commitments, and evening obligations, are directly associated with the interplay of work and family responsibilities (Parker, 2015). Additionally, stressors originating from family-related issues like marital and parental conflicts can also encroach upon and disrupt one's ability to fulfill their work-related roles. For example, working mothers contend with potential implications for their stress levels and overall well-being (Norton et al., 2005). In recent times, a transformation has occurred in the roles that women play both within their homes and in the workplace. The traditional demarcation of labor and gender roles within households, where women were primarily associated with homemaking while men were the primary breadwinners, has evolved (Parker, 2015). In comparison to men, women often shoulder a greater share of the responsibilities related to childcare (Watson & Slocock, 2007). Although men also face challenges in balancing work and family roles, women who navigate these dual responsibilities often experience a heightened level of role strain.

In her influential work, "Women in Educational Administration," Shakeshaft et al. (2007) argued that the most significant obstacle impeding women's success in educational administration is the delicate balancing act between family and the workplace. Achieving work-family balance is described as maintaining an equitable commitment to both work-related and family responsibilities (Grzywacz & Butler, 2007). Additionally, work-family balance encompasses the reciprocal influence of work and family life on each other, both positively and negatively (Halford & van de Vijver, 2020).

A closely related qualitative study, Garcia (2015), focused on a qualitative phenomenological inquiry into the work-life balance of female principals. The research aimed to comprehend the influence of work-life balance on the lives of five female school principals. The study revealed that the participants may attain balance in their professional and personal lives through a support system that included assistance from family members and colleagues. Additionally, the findings highlighted the participants' ability to balance their roles as working mothers through the identification and utilization of resourceful tools to manage the daily demands placed upon them. School leaders find themselves working extended hours, battling sleep deprivation, adopting suboptimal dietary habits, engaging in less regular exercise, and sacrificing quality time with family and friends in comparison to the broader population (Ray et al., 2020). Notably, female administrators face an escalating challenge concerning family-work conflict (Dicke et al., 2018). Research demonstrates that such conflicts foretell feelings of strain and burnout, potentially inducing anxiety, and stress due to the need to make challenging choices between family and career commitments.

Effectively managing the equilibrium between work and family life presents a substantial challenge in contemporary society (Cinamon, 2006; Halpern, 2005). Modern employees invest as much dedication in their family roles as they do in their careers, and this challenge has led to a surge in interest of the intricacies of work and family dynamics, especially with the increasing presence of mothers and dual-career parents in the workforce. The ramifications of work-family conflict are extensive and include diminished life satisfaction, heightened anxiety, burnout, psychological distress, depression, and even physical ailments (Guitian, 2009). Mothers, in particular, grapple with intensified feelings of guilt and exhaustion as they navigate their dual

roles. When women encounter an overload of roles or conflict between them, it can have adverse effects on both their physical and psychological well-being (Oates et al., 2017).

The Role of Women in Education

Women have played integral roles in the field of education for an extensive duration (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010). The positions they held in educational institutions often closely mirrored their roles within society. In recent decades, there has been a gradual ascent of women into leadership positions within schools. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that women continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles, particularly in education, which stands out as one of the most gender-segregated fields of employment, outside of the business sector (Bon, 2009). Across schools nationwide, women are predominantly employed as teachers rather than occupying leadership positions.

According to the 2020 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics population survey, 60.5% of high school teachers and 78.5% of elementary school teachers are women. Furthermore, data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in 2019, obtained through the National Teacher and Principal Survey, revealed that 54 percent of public-school principals were female. Notably, there was a higher percentage of female public-school principals in primary schools (67%) compared to middle schools, high schools, and combined schools (40%, 33%, and 43%, respectively). Overall, 58 percent of private school principals were female, with a greater proportion of female principals in elementary schools (66%) compared to secondary schools and combined schools (44% and 51%, respectively; NCES, 2019). In the context of Chicago Public Schools, a noteworthy 73% of selective enrollment high schools are led by women.

Presently, there is a growing presence of women in administrative roles, including principals and assistant principals. Still, women continue to encounter challenges when aspiring

to attain leadership positions in education. As the responsibilities of school principals expand, female educational leaders grapple with additional pressures stemming from the multitude of roles they fulfill beyond their professional lives. In sum, female principals frequently confront dilemmas in reconciling the demands of their work with their familial obligations. Those with families often find themselves in the challenging position of balancing lengthy work hours with the responsibilities of caring for ill children, aging parents, contributing to marital or significant relationships, and managing care for their own wellness, thereby experiencing heightened levels of stress and fatigue (Omori & Smith, 2010).

Exploring the Disproportionality of Women in School Leadership Positions

Since women constitute approximately 75% of the teaching workforce (Kruse & Krumm, 2016; Sanchez & Thornton, 2010; Superville, 2018), it is natural to expect a higher proportion of female leaders in high schools. However, the statistics reveal that in the United States, only 33% of high school principals are women, 40% occupy the role of middle school principals, and 64% lead elementary schools (Bitterman et al., 2013). While evidence indicates substantial progress in terms of increased representation of women in educational leadership positions at both the school and district levels, the percentage of female principals remains notably lower than their male counterparts, especially within the middle and high school levels, despite most teachers in these levels being women (Bitterman et al., 2013; Fuller et al., 2018).

Furthermore, in recent years, women have constituted the majority of educators pursuing principal certification and licensure (Fuller et al., 2018). They are equally as likely as men to aspire to and actively apply for leadership positions within schools (DeAngelis & O'Connor, 2012; Fuller et al., 2018). Consequently, one would anticipate that the proportion of female principals would align with the percentage of female teachers.

The trend of women assuming leadership roles across all grade levels has exhibited a consistent upward trajectory over the past two decades. Since 1994, the representation of female high school principals has more than doubled, growing from 14% to 30% in 2012 (NCES, 2019). Nonetheless, women still encounter barriers when pursuing the principalship, despite possessing the competence and capability required for the role (Martinez et al., 2020). These barriers primarily stem from historically ingrained perceptions and interpretations of female leadership (Shakeshaft, 2007). Additionally, a body of research suggests that men tend to be perceived as more effective leaders (Eagly et al., 1992; Martinez et al., 2020).

Despite women possessing the attributes that exemplify effective leadership (Rosin, 2012), research by Paustian-Underdahl et al. (2014) reveals that women tend to be underappreciated as leaders and are frequently deemed less effective due to their "feminine" leadership style and their approach to intricate challenges. While women have made notable strides in attaining leadership positions within elementary, middle, and high schools, a significant disparity persists in the placement and advancement of women into high school principal roles.

The Impact of Gender Bias in Leadership

The significance of how women are perceived in leadership roles within the field of education is worthy of consideration. Throughout history, the role of women has often been either absent or regarded as inconsequential in academic discussions. Generally, women's concerns are frequently overlooked in the workplace, and their contributions are undervalued (Coronel et al., 2010). Leadership and managerial positions have traditionally been associated with masculinity, and until recently, women were rarely considered for these roles. In the realm of education, women often find themselves in organizational cultures dominated by masculine

ideals and models that reinforce conditions of inequality and marginalization (Coronel et al., 2010). Consequently, organizations have inadvertently erected barriers to women's entry into and progression within management and leadership positions in the workforce (Coronel et al., 2010).

The continued underrepresentation of women in administrative roles in high schools remains a concern, especially considering the predominantly female teaching workforce (Coronel et al., 2010). Nevertheless, there has been a recent shift in the number of female school leaders, possibly attributable to more progressive attitudes towards gender roles and the growing number of women seeking high school principal positions. Despite these changes, women still confront challenges when aiming to advance their careers.

Additionally, Hurst et al. (2016) discussed gender biases concerning the types of work expected from men and women. In general, women often find themselves evaluating their own preconceived beliefs about gendered stereotypes, their skills and abilities being perceived and undervalued, and the incongruity between anticipated and actual roles (Ely et al., 2011). Women frequently navigate a gendered hierarchy where masculinity is highly regarded and promoted, and effective leaders embody qualities such as confidence, assertiveness, and dominance (Debebe et al., 2016; Domingo et al., 2015; Phillips & Grandy, 2018). Research on women in leadership has revealed that constantly challenging a "labyrinth" of a "gender-organization-system" can give rise to occupational stressors of its own (Phillips & Grandy, 2018). "Women managers encounter various demands that can make them more susceptible to health issues [including stress], but also more inclined to leave managerial careers" (Phillips & Grandy, 2018, p. 367).

While the demands of leadership faced by both women and men are undoubtedly complex (e.g., time constraints, catering to diverse stakeholder needs), this research specifically

addresses the impact of occupational stressors on female leaders. A report from the Center for Creative Leadership on leadership stress found that nearly 90 percent of those surveyed, predominantly men, identified work as a primary source of stress and acknowledged that holding a formal position of authority (i.e., a leadership role) amplifies stress levels (Campbell et al., 2007; Phillips & Grandy, 2018). Although workplace stress is not unique to women, the expressions of stress may have gender-related aspects. Studies on executive coaching and women's leadership development have indicated that "struggling to balance and/or integrate work and life responsibilities has consistently emerged as a primary concern for women in leadership positions" (O'Neil et al., 2015, p. 256; Sandberg, 2013; Slaughter, 2012).

Work Experiences and Work Life Demand: Gender and Racial Discrepancies

Female principals grapple with role conflict as they navigate the delicate balance between their domestic and familial responsibilities and their professional roles (Eckman, 2003; Robinson et al., 2017). Furthermore, some female principals shoulder the added responsibility of parenthood, which entails juggling a multitude of tasks, including multitasking, household management, aiding children with their studies, and volunteering at their child's school.

At the systemic level, gender discrimination and bias can hinder women's access to leadership opportunities (Limerick & Anderson, 1999). Preconceived ideas about leadership capabilities based on gender stereotypes can marginalize women and undermine their confidence and the way they are seen by peers within the profession (Limerick & Anderson, 1999). Equally, institutional structures may perpetuate male preferentiality in leadership positions, further limiting women's progress, access, and experience within the educational hierarchy.

Societal structures and norms also contribute challenges for women pursing educational leadership roles. Work-life balance poses a significant challenge for women pursuing leadership

roles in the education sector (Limerick & Anderson, 1999). The demanding nature of administrative positions often requires long hours, time outside of the home, extensive responsibility, and accountability (Sachs & Blackmore, 1998). Balancing these leadership responsibilities with familial and personal commitments often presents a unique challenge for women. As women often bear a significant load of caregiving responsibilities within their households due to cultural and societal norms for women (Sachs & Blackmore, 1998). Beyond the household, women also face disproportionate independence in educational leadership. A lack of mentorship and professional support can hinder the career growth of aspiring women leaders. Compared to male counterparts, women must often experience learning and leadership independently, which conversely adds to feelings of isolation and required independence. Women may encounter a scarcity of female role models in leadership positions, which can make it difficult to envision themselves as principals and navigate the pathway to success (Allen et al., 1995). Adequate mentorship and support are crucial to foster the leadership skills and confidence necessary to overcome obstacles and attain leadership roles.

In addition to these challenges, many female principals confront barriers that set them apart from their male counterparts. Earlier research on female administrators, as identified by Shakeshaft (1989), categorized these barriers as either internal or external. Internal barriers encompass issues such as "low self-image, lack of confidence, and a dearth of motivation or aspiration" (Shakeshaft, 1989, p. 121). Over time, studies on female administrators have suggested that while internal barriers may persist, the prevalence of external obstacles faced by female administrators may not be as widespread as in previous years (Brunner & Grogan, 2005).

Other examples of qualitative research, including McKay's study, serves as illustrative studies relevant to this work and the connection to qualitative validity. McKay (2020) conducted

a phenomenological examination of the repercussions of burnout in charter school leaders in the western United States. This study used qualitative methods with ten charter school leaders, including interviews, group discussions, and observations. The research findings indicated that stress and burnout sources included relationships with local school boards, maintaining student enrollment, and the multifaceted nature of the charter school leader role. Participants in the study reported that job-related stress and burnout had adverse effects on personal and professional relationships, job performance, job satisfaction, and physical and mental well-being, with chronic stress leading to episodes of burnout. In another study, Archer (2020) completed a qualitative exploratory story of how school leaders experience secondary trauma and how they perceive it affects their leadership. The study employed semi-structured interviews, and the data underwent coding and interpretation to gain insights into the experience of secondary trauma by school leaders. The findings unveiled that, lacking formal training, school leaders either suppressed or repressed the impacts of secondary trauma to fulfill their leadership responsibilities.

The Role of Black Women in History, Society and as Principals

American history has largely captured the experiences and structures of white males, while the story and experiences of African Americans have largely captured the infrastructures and obstacles of the Black male (Fraser & Griffin, 2020). Black women are discussed here because of their significant and growing presence in the field of education and educational leadership. Also, their experiences in history, society and in education are distinctly different from those of other stakeholders of education. I felt the need to bring some of these differences to light in this review of literature. The plight, experience, strengths, and obstacles of Black women have not been highlighted as adequately in history. In contrast, the stories, and

experiences of White women, have found selective highlights in society and culture. The structures among both Black and White women have largely been created by the infrastructures of history, and therefore also serve as a critical structure in the struggles Black women and White women have often found between one another (Fraser & Griffin, 2020). Both sets of women exist in identities largely created by males (Fraser & Griffin, 2020).

The concept of the Black woman arrives in American culture from slavery. The history of slavery in America impacts the understanding of identity for Black women, and men (Jones, 2000). Hegemonic ideals remained central in shaping beliefs of not only slavery, but Black acceptability and culture post-slavery (Fraser & Griffin, 2020). These ideals included appropriate behavior, image, conventions, structures, and even class. The concept of "Republic Womanhood," further exacerbated the concept of the traditional White woman and her role in the domestic setting as a caring and admirable wife and mother (Fraser & Griffin, 2020). This image of womanhood became embodied as the ideal woman, extending from the Revolutionary Period, the antebellum period, and well into the twentieth century. The ideology of womanhood applied explicitly to White women. Black women, on the other hand, remained viewed as a supporting infrastructure to whiteness and American culture. The hegemonic narrative categorized Black women as untamed objects (overly sexualized beings) or servant-focused beings (maids).

Collins says, "There are two main types of black femineity stereotypes, the Jezebel and the Sapphire (Collins, 2000, p. 69)." The Jezebel and Sapphire while different, show up negatively in American society. The Jezebel highlights the over-sexualized and objectified Black woman. The Sapphire is overly assertive, nagging, overbearing, and argumentative (Jerald et al.,

2016). The Sapphire not only serves as a threat to other women, but she also emasculates Black men and presents as a threat to White men (Jerald et al., 2016).

Collins also shares a third pervasive image of Black women in American society, the Strong Black Woman, SBW (Collins, 2000). The Strong Black Woman can also be seen in the earliest stereotypes of the mammy (Collins, 2015). The ideology of the mammy is present in the American historical context and perspective for Black women. Andy Warhol included the mammy ideal in his work, "American Myths" as one of the most famous figures in American culture in 1980 (Jerald et al., 2016). The mammy is stereotypically unattractive, supportive, caring, and the superior caregiver in both domestic and work settings (Greene, 2018). While the mammy is associated with the antebellum south, the modernized Strong Black Woman image, has become prevalent in culture as a thriving space for Black women. As mentioned, one of the most famous figures in American culture is the idea and image of the Black woman mammy, thus creating a direct conflict for women striving to exist outside of such stereotypes (Greene, 2018). The Strong Black Woman consistently prioritizes the needs of others over her own, stays emotionally composed (despite outlandish situations), fulfills multiple roles, and often practices self-neglect in order to support others (Greene, 2018). The Strong Black Woman is not categorized in traditional femineity because the structure is not intended for traditional feminine narratives. Greene shares that, "Black women are often forced to find identity in one of these images, the Sapphire, the Jezebel, the mammy, or the Strong Black Woman" (as cited in Jerald et al., 2016, p 24).

There are heavy concerns for each of the presented ideals and stereotypes. Jerald et al. (2016) share that "Black women who find sexuality as their primary source of identity are often subject to sexual harassment, assault, and sexualized interactions in their personal lives and

workplace, often without awareness of the issue." Greene (2018) also states that "Black women who identify with Strong Black Woman perspectives are often at greater risk for depression, alienation, binge eating, and emotional dysregulation." Both Greene (2018) and Jerald et al. (2016) suggest that Black women are often predisposed to these identities at an early age through personal images of Black women and the media, making it difficult to establish identity and authorship outside of these stereotypes. Hooks (1995) argues that for many Black women, there is an awareness of challenges with identity, sexism, racism, and femininity; however, there is a pervasive inability to create substantial changes to behaviors often associated with those beliefs. Hersey (2022) presents this concept in her text *Rest is Resistance*, stating, "The roots of capitalism are deep for Black women, we believe we have to produce at all times, we are unable to separate from it" (p. 37). Hersey (2022) emphasizes that Black women emphatically lean into traditional constructs of Black femininity without fully realizing the hardship and detrimental challenges this creates. In recent years, Black women have taken on additional titles in academic fields. Black women account for significant subgroup growth in graduate studies programs across the United States (Collay & Cooper, 2008). Though national data continues to indicate a gap of presence for Black women in principalship positions across school districts in the United States, they have grown tremendously in the last decade (Johnson, 2021). According to the National Education Database, in some districts, there are significantly smaller gaps in elementary principalships, whereas the gaps are much more significant in secondary schools, as well as district-level leadership (Neely, 2018). The history of Black women and American culture is unique.

Researchers find that women have fewer entry points for becoming high school principals, and promotion from elementary principal to superintendent (or cabinet-level

leadership within a district) is rare (Johnson, 2021). Kruse and Krumm (2016) share, “Many women report fear that the long work hours, personal responsibilities, long tenure before promotion, school politics, undervalue, and outdated hiring practices keep them from pursuing principalships and roles in school administration” (p. 8). These women feel as if principalship and administration will usurp their lives, and they do not see value in the exchange. Research suggests that women in the principalship must be skilled in developing aspects of their personalities that highlight authoritative personas, which are atypical to most feminine identities (Kruse & Krumm, 2016). According to researchers, Black women are also more likely to be overlooked or passed over for positions under the guise of positional fit, despite qualifying skills and experience (Palmer et al., 2016). For Black women, this presents a particular conundrum, as those who demonstrate authoritative personae may quickly be identified as threatening to both males and females (Palmer et al., 2016). Positive feminine identity for both Black and White women often include submissive personality types and a subservient understanding toward males and whiteness (Green, 2018). Black women who challenge this infrastructure can expect to be met with significant challenges (Collins, 2000).

Black women in educational administration can expect to encounter challenges rooted in societal norms around gender and race and the fundamental organization of the traditional social structure (Robinson, 2014). Research also suggests that Black women are more likely to remain in the classroom or support positions longer than their counterparts, as they are confronted with stereotypes of how they can best support the educational experience of the school and community (Neely, 2018). Black teachers and assistant principals are more likely to experience both sexism and racism in attempts to access higher positions (Neely, 2018). Black female principals manage additional challenges in the principalship as they navigate the intersection of

both gender and race. Black female principals carry the same responsibilities as their female counterparts, as well as they hold the management of racial and gender expectations.

Conceptual Framework

Feminist theory, as a subset of critical theory, is dedicated to addressing exploitative practices rooted in gender distinctions and inequalities. Rather than a monolithic body of feminist theory, multiple theories exist, sharing common themes. This study employs standpoint feminist theory to investigate disparities among social groups from their unique vantage points shaped by their life experiences. Standpoint feminism posits that, due to the distinct life experiences of women compared to men in nearly all societies, women possess a different form of knowledge. Narayan (2004) acknowledges that women's marginalized status enables them to perceive and understand the world in ways that challenge the prevailing male-dominated conventional wisdom (pp. 256-272). Key characteristics of Standpoint theory include:

- Standpoint serves as a perspective from which to observe the world, influencing our focus and what remains hidden.
- Our affiliations with social groups shape our knowledge and communication styles.
- Standpoint theorists argue that societal inequalities lead to distinctive interpretations of nature and social relationships.
- The viewpoint from less powerful individuals can offer a more objective outlook than that from the more powerful.
- Inequalities among different social groups result in variations in their standpoints.
- Standpoints are inherently partial, with individuals capable of holding multiple standpoints simultaneously.

- An individual's overall standpoint is shaped by all the social communities they belong to (Wood, 1993).

Standpoint theory finds applications in sociology, political theory, and communication research. As Hartsock (1983) asserts, feminist Marxists and materialist feminists argue that women's structural position differs from that of men, and the lived experiences of women substantially contrast with those of men (p. 284). Standpoint theory underscores that not all individuals or groups experience culture in the same way. Those with more social power have their perspectives validated more often than individuals in marginalized groups. People from marginalized backgrounds often must navigate multiple groups or adapt to the dominant culture to survive, even if it does not align with their personal viewpoint (DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2007). Standpoint theory finds application in sociology, political theory, and communication research. As Hartsock (1983) asserts, feminist Marxists and materialist feminists contend that women's position differs structurally from that of men, and the lived experiences of women substantially contrast with those of men (p. 284). Standpoint theory underscores that not all individuals or groups experience culture in the same manner. Those belonging to groups with more social power have their perspectives validated more frequently than individuals in marginalized groups. People from marginalized backgrounds often must navigate multiple groups or adapt to the dominant culture to survive, even if it does not reflect their personal viewpoint (DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2007).

In addition to Standpoint, feminism, this study will also incorporate the work of Irby et al. (1999) with Synergistic Leadership Theory, which was founded on several key assumptions pertaining to women and leadership:

- Effective leadership results from the interplay of leadership behavior, organizational structure, external influences, attitudes, beliefs, and values.
- Women contribute a distinct set of leadership skills to leadership roles.
- Existing literature does not adequately incorporate feminine leadership behaviors or the female perspective.
- The feminine leadership style encompasses elements of transformational leadership.
- The greater the manifestation of feminine leadership traits, the better the alignment of the leader with postmodern organizations.

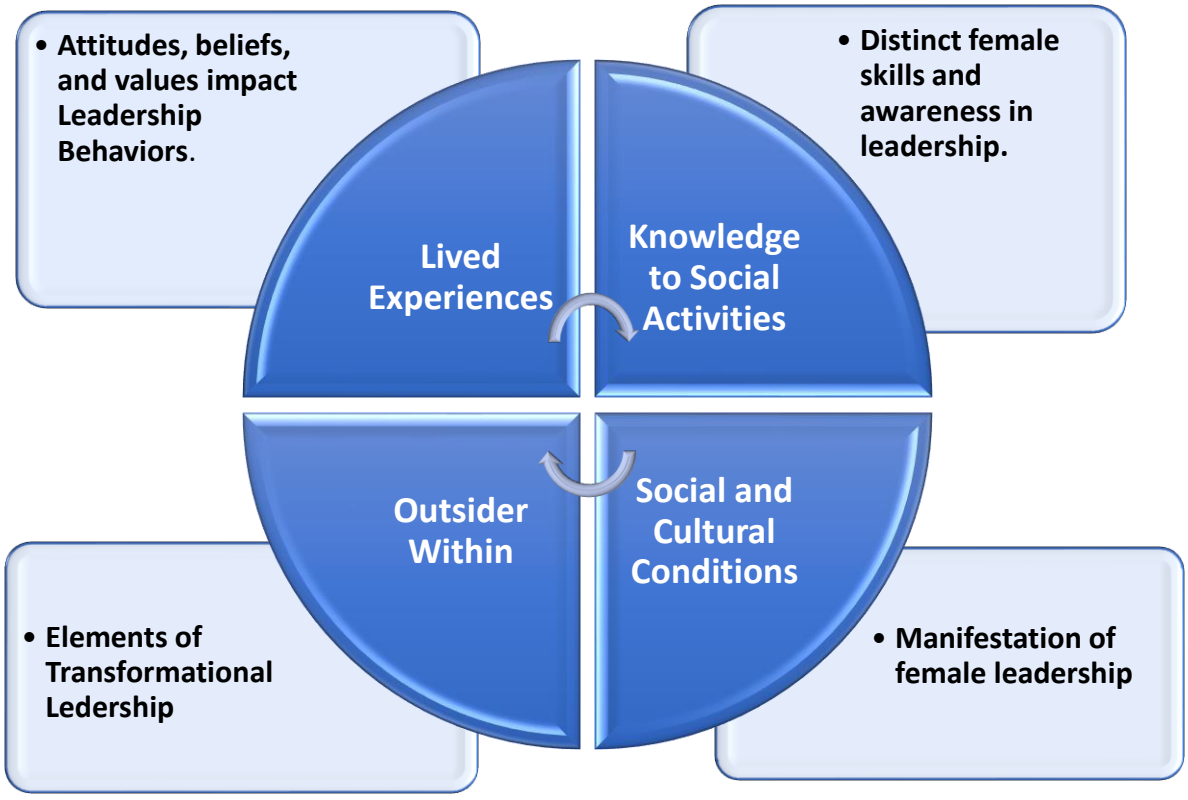
There are four points to this theory: (a) the involvement of female leaders in its formulation; (b) recognition that external forces, organizational frameworks, and attitudes, beliefs, and values may affect female leaders differently from male leaders and vice versa; (c) acknowledgment that female leadership behaviors may interact with these factors in ways distinct from male leadership behaviors; and (d) an understanding that leaders at various positions or levels may be influenced by these model factors in varying ways (Irby et al., 1999). Harding proposed that women's experiences can offer valuable perspectives in areas where their viewpoint has been historically omitted (Harding, 2004). Literature stemming from a patriarchal perspective frequently fails to accurately depict women's journeys into administrative roles. Feminist standpoint theory provides a lens for understanding this transition.

A conceptual framework plays a pivotal role in research by providing a structured foundation upon which a study is built Creswell (2013). It serves as a guiding framework that helps researchers conceptualize their research questions, identify key variables and relationships, and develop a coherent and systematic approach to data collection and analysis. A well-constructed conceptual framework not only enhances the clarity and organization of a study but

also facilitates a deeper understanding of the research problem by placing it within a broader theoretical context. As Creswell (2013) highlights in his book *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, a conceptual framework helps researchers make sense of complex phenomena, identify gaps in existing literature, and generate hypotheses that can be empirically tested. In essence, it acts as the scaffolding that supports the entire research endeavor, enabling researchers to frame their inquiries, make informed decisions, and contribute meaningfully to the body of knowledge in their field. Providing a framework for the impact of these theories will allow for deeper analysis and understanding, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Summary

Despite the growing presence of women in principal roles, educational organizations continue to reflect structures that compare males to females, which are rooted in male-oriented structures, incorporating male values, female gender stereotypes, and prototypes of effective management performance. These gender stereotypes regarding women's leadership persist due to factors like organizational symbolism, socialization processes, and informal work-life practices that perpetuate gender-based role divisions. Transformations in the conventional work-life culture are challenging to change and tend to be short-lived. The role of a school principal is undeniably laden with stress. Like educators, school principals seamlessly shift between various roles daily, while simultaneously bearing the responsibility of guiding adult staff and fostering a positive school culture and environment conducive to learning and growth for both students and adults. These multifaceted demands, originating both internally and externally, can have profound effects on personal and professional relationships, influencing one's overall quality of life. Additionally, the job of a school principal can entail physical demands, often requiring attendance at after-school events such as meetings, dances, concerts, and sports competitions. Administrators frequently dedicate their weekends and extended hours after the workday to tasks like sending emails, completing compliance paperwork, devising school improvement plans, managing budgets, and conducting teacher evaluations. It is worth noting that, unlike teachers, school administrators often lack the protection of an organized labor union and bear the ultimate responsibility for the school, its staff, and its students.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

After completing a comprehensive literature review on the evolution of gender roles of women in the United States, gender norms, and racial implications among gender norms within the context of educational leadership for secondary principals; it was evident that research could positively contribute to greater understanding of modern secondary principals and how their needs have evolved or persisted throughout literary references. This qualitative research study seeks to provide contributions toward practice and theory in gender, culture, and educational leadership. The research supports secondary female principals, but also leaders who hire, recruit, and work with them. The constructs presented in this research emerged from interview responses and data collection from participants; thus, reflecting a qualitative study. Qualitative research connected to this study, as the purpose of the research was to reveal meaning and significance to the experiences of secondary female principals. The use of qualitative practice allowed a greater capacity to highlight issues, underlying concerns, and thematic occurrences (Creswell, 2007). Creswell shares, qualitative research provides opportunities for understanding how and why individuals and larger groups connect in various problems or experiences (Creswell, 2007). Based on Creswell's (2007) Five Types of Qualitative Methods, qualitative evaluation, grounded theory, ethnography, case study, and narrative research; this study utilized qualitative approach to draw connections between the experiences and feedback of the study participants. The structure of this research created an in-depth reflection into the scope of the research question, which in this case involved inquiry into leadership identity and leadership experience in relation to gender, race, and culture (Creswell, 2007). Analysis of this data and the participant responses created implications, themes, concepts insights, and potential theories related to the data.

The study used qualitative data collected from within the central North Carolina community to develop awareness and understanding of the experiences of secondary female principals. The research is a highlight of the significant experiences, challenges, and successes of secondary female principals. In prior decades, male administrators dominated both secondary school leadership; however, in subsequent years, as more tenured administrators retired, female leaders have ascended to principalships (Protheroe, 2008). The secondary principals serve in a large diverse public district in North Carolina with urban, suburban, and rural school communities and is therefore inclusive of diverse schools and community experiences. Principals who serve in suburban and urban district schools experience demanding leadership requirements thus requiring strong skillsets and leadership application (Erwin et al., 2010). The purpose of this study was to uncover how leadership experiences are influenced by gender in the secondary setting. Through a deeper understanding of experience and gender, leaders are more likely to experience greater tenure and positional success. Current literature highlights the presence of female principals and the general experiences of leadership within the frame of instructional outcomes and school outcomes. While there is literature focused on female principals, there is a gap in literature on the secondary female principals post-Covid, and how perceived gender bias and gender norms influence their experience in modern leadership.

Framework

Feminist theory, as a subset of critical theory, focuses specifically on addressing exploitative practices rooted in sex and gender distinctions. Rather than a single, defining body of feminist theory, several theories exist that share common themes. This study employed the standpoint feminist theory to examine the disparities among various social groups from the unique vantage point through which they perceive the world. Standpoint feminism poses that due

to the distinct life experiences of women in nearly all societies compared to men, women possess a different form of knowledge. Narayan (2004) acknowledges that the marginalized status of women allows them to perceive and comprehend the world in ways that challenge the existing male-dominated conventional wisdom (pp. 256-272). Key characteristics of Standpoint Theory include:

1. A standpoint serves as a perspective from which to observe the world, shaping what we pay attention to and what remains obscured.
2. Our affiliations with social groups influence our knowledge and communication methods.
3. Standpoint theorists argue that societal inequalities lead to unique interpretations of nature and social relationships.
4. The viewpoint from less powerful individuals can offer a more objective outlook compared to that from the more powerful.
5. Inequalities among different social groups result in variations in their standpoints.
6. Standpoints are inherently partial, with individuals capable of holding multiple standpoints simultaneously.
7. An individual's overall standpoint is shaped by all the social communities they belong to (Wood, 1993).

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more social power have their perspectives validated more frequently than individuals in marginalized groups. People from marginalized backgrounds often must navigate multiple groups or adapt to the dominant culture to survive, even if it does not reflect their personal viewpoint (DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2007).

In addition to Standpoint feminism, this study also embodied the work of Irby et al. (1999) with Synergistic Leadership Theory, which was founded on several key assumptions pertaining to women and leadership:

- Effective leadership results from the interplay of leadership behavior, organizational structure, external influences, attitudes, beliefs, and values.
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- Existing literature does not adequately incorporate feminine leadership behaviors or the female perspective.
- The feminine leadership style encompasses elements of transformational leadership.
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There are four points to this theory: (a) the involvement of female leaders in its formulation; (b) recognition that external forces, organizational frameworks, and attitudes, beliefs, and values may affect female leaders differently from male leaders and vice versa; (c) acknowledgment that female leadership behaviors may interact with these factors in ways distinct from male leadership behaviors; and (d) an understanding that leaders at various positions or levels may be influenced by these model factors in varying ways (Irby et al., 1999). Harding proposed that women's experiences can offer valuable perspectives in areas where their viewpoint has been historically omitted (Harding, 2004). Literature stemming from a patriarchal

perspective frequently fails to accurately depict women's journeys into administrative roles. Feminist standpoint theory provides a lens for understanding this transition. According to Irby et al. (1999), current research studies do not adequately address the need to explore women's leadership experiences from their own viewpoint. To address this gap, the Synergistic Leadership Theory (SLT) was developed to provide a framework for examining and understanding the feminine perspective within educational leadership. The Synergistic Leadership Theory proposes that women bring a unique set of leadership skills to their roles and emphasizes that feminine leadership incorporates various elements of the transformational leadership theory. Furthermore, it suggests that characteristics associated with feminine leadership are particularly advantageous within modern organizations (Irby et al., 2009).

Leadership Framework and Theory Discussion

The experiences and reflections of this study aligned closely with Shakeshaft's foundational work in *Women in Educational Administration* (1989) and her later research, co-authored with Grogan in *Women and Educational Leadership* (2011). These works provide critical insights into the unique leadership styles, challenges, and successes of female educational leaders, emphasizing the relational, collaborative, and community-centered approaches that women often bring to leadership roles. The female principals in this study—who find joy and fulfillment through their work by fostering positive school environments and supporting student success—exemplified many of the key tenets of Shakeshaft's research. Despite the evolution of the educational landscape, particularly in the post-pandemic era, the underlying principles of Shakeshaft's framework and feminist standpoint theory remain relevant in understanding the experiences of these women leaders.

In *Women in Educational Administration* (1989), Shakeshaft highlights the relational and transformational aspects of female leadership, noting that women in educational leadership often prioritize collaboration, inclusivity, and community building. These leadership characteristics were evident in the feedback from the study's participants.

Shakeshaft's (1989) exploration of the systemic barriers faced by women in leadership also aligned with the challenges expressed in this study, despite the evolving nature of these barriers. In today's context, the pressures of navigating post-COVID educational environments, coupled with traditional gender expectations, have created new layers of complexity for female principals. Nevertheless, the foundational issues of gender inequality and the undervaluation of women's leadership, which Shakeshaft identified in 1989, remain relevant. This echoes Shakeshaft's earlier conclusions about the high expectations placed on female leaders to be both strong and nurturing, an expectation rooted in broader societal gender norms.

Feminist standpoint theory, which posits that marginalized groups (in this case, women) experience the world from a unique vantage point that can reveal power dynamics and inequalities, further helps to contextualize the experiences of these principals. Shakeshaft's research aligns with this theory by acknowledging that women leaders, especially in education, bring valuable perspectives shaped by their experiences of gendered expectations and systemic barriers (Harding, 2004). These principals, while navigating a constantly changing educational environment, continue to draw on these perspectives to create inclusive and supportive spaces for their students and staff. Their ability to maintain joy and purpose, even in the face of new challenges, reflects the strength of the leadership practices identified by Shakeshaft and feminist standpoint theorists.

The experiences highlighted here by these women illustrates that, despite the emergence of new challenges in education, the foundational principles outlined in Shakeshaft's 1989 and 2011 works remain highly relevant. The relational, community-oriented leadership styles embraced by these women, as well as their commitment to nurturing the emotional and academic well-being of their students, align closely with Shakeshaft's research. Furthermore, feminist standpoint theory helps to frame their leadership as not only a response to current educational needs but also a reflection of the unique perspectives and strengths that women bring to leadership in the face of systemic barriers.

Data Collection Methods

This qualitative study employed the research principles established by Creswell (2013) and Flick et al. (2008). The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are widely recognized for their flexibility and effectiveness in qualitative research. They offered a balance between structured and open-ended questioning, allowing researchers to explore complex topics in depth while maintaining consistency (Guest et al., 2017; Uwe & Gubrium, 2005). This approach enabled participants to articulate their experiences and perspectives in their own words, which helped in uncovering nuanced insights and unexpected findings that might not surface through more rigid data collection methods. The adaptability of semi-structured interviews makes them particularly valuable for capturing diverse perspectives and emerging themes (Creswell, 2013). The qualitative methodology employed provides an opportunity for the unique experiences of secondary female principals to be captured and succinctly shared through research. Qualitative research tells the stories of fellow humans so that researchers and fellow humans develop a greater understanding of what is happening beyond

their own realm of awareness (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Through qualitative data, the world becomes accessible to one another through the distinct art of listening, uncovering, and organizing the stories and experiences of others (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Qualitative interviews and data are used to provide clarity into experiences, practices, habits, emotions, and potential behaviors of groups, individuals, and cultures in ways that qualitative data cannot ascertain (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Though there is research on women in education and female leadership, there is not substantial research or data on the experiences of leaders during or after the Covid Pandemic. Nor is there significant research on the self-authorship, impact of gender norms, and biases on female principals, specifically secondary female principals. With data that trends positive, it can appear contradictory that women may be facing challenges in the secondary principalship. The absence of literature coupled with the complexities of secondary female principal experiences, and a recent contradiction in data creates an appropriate setting for a qualitative research study (Elliot & Timulak, 2005).

In this study, semi-structured interviews provided a platform for participants to engage in detailed discussions about their experiences as female principals. The open-ended nature of the questions was designed to elicit comprehensive responses about the stressors they face in their professional and personal lives. This method allowed for a deeper exploration of the challenges and supports that impact their roles, providing rich, contextual data that was essential for understanding the complexities of their experiences.

The interviews were conducted one-on-one, allowing for in-depth exploration of each participant's individual experiences. The questions were carefully structured to guide the conversation, but participants had the freedom to elaborate on their responses, which facilitated a deeper engagement with the topics discussed. This format not only ensured a focused inquiry but

also encouraged participants to provide detailed insights into their experiences, attitudes, and perceptions (Englander, 2016; Ruslin et al., 2022).

The analysis of the interview data involved coding the transcriptions to identify themes and patterns related to the participants' experiences. This process included reviewing the background information of each participant to uncover commonalities and differences in their responses. By examining these themes in the context of the participants' backgrounds, the study aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by female principals and the support systems that could enhance their effectiveness and well-being. This approach also provided an opportunity to reflect on potential theories, themes, and areas for future research.

Overall, the use of semi-structured interviews proved effective in gathering detailed and contextually rich data. The method's ability to balance structure with flexibility enabled the study to explore complex issues and generate meaningful insights into the experiences of female principals.

Rather than employing isolated surveys or focus groups, this study relied on one-on-one semi-structured interviews as the central source of data collection. Open-ended interview questions were carefully designed to encourage in-depth discussions among the participants, providing valuable insights into their perspectives on the occupational stressors they encountered in their roles as secondary female principals. These interviews offered a platform for participants to share their personal stories and experiences, resulting in rich and comprehensive data that was analyzed to present timely and pertinent findings. The study was conducted across the second semester of the 2023-2024 academic year, and first quarter of Summer 2024. Feedback and data were collected through the interviews and a brief background participant questionnaire.

The primary source of data collection occurred through semi-structured interviews. These interviews were categorized as semi-structured because they included both structured questions and an organized flow of questioning, while also allowing participants to expand on their responses in guided discussions. The interviews began with the semi-structured format, and subsequent follow-up interviews were completed one-on-one. Although the interview questions were structured, participants had the opportunity to elaborate on their feedback. This structure provided a high level of focus while also creating an interview climate conducive to expansion, follow-up questions, and deeper participant engagement. Research suggests that semi-structured interviews enable both participants and researchers to develop a greater understanding of experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions through natural discourse (Englander, 2016; Ruslin et al., 2022).

To review feedback and unpack the participants' experiences, transcriptions of participants was cleaned, organized, and coded to establish themes and contextual responses from each participant. Additionally, the individual background information on study participants was categorized to identify greater similarities among experiences. Developing this awareness allowed for a deeper analysis and understanding of the responses from each participant. This step in the data collection process also provided an opportunity to reflect on potential theories, themes, and future areas for research studies and initiatives. This format also created a broader scope for additional responses and interview follow-ups.

Participants

To support the research aim, a blend of purposeful sampling was utilized to identify potential participants. Sampling methods should be considered to create maximize impact and validity (Morse & Niehaus, 2009). Purposeful sampling also underscores the need to identify

individuals who are especially knowledgeable about a subject or desired area of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). This study used criterion-i sampling and snowball sampling (Palinkas, et. al., 2009). Criterion-i sampling is defined by Palinkas as the intentional effort to select participants that meet a predetermined criterion of importance (Palinkas, et. al., 2009). In this case the female secondary principals were identified as key participants. Snowball sampling is defined by Palinkas as an ability to identify participants by connections of either the researcher or other participants who share similar characteristics, and intern have a greater network of other people with similar profiles (Palinkas, et. al., 2009). To develop a participant framework, a potential list of secondary female principals within a suburban public school district in North Carolina was identified to support participation in the study. A call for participants was also posted on social media. The literature review revealed the increased complexities faced by female principals, making it crucial to intentionally capture female perspectives during this process. Therefore, the selection process was designed to focus on secondary female principals who could provide meaningful insights into the challenges they encounter.

Through posts and email, eight participants agreed to progress with the study. These participants agreed to engage in the background questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. This selection was driven by the need to ensure a manageable number of participants to facilitate a thorough analysis and in-depth understanding of their responses, but also to capture variety within the participants. While there were certainly more secondary female principals available and capable of contributing, the study's focus on detailed, qualitative analysis necessitated a more selective approach.

One significant challenge encountered during this process was the difficulty in finding secondary female principals who were willing to share their stories openly. Out of all

participants, six expressed concerns about being perceived as weak or vulnerable by sharing their experiences and challenges. This reluctance was communicated as hesitancy to uncover and identify societal expectations and professional pressures that often surround secondary female leaders. There was a notable observed apprehension among secondary female principals about how their candid reflections might be interpreted by their peers and superiors. All participants were especially concerned about shared data as a concern of perception by colleagues, their school district, or peers.

These concerns reflect broader issues related to gender perceptions in leadership roles. Secondary female principals frequently navigate complex social dynamics where demonstrating vulnerability is a potential liability rather than a strength. The fear of being judged or perceived negatively is compounded by the demanding nature of their roles, where there is often little room for perceived weaknesses. Such concerns are aligned with existing literature on gender bias in leadership, which indicates that female leaders are often scrutinized more intensely than their male counterparts (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Heilman & Haynes, 2005).

Despite these challenges, the efforts to recruit participants was met with success to complete the study. Secondary female principals were willing to engage openly, understanding the potential benefits of contributing to research that could illuminate their unique experiences and challenges. These participants demonstrated remarkable resilience and a commitment to advancing the discourse on female leadership in education. Their willingness to share their stories, despite concerns about vulnerability, underscores the importance of providing supportive research environments where female leaders can voice their experiences without fear of judgment.

While the process of recruiting female principals for this study arrived with challenges, it highlighted the critical need for supportive and empathetic research environments. The apprehension expressed by some potential participants about being perceived as weak underscores the broader issues of gender bias and the high expectations placed on female leaders. By addressing these challenges and creating a space for honest dialogue, the study aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of the experiences of female principals and contribute to the broader conversation on gender and leadership.

Methodology Discussion

The initial demographic questionnaire comprised five questions, while the semi-structured interviews included twelve questions. The questionnaire items were designed to include a mix of open-ended and multiple-choice questions to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. These questions aimed to capture participants' basic demographic information and provide context for their subsequent responses.

The semi-structured interviews began with grounding questions intended to help participants reflect on their experiences and set the stage for deeper engagement. These initial questions were crafted to encourage participants to connect with their individual experiences and articulate their perspectives on the topics of interest. The grounding questions served to create an environment conducive to open and thoughtful dialogue, allowing participants to engage more fully with the interview process.

The demographic questionnaire was distributed electronically prior to the individual semi-structured interview. This approach was chosen to streamline data collection and ensure that participants had ample time to provide thoughtful responses before the interviews. By

sending the questionnaire and interview questions in advance, participants were able to reflect on their answers and come prepared for a more in-depth discussion during the interviews.

The development of the interview questions was guided by research questions of this study, themes identified in the literature review, which focused on various aspects of principal experiences, the impact of Covid-19 on educational leadership, leadership identity, and the specific challenges faced by secondary female principals. This thematic approach ensured that the interview questions were relevant and aligned with the key areas of inquiry explored in the study. By drawing from existing research, the questions aimed to elicit rich, contextual insights into the participants' experiences and perspectives.

In crafting the questions, particular attention was given to capturing the nuances of the participants' leadership experiences and the evolving nature of their roles in the post-COVID educational landscape. The goal was to generate comprehensive data that would shed light on the complex realities faced by secondary female principals and contribute to a deeper understanding of their professional challenges and coping strategies.

Participant Details and Demographics

The eight participants in this study are diverse female principals from various schools and backgrounds, each bringing unique perspectives and experiences to their roles. During their interviews participants reflected on their professional lives, career journey, professional trajectory, job satisfaction, and career perspectives, as well as reflections on their personal lives. As shown in Table 1, the study participants were eight secondary female principals from a sub-urban school district. Five of these participants lead large middle schools, one leads an alternative high school, while the other two lead traditional comprehensive high schools. The schools vary in size; however, seven participants reported perceiving their schools as a large

school. One principal considered her school small due to its enrollment and classification as an alternative school. The participants range in years of service. Only one participant considered herself as a new principal, with just three years of experience. All other participants considered themselves to be seasoned principals and veteran school administrators. Participants defined their school as a specialty school if they identified an intentional focus or creative initiative in the title or overall program of their school. The participants range in experience in the principalship from four years to fifteen years.

- Principal Kylie-Jo, a White female, is the principal of one of the district's newest middle schools. Her school serves over 1,500 students in grades 6-8. Kylie-Jo feels extremely comfortable in her role as she is an established principal with over 14 years of experience as a principal, over 20 years in administration, and over 27 years in public education. Kylie-Jo is married, and her children are older; however, she has parented throughout her career as a principal and building level administrator. Kylie-Jo offers a significant contribution to the study with such a robust catalogue of experience in secondary administration. Her school is considered a calendar specialty school as it operates on a multi-track year-round calendar, which means her building is always in session with students, 12 months out of the year.
- Principal Reese, an African American female, leads a middle school with an enrollment of 1,300 students. Reese's middle school currently operates on a multi-track year-round calendar and is located on the outskirts of the district, in a slightly more rural portion of her county. Reese has been a principal for 10 years and has served as a principal at both elementary and middle school. Principal Reese is divorced, a mother, and grandmother. Principal Reese has worked for a significant

amount of time in her district and feels very well versed in the demands of her role within the district.

- Principal Shayna, an African American female, has been a principal for 14 years. She has served as an educator for 28 years and plans to retire from her current role as high school principal. Shayna is a well-known leader within the district and is frequently asked to mentor and support new and beginning principals. She has been successful as a principal at every school level (elementary, middle, and high school). Principal Shayna is married and cares for her parents. Shayna identifies her high school as a very traditional comprehensive high school. Shayna reports that her high school is a 0very well-established school within her district and serves over 2,500 students.
- Principal Elsa, a White female, leads a large traditional middle school with just over 1,300 students. Principal Elsa has been a principal for 13 years and has spent 15 years in administration. She has been in education for over 20 years. Principal Elsa identifies her school as a Magnet School and reports that it is considered one of the flagship middle schools for her district. Principal Elsa is married and a caregiver to three young children.
- Principal Sofia has served as a high school leader with over 2,500 students, covering grades 9 through 12. With four years as a principal and 26 years in the field of education, Principal Sofia is a Latina female. Principal Sofia is bilingual and serves a community with a focus on Spanish language immersion for students and the community. Principal Sofia is divorced and a mother to two adult children. Principal Sofia has expansive experience that spans the cultural diaspora.

- Principal Virginia, a White female, oversees a middle school with close to 1,100 students. Her school is a traditional middle school that serves students within a short mile radius of the school, making it one of her district's few neighborhood schools. Virginia has been a principal for 10 years and has only served in her current school. She is the mother of two toddlers and is married. She has been in education for 16 years.
- Principal Maya, an African American female, oversees a middle school with less than 100 students. She has been in administration for over 15 years and has been principal of her middle school for 4 years. Principal Maya leads an alternative school. She arrived in this role with many years of experience in administration as a comprehensive high school administrator. Principal Maya's school is considered a specialty school within her district. Principal Maya is married and manages caregiving responsibilities, as she is a mother to two small children. Unique to other participants in the study, Principal Maya was a principal during one of her pregnancies.
- Principal Neena is an African American female, and currently principal of a middle school with just over 1,000 students. Her school is considered a specialty school, as it is also a magnet school. Unlike other study participants, Principal Neena has served exclusively at the secondary level and has focused her work with middle and high school students. Principal Neena has never been married and is not a direct caregiver.

Table 1

Participants' Employment Demographics

Participant	School Demographic	Grades	School Program	Years as Principal	Years in Education
P1, Kylie Jo	MS, 1,500+	6-8	Year Round	14	27
P2, Reese	MS, 1,000+	6-8	Year Round	10	21
P3, Shayna	HS, 2,500+	9-12	Traditional	15	23
P4, Elsa	MS, 1,000+	6-8	Traditional, Magnet	10	21
P5, Sofia	HS, 2,500+	9-12	Traditional, Magnet	12	22
P6, Virginia	MS, 1,000+	6-8	Traditional, Magnet	3	16
P7, Maya	HS, 100	9-12	Alternative	8	19
P8, Neena	MS, 750	6-8	Traditional, Magnet	10	18

Table 2

Participants' Personal Demographics

Participant	Subgroup	Age Range	Marital Status	Caregiver	Children
P1, Kylie Jo	White	50-60	M	No	3, adult
P2, Reese	African American	40-50	D	No	1, adult
P3, Shayna	African American	40-50	M	Yes	0
P4, Elsa	White	40-50	M	Yes	3, under 11
P5, Sofia	Latina	50-60	D	No	2, adult
P6, **Virginia**	White	30-40	M	Yes	1, under 2
P7, Maya	African American	30-40	M	Yes	2, under 6
P8, Neena	African American	40-50	S	No	0

Data Collection

To collect data for this study, the above participants were recruited through email and social media postings. Through email the researcher shared background information and an invitation to participate. Once participants responded with interest or questions, the researcher replied with subsequent details to support their questions. After participants agreed to participate in the study, they were provided with informed consent forms, followed by the background questionnaire. The questionnaire was provided electronically to collect demographic detail in advance. Participants were also given the opportunity to schedule their own interview time using a calendar application connected to the researcher's calendar. Providing participant autonomy allowed participants to select times that worked best for their schedule without unnecessary interview scheduling. All participants agreed to engage in a 45 minute to one hour interview session with the researcher. Participants were provided with a choice to schedule an in-person or virtual interview. Seven participants elected to engage in virtual interviews on Google Meet. One participant elected to meet in person. All interviews were recorded through Google Meet online for virtual meetings, and in-person for in-person meetings. Transcripts were maintained through Goole Meet, downloaded, and then cleaned through Otter Transcription Services. The interview process was essential to collect responses and capture the perspective of female secondary principals. The semi-structured interview protocol was created to follow a conversational pattern to encourage participants to talk freely and openly around the content of the study. Interview times did occur outside of working times to support free engagement.

Transcripts were pulled from Google Meet and then cleaned with Otter Transcription. After transcripts were merged and uploaded, they were edited for translation and clarity by the researcher. Transcripts were then organized by participant. Once transcriptions were cleaned, the

research organized and underscored themes and subthemes presented from the interviews. After data and coding analysis, themes and subthemes were categorized manually by the researcher. Since coding and organization was done manually, the researcher was able to pull themes, identify patterns, and establish relationships relevant to the study's research questions and purpose. In qualitative research, data are typically organized into themes and subthemes, which help structure and validate the findings (Pascal et al., 2011). After organizing and underscoring themes, the data transcripts were carefully reviewed to gain a deep understanding of the participants' experiences.

Data Analysis and Procedures

The data analysis plan for this study followed the framework outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994) for qualitative analysis, which comprises three key stages:

1. Data Reduction: This initial phase involved the selection, concentration, condensation, and transformation of the collected data. During this stage, the aim was to streamline the data for more focused analysis.
2. Data Display: In this phase, an organized and concise arrangement of the coded data was created, connecting them in a coherent manner. This display facilitated a clearer understanding of the emerging themes and patterns.
3. Conclusion Drawing and Verification: The final stage encompassed revisiting the data multiple times to verify, test, or confirm the identified themes and patterns. This thorough examination ensured the validity and reliability of the conclusions drawn from the analysis.

These three interconnected stages guided the systematic qualitative analysis process employed in this study. To develop data analysis and to unpack thematic occurrences in the

responses by participants, responses were coded and reviewed for themes. The interview sessions were transcribed verbatim, which allowed for a greater coding scheme and analysis of responses. Coding the responses based on participant feedback allowed me to establish patterns in thoughts, beliefs, behaviors, and assumptions. These patterns allowed me to assess how leadership identity, gender, perceived challenges, and supports impacted the secondary principalship. Creating an analysis of this data fostered greater awareness of how these factors adversely affect applicants, teachers, administrators, and subsequently students in district schools.

Considerations

This study and this process produced significant learning that can influence the way secondary female principals are supported, trained, and influenced toward success. This study provides a strong opportunity to explore leadership preparation practices for aspiring administrators, and equally leadership development and retention opportunities for current administrators. The study also provides greater awareness for district level leaders who supervise principals. The study can also be considered in the field of counseling to support those who serve as support for secondary female principals. Throughout the study, the data demonstrated a need for continued research and greater participant input to unpack a wider scope of impact. Through analysis, limitations and additional study opportunities for development emerged. Though race and cultural impacts were not underscored as a primary area of research in this study, a presence of data in the literature review revealed a considerable difficulty for minority principals, specifically noted in the literature is the challenge of African American female principals. This research study did include African American, secondary female principals. Their responses affirm a need for continued attention, research, and discovery for the experiences, obstacles, supports, and challenges of African American principals.

Coding

In unpacking data, the connection of research questions, participants, data, and research become intertwined in the construction of significance and reflection. Through practice, human interaction, and action, the researcher can immerse in the process to develop deeper meaning and connection to components of the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This attribute of qualitative research makes it even more important to create strong strategies to extract themes and underlying ideas to ensure the information gathered is not only seen as personal reflection. Critics often claim that qualitative research is soft, relative, and filled with the three "Is"- "insight, intuition, and impression" (Creswell, 2007). Creswell states that each research is likely to pull out different significance; however, with a strong process the research should still take the aligned shape of the original purpose (Creswell, 2007). According to Creswell, the coding process is where the researcher can create opportunities for describing, classifying, and interpreting data into meaning (Creswell, 2007). Through coding, information is deemed significant or contextual, while some data is deemed insignificant and can effectively be discarded in context of meaning related to the research question. For this study, codes were established after reviewing notes from the semi-structured interviews to determine what initial codes may be purposeful in highlighting data. It is often helpful for researchers to begin with a short concise list of codes based on initial responses, and then expand or create more expansive codes while working with the data (Creswell, 2007).

For this study, the coding included both deductive and inductive coding methods, or a hybrid coding model (Creswell, 2007). Initial deductive codes included self-doubt, self-awareness, sexism, and racism. Through reviewing the responses, transcript, and data itself, additional codes were added. These codes included motivation, fear, emotional pain, confidence,

authenticity, and health. In addition to these coding foundations, “In Vivo” coding and value coding. When reviewing perceptive reflections and establishing understanding related to responses, a subjective review of the data can be applied to a macro structure when using language extracts for significant responses and themes connected to motivation and interpretation (Khamung et al, 2022). In this data, “in vivo” codes created an opportunity to amplify the individual comments and quotations of the project participants. The value coding introduced recurring themes and ideas that arrived through the semi-structured review. In addition to the codes established through hybrid coding and “in vivo” coding, the values coding added an additional lens of analysis. The values coding included emic perspective on glass ceiling, double jeopardy, mentoring, gender insensitivity, perseverance, and cultural insensitivity.

Trustworthiness

Since the participants shared personal, sensitive, and intricate experiences throughout the semi-structured interview process. A great deal of attention was asserted to ensure the preservation of feedback throughout the data analysis and synthesizing process. In completing interviews, data review, and coding, personal context and challenges remained at the forefront of consideration. Through journal and transcript notes, frequent “in vivo” coding was applied to monitor occurrences with the research to ensure accuracy and appropriate data capture. To ensure transparency and seek accuracy, participants were able to review notes, information, digital recording, transcripts, and preliminary coding data to ensure there were no discrepancies or misinterpretation in their responses.

Study Credibility

Creswell notes the importance of credibility in qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). Credibility ensures accurate data collection, analysis, and correlation with multiple data sources (Creswell, 2007). Due to the nature of this study, there will not be multiple researchers, nor will there be multiple coders to confirm coding themes; however, the use of direct quotes and coding transparency by sharing data with the participants will help provide strong affirmation in reviewer triangulation. Additionally, multiple sources of data were used, which adds to the extended confirmation of data findings.

Transferability

Qualitative research presents a challenge in transferability as an avenue for trustworthiness, as the research is technically not completely replicable because the participants and researchers will vary, even if solely in the experiences gained form one study to the next (Stahl & King, 2020). Studies may vary based on circumstances and extensions that could bring about similar or slightly varied results, even if replicated in similar form or fashion (Stahl & King, 2020). This study adds to several bodies of research related to both women and cultural dynamics in school leadership. This contribution provides an opportunity to create new and emerging knowledge, thus adding to new discovery through the qualitative design. According to researchers in qualitative study, transfer is only possible when a thick description provides a rich enough portrayal of circumstances for application to others' situations (Stahl & King, 2020). Through thick description, the study could achieve transferability to suggest potential context and influence for application in a new site or setting.

Ethical Notes and Considerations

The nature of this study will be very delicate for program participants. The challenges, experiences, and personal pain described based on perception of race and gender can be extremely difficult to relive, describe, and share in an open setting. Due to the nature of the questions, topic, and information, each participant will be provided with a copy of North Carolina State University Research and Data Information, as well as a copy of IRB information, and any school district specific protocols around research. Each participant will also be met with individually prior to the semi-structured interview to ensure they felt comfortable consenting to the process of this study. Each participant was also made aware that they could rescind their engagement at any time, as well as they will frequently be reminded that no names or identifiable characteristics will be used or shared from the interview sessions. Participants will be referred to with alternative names during the interview to ensure their comfort. Data, coding, and analysis information will be stored securely away from public or duplication access. All data, transcripts, and coding will be stored in a digitally encrypted file after study submission to maintain the sensitive information gained during the study.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations serve to identify potential weaknesses within research (Creswell, 2007). As Roberts (2014) suggests, limitations pertain to aspects of the study that may impede the researchers' ability to make broad generalizations. Qualitative research, which is the foundation of this study, inherently possesses limitations. Qualitative research outcomes can be challenging to reproduce due to the unique nature of each participant's experiences. Also, the researcher must rely on the honesty and openness of participants, as they are the sole source of data.

Delimitations

This study's scope was delimited to female principals within the noted suburban public school district in North Carolina, which consisted of secondary female principals. Delimitations encompass the clear boundaries set for the study, including participant selection. This study assumed that both male and female principals cope with stress; however, this study addressed the perception of gender bias, post-Covid stress, female principal identity, and role responsibilities of female secondary principals. All interviews were conducted at the choice of the participant. Some participants preferred virtual interviews, while two participants preferred in-person interviews. The interviews relied on the open communication, dialogue, and genuine responses of the participants. Consequently, the findings from this qualitative case study can only be broadly applied to the secondary female principals in this specific population.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher can impact the outcome of research and participant data (Creswell, 2007). Evaluating the impact of the researcher is necessary to address the study methodology and potential impact on outcomes. As the sole researcher in this study, I hold a unique perspective. This perspective is known as insider research because the researcher is also a member of the population being observed (Kanuha, 2000). As a result, the researcher, and participants during insider research, have shared identities, context, language, and lived experiences (Asselin, 2003). Insider positionality can create an immediate sense of engagement; however, the researcher must emphasize their role as researcher and insider to ensure ability to see participant data as individual to their own (Asselin, 2003). Insider research can create a more significant depth of responses and data from participants (Asselin, 2003). In practice, inside researchers must also emphasize the practice of epoche to ensure separation from assumptions and personal bias to

participants (Husserl, 1931). This insider role afforded me greater acceptance by the participants, fostering openness and honesty during the interviews, which lead to in-depth responses. As a female principal, and a wife and mother, my dual roles, informs my awareness to this study. My insider status created an opportunity for me to leverage my existing relationships and familiarity with the complexities to ask probing questions and delve deeper during the interviews.

Chapter Summary

This chapter focused on the research analysis strategies and approach to make meaning of the data gathered in the semi-structured interviews discussed in the Research and Design chapter of this study. The rationale was presented in context of the qualitative study. Coding and data analysis requires intentional observation and attention from the researcher. It is also essential that program participants trust the research process in play. A strong participant pool allows for more in depth and potentially expansive data to triangulate, use, and create meaning. As the only researcher in the study, a deep dive into the research process of analysis and coding was critical to effectively unpacking the data.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The findings presented in this chapter respond to the study research questions, what do secondary female identify as the key expectation of their role? How do secondary female principals believe the "superwoman" archetype, or the assumption that women should manage multiple culturally constructed roles, influence their perceptions about the principalship, behaviors in the principalship, and career trajectories? What post-COVID career obstacles are currently faced by secondary female principals? What personal and professional supports do secondary female principals perceive they need to maximize their success and wellness, personally and professionally?

The purpose of this qualitative study was to discover how female secondary school principals navigate the expectations and demands placed on them in both their professional and personal lives, with consideration to the challenges in the post-Covid setting. Specifically, the study focused on understanding the professional demands perceived by female secondary school principals and through the research questions; to uncover the strategies these women employ to enhance job satisfaction, professional efficacy, and balance in their roles. As more women have become representative of the secondary principalship, this study emphasizes how those leaders maintain success and progression in the role. The study began with a detailed statement of why the research is relevant. The study then moved to an in-depth literature review that captured historical literature related to women in the United States, women in educational leadership, and a section related to the literature emphasis on the differences African American women experience both in the United States history, and educational leadership. This chapter presents the findings of the study, which delves into the lived experiences of female high school principals. Through this research and continued attention to the experience of women in

educational leadership, district and state leaders can become better equipped to support professional wellness, retention, and recruitment. This research may also contribute to a deeper understanding amongst practitioners in the field, which can also help provide support and balanced expectations for current secondary principals. This chapter outlines the key findings from eight in-depth interviews, which unfolds how the methodology for the study was employed. The results of the findings are discussed through major themes and subthemes, and their correlation to the research questions presented. The data is presented through the themes and subthemes, but also includes elements of non-conforming data, which was presented through the interviews. The findings presented in this chapter include a reflection of quality through qualitative practice. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings.

This qualitative study presents the professional and life experiences of female principals and how they navigate their health and wellness. Qualitative research allows for the exploration and understanding of participants' experiences, meaning making, and knowledge construction (Pascal et al., 2011). By sharing a variety of experiences, the study provides insights to better uncover the perspectives of the research participants. The key themes that emerged from the participant data based on the self-reported experiences of the principals from the study were: (a) pressure to support comprehensive mental wellness, while still emphasizing academic success for school communities (b) polarization of education, people, and communities in the post-Covid setting, (c) gender ingrained bias impacts ambition, self-esteem, and professional practice, (d) self-fulfilled joy (e) the importance of gender affinity mentorship and support. A universal theme observed in the interview data, secondary female principals believe their roles must be performed with near perfect outcomes and practices. They observe that there is little room for error and forgiveness in secondary leadership.

The following sections discuss the findings in detail, providing evidence and explanations for each one. Through rich, detailed descriptions (Denzin, 2001), the researcher aimed to capture a wide range of experiences, allowing readers to immerse themselves in the study and gain a better understanding of the participants' realities. The use of participant quotes from the interviews adds depth, personality, and vividness to the participants' perspectives, highlighting the complexity and beauty of their experiences.

Research Question 1: What do secondary female principals identify as the key expectation in their role?

For this research question, the participants shared stories of multiple areas of pressure and nuanced responsibility. From generalized managerial anxiety to expansive professional stress, all participants noted that their role as secondary principal is expansive and often exhausting. They highlighted the gravity of professional responsibility to grow students academically and meet standardized benchmarks outlined by their district and supervisors, but also the heavy responsibility of attending to the growing mental health needs of staff and students in their building. All eight a participants articulated that mental wellness and academic growth are often conflicting in roles and expectations. Participants noted a spike in professional stress during and after COVID-19, all participants noted that the stresses immediately following COVID-19 have remained and merged into daily expectations or professional practice.

Theme 1: Supporting school mental wellness, while still emphasizing academic success

The participants in this study, including Kylie-Jo, Reese, Shayna, Elsa, Maya and Neena, consistently highlighted the challenge of balancing the need to move their school’s academic needle forward, but still maintain extreme sensitivity to the mental needs of students and staff. This balancing act often requires them to exceed traditional leadership expectations of

instructional supervision, but to also dive deeper into a more recent trend of educational leadership, social and emotional supervision, and support. The participants noted that the expectation to seamlessly integrate these roles impacts their professional experiences by increasing stress levels and often leading to conflicts in professional, staff, student, and community expectations. Additionally, participants noted that this demand of increased social and emotional health of staff and students, often lead to taking on more tasks as a principal, working longer hours, sacrificing personal time, and facing the constant pressure to always be available.

> *Principal Kylie-Jo*: "School is so different now. Before 2020, listen, I would have so many hardline expectations for staff, students, and honestly even families. I try so hard not to look at it as though my standards are lower, but I admit that's how it feels. My standards feel lower for other people, but exponentially higher for myself. Like now, if a teacher is late for five days, okay, so what? I might not even ask about it, or sometimes I already know it's something going on with her family or her kids. I'm just happy to have a teacher in a position, so I'm not willing to do anything to push someone to quit. Because now, if I get an open position, I truly might not have anyone to fill it for the whole year. Before 2020, I would have said, 'No way! You must be on time, figure it out.' I would have said something like, 'Kids are not going to learn if you are not there.' But now, there is this pressure to be understanding, to be flexible about everything, and then I end up taking on more. I'm figuring out the coverage until the teacher gets in, or I'm figuring out the lesson plans because now someone else says that's not their job, and I'm afraid to lose them too. I mean truly, I feel like I can't demand anything of anybody to a hard line. My Area Superintendent is always asking me how I'm taking care of my

people, but at the end of the year, I feel conflicted because I know he's going to ask about my scores. And I'm like, 'They can't both be taken care of all the time without sometimes pushing the demand.' I'm giving you this one example, but in a staff of 100, this is like 80 percent of people—it's not a one-off anymore. I get where they're coming from too, but when I'm in the hot seat, I'm just not sure how to balance it all together."

Participants in this study shared significant experiences around the occupational challenges and stressor they perceived female secondary principals are faced with daily. They cite these stressors as lack of support from Central Services, lack of school funding, lack of qualified candidates in hiring pools, increasing demands of students and communities, and limited opportunities for professional advancement and development.

Principal Reese: "I mean, you're asking me about expectations, but honestly, the day-to-day feels like a true spiral now. I've been in this role for a long time, and when I first started, I felt like, okay, this district expects me to be an instructional leader. I felt like everyone looked to the principal to emphasize instruction, set high protocols and organization, and be the organized, type-A visionary. Now, though, my job feels so scattered. I'm coming in, trying to handle two or three open positions—and depending on the year, it could be more. I'm dealing with students having massive behavioral outbursts, sometimes scaring other students and teachers. I'm trying to ask for support from Central Services, but sometimes it feels like they are so far removed from being in a school that they have their own agenda, completely disconnected from mine. My building is always busy, with people tracking in and out, and everyone is quick to tell me what they won't do during track-out. And guess who picks it up? Me! I've never done so many managerial tasks, but I feel like I can't ask my teachers or my administrative team because I'm

> supposed to be sensitive to everyone's mental state. But what about my own mental state? Now I feel like I'm expected to keep everyone mentally well while somehow keeping them academically challenged. Don't get me wrong—those two things are connected, but it's like I'm supposed to be both a therapist and a tutor at the same time, and those two roles are so different. It makes me a little sad—not that it was perfect before, but now everything feels impossible to tackle."

The female principals in this study navigated a complex web of work stress and heightened role expectations, especially within the demanding environments of their respective schools. Their experiences were marked by the pressures of managing large student populations, ensuring academic excellence, and balancing the specialized needs of their institutions, such as accelerated academic programs. The principals described the challenge of meeting the high expectations placed upon them.

> *Principal Elsa*: "I've never had such low expectations for staff as I do now. I know that sounds harsh, but I can't be nitpicky about what people wear, what time they arrive, what they wear to their interview, or what extra duties they're willing to take on. I used to be like that. People knew I had a clear line about what was required to be professional. But now, honestly, if I'm like that, people complain and say I'm impossible to work with, or that I'm not sensitive to their social and emotional wellness. And then it's on me to change. Right now, I'm managing the National Junior Honor Society, Battle of the Books, and another club because everyone in my building says they're taxed and can't take on anything else. But if I say we're canceling these standard clubs for the year, it's going to be on me anyway to make it happen. So, here I am—the principal and the advisor for these clubs. Five years ago, I would have had so many teachers asking to be

the club advisor for National Junior Honor Society because it would have been considered prestigious for a teacher to host that group. Now, when the last bell rings, people are booking it out of the building. Yes, of course, there are still some who are willing to help, but that number is getting smaller and smaller. I can't blame them. Some of them have second jobs, and some tell me that after COVID, they realized they don't *have* to do all the things they thought they did, and it's just not worth it to invest that much into a field that doesn't pay. Again, I don't blame them—it's just hard. I'm constantly making sure I don't come across as too demanding or too harsh with my staff because the reality is that if they leave mid-year, then I'm on the hook for even more."

Principal Shayna: "As a principal in a large high school, the stress comes not just from the day-to-day operations but from the relentless expectations to perform at a higher standard because I don't feel like I can make any mistakes on the grand stage. It's as if I'm expected to have this innate ability to juggle everything flawlessly—academic outcomes, student well-being, community relations—all while keeping a calm and composed exterior. Because if they think I'm upset, it's like everyone feels I stole their Christmas present.

The reality is that this job demands every ounce of my energy and more. My district expects me to reduce disciplinary incidents, increase graduation rates, retain teachers, show growth on the Teacher Working Conditions Survey, demonstrate improvement among subgroups, and maintain high levels of parent engagement. My teachers expect me to reduce their stress, minimize distractions, and handle disciplinary concerns so they can focus on their classes. Just thinking about those expectations reveals so many contradictions. For example, I'm expected to increase satisfaction on the Teacher

> Working Conditions Survey—basically, make sure everyone is happy—while also reducing discipline incidents, which means keeping kids in school when teachers want them removed for disruptions. Saying it out loud even sounds wild.
>
> Every day, it's a test of which area will prevail. Will I give in to the mental, social, and emotional needs of everyone, or will I hold the line on academics? I find myself holding the line more often, and I've lost people because of it. I can't tell you yet which road is better because I'm still traveling it. I do know there's constant pressure to excel, to prove that I belong in this role, and to do so without showing any sign of weakness. It's a burden that weighs heavily, but I've learned to channel that pressure into a drive to succeed, even when it feels like the odds are stacked against me. Still, I can't decide if that drive to succeed is healthy or not, but it's a drive nonetheless."

These remarks and perspectives reflect the perceived responsibility that secondary female principals feel responsible for their community's social and emotional wellness, as well as their instructional outcomes. These principals note this as a heavy responsibility in the current educational setting. In their reflections, these principals have identified themselves as emotional anchors in their building, as they prioritize positive culture and wellness in their buildings. They report a recognition of importance, but a complexity of feeling they must often sacrifice their own wellness in supporting the wellness of others. In balancing both the mental, social, and emotional outcomes, as well as professional, these principals strive to be successful in a changing landscape of expectations.

Subtheme: Principalship expectations after returning from the Covid-19 Pandemic

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of a school principal evolved significantly, taking on more dimensions than ever before. What was once primarily an

educational leadership position has now expanded into a role that requires adept political management, constant parent engagement, and meticulous building management. Principals have found themselves at the intersection of public health policies, shifting educational demands, and heightened community expectations. The stress associated with these expanded responsibilities has been profound, as these secondary female principals navigate a landscape where they are expected to be instructional leaders, while also simultaneously becoming crisis managers and social and emotional wellness coaches for staff and students, while maintaining the academic integrity of their schools.

During participant interviews, principals shared that they felt the return to the traditional school format created a new level of stress and pressure that was unique to the demands prior to the pandemic.

> *Principal Maya*: "Before the pandemic, my focus was largely on academic leadership—ensuring that our teachers had what they needed and that our students were learning. That sounds crazy, but it really was what we did before. We talked about data; we made data teams. We did all the things I read and studied in our master's program. I mean, we would have all these walkthroughs and protocols, and everyone was all about it. Now, that is not the case. I understand that nothing we read about could have really prepared us for COVID because it had never happened, but we just came back and expected everything to be the exact same—and that wasn't realistic, in my opinion. In no other field did everything just go back to the same. People are still working from home thanks to learning that we could successfully work from home and still get things done, but in education, it's like we said, 'Nope! Let's just do it the exact same way.' Now I'm trying to herd cats back to doing things the same way, and people just don't want to do it the same

way, and honestly, the world isn't the same. My teachers want to leave on time every day. I feel like I'm always up against this invisible bell of people being ready to turn it off. I get it because I wish I could turn it off too, but I know that doesn't happen for principals."

Principal Neena: "The pandemic turned the principalship into something much more than I felt it was before. I don't know how to pick just one thing, but since we are talking about expectations, I'll say that I felt like I was expected to really know my school's data before COVID—inside and out. I needed to know my instructional data: which kids needed support, which teachers needed support, which subgroups were underperforming, and which were excelling. Now, I still feel like I need to know all of that, but I'm also expected to be a mental wellness expert. I'm supposed to have social and emotional structures in place that keep everyone performing at maximum capacity while ensuring they feel fulfilled, seen, heard, and valued. Of course, I believe everyone should feel seen, heard, and valued, but now it's on me to do all this every day, without falling behind in any area. My teachers tell me I'm too hard on them, that I make them anxious when I call out subgroups that need support, and they include that in their climate surveys. My school team says we need to relieve some of the stress teachers feel around getting kids to pass a test, yet at the same time, I'm sitting in meetings where the district says, 'Principal Neena, you need to focus on improving your school's scores.' I feel like I can't do both at the same time."

Principal Sofia: "Oh my goodness, before COVID-19, things felt so much more traditional, more settled. Right after we came back to the building fully, it felt different, which we all sort of expected, but the demands in this role were immediately and

> perpetually different. I went from putting a heavy emphasis on how I was managing and pushing everyone to do their best academically, to becoming heavily focused on how everyone was doing emotionally after we returned—and it never stopped. Though we have some level of routine back now, I still feel like I'm locked in on the emotional wellness of everyone. And honestly, I'm more aware of my own emotional state. There was a time when I was always tired, always overworked, and always on edge. Now, I feel like I'm giving myself the same expectations that I give others. I'm trying to cut it off when I leave; I'm trying to do what I see those I work with do. I try hard not to take it home. I've seen this job take a toll on so many women lately. I've seen those with health concerns, those who lose friendships—sometimes even relationships—over this job, and I'm not willing to be that person anymore. I used to be, even before COVID-19 happened, but I'm just not now. I've given so much to everyone, I feel like I should get a little for myself. I deserve to have someone looking out for my own mental wellness too, right? Even if that someone has to be me."

After the Covid-19 pandemic, the feedback above reflects a shifting aspect of expectations for principals. Though these participants are secondary female principals, these experiences could also relate to perceptions of other principals in schools across the nation, as the crisis revealed new challenges in society and in education. The participants underscored the unique complexities of establishing an elevated level of compassion and flexibility, while also owning the responsibility to provide structure and balance within schools. These experiences underscore the need for emerging skills in adaptability, empathy, resilience, and the need for these secondary female leaders to adapt to these traits for the success of their building.

Research Question 2. How do secondary female principals believe the "superwoman" archetype, or the assumption that women should manage multiple culturally constructed roles, influence their perceptions about the principalship, behaviors in the principalship, and career trajectories?

A recurring theme among the participants was the pressure to fulfill their role as principal and to also fulfill the traditional role as a spouse, homemaker, and caretaker. There was an overwhelming emphasis on success being defined through presence in both the professional and personal arena. The expectation to manage a complex array of responsibilities—ranging from educational leadership to caregiving, all while maintaining a warm and positive demeanor—deeply influenced perceptions of themselves, their behaviors in the workplace, and their career trajectories. These women described a balancing act that is not just about understanding the increasingly complex role as principal, but also about meeting more historic and traditional societal expectations as women, mothers, and spouses.

Theme 2: Ingrained gender bias impacts ambition, self-esteem, and professional practice

For many of the participants, this balancing act of being a successful principal and successful traditional woman at home as a spouse and caregiver is met with challenges, particularly in navigating the expectations of being a secondary female principal. They discussed the need to be firm in their leadership to command respect, yet not so firm that they are perceived as harsh or unapproachable, and the need to be able to quickly transition to a different presence in their personal lives. This delicate balance requires them to be authoritative but also maintain a certain level of femininity, which was described by the participants as uncomfortable and restricting.

Principal Sofia: "Growing up, I don't ever remember not seeing myself as a mother. It was never something that was introduced as a concept. The idea of not having children or not wanting to be a wife and caregiver never crossed my mind because I just thought that was what women were supposed to do. I remember feeling like I had to delay my professional goals a little longer because I couldn't imagine working so heavily and still being the caregiver I felt I needed to be for my children and family. I got married young, probably because that was what I felt like I needed to do. We were best friends, but it was always about me in this role of taking care and mothering. I love being a mother and the things I did with my kids, but I'm also saying I never thought about doing anything outside of that because that was not something women did. When I finally started working in a school, I felt like there was pressure to never let my house slip. I had to be the same woman that I always was, because otherwise, I was letting my kids and family down. Of course, I can look back on that now and know that wasn't true, but it took a long time for me to get there because, you know, so much of what was ingrained in me was being this traditional woman. In my culture, it would have been really out of the ordinary to say, 'No, I'm not going to be this doting wife and mother.' Most of my family probably would have thought I was crazy."

Principal Maya: "The expectation to juggle everything—school leadership, parent interactions, student issues—and then go home and be the perfect wife and mom is overwhelming. There's this constant pressure to be everything to everyone. As a female principal, I feel like I have to work twice as hard to be taken seriously, but I also can't come off as too aggressive because then I'm labeled as difficult. It's this impossible standard where you have to be perfect at work and at home, and honestly, it's exhausting.

It makes you question whether you're cut out for this, not because you lack the skills, but because the expectations are just so unrealistic. I have to be one way at work and another way at home. My family will tell me, 'You are not the principal here; you're the mom.' It's hard because, yes, they are right—I don't have to take the lead on everything—but it's not as easy to jump out of those roles. I never even thought about people researching how women principals feel about all the things they balance, but honestly, when I look around, I feel like that's why a lot of secondary female principals don't have small kids; they are mostly older. It's only a few of us with small kids, and it often feels impossible. I remember being pregnant as a principal and feeling so strange because it was so isolating. Then, after the baby was born, it was this additional reminder of how demanding this role is for women in this phase of life."

Principal Virginia: "As a woman in leadership, I've had to learn to navigate unspoken expectations that aren't as present for my male counterparts. There's this idea that I should be able to handle everything with grace—run a school, manage a household, and still maintain my composure. But the reality is that it often feels like I'm choking on it all. There are days when I feel like I'm wearing a mask, trying to project confidence and calm while internally, I am drowning. I already feel like I should be perfect at the principalship because so many people depend on me for everything. Then, at home, I feel like I have to get it right because these people love me and need me. The reality is that I often feel like I'm failing at both. I try hard to establish non-negotiable boundaries, but somehow, it's Sunday morning, and I'm doing work instead of playing on the floor with my toddler. I feel like there are three or four people in me: the principal, the mom, the

spouse, and somewhere, there's me without all those titles. But honestly, I don't feel like I have the time to pour into that person as much, because the other areas need me."

Principal Shayna: "The most challenging part of my job isn't the day-to-day management; it's the constant need to balance being strong enough to lead effectively while also being 'feminine' enough not to offend anyone. It's a tough act to pull off. I'm expected to be decisive, but not too forceful; compassionate, but not too soft. And on top of that, I don't have personal children of my own, so I feel like my school community looks at me as if I should always be able to do everything. Honestly though, I look at my colleagues who have small children or school-aged children, and I have no idea how they do it. I don't know how they give this job the hours it requires and then go home and turn it on for kids and a spouse. There's this constant expectation to perform perfectly in all these roles, and it feels like no one really understands how much that takes out of you. When I leave school, sometimes I'm just so drained that I have no energy to do anything else. But when I get home, I realize that I have to be present for my spouse and sometimes my parents. They're all adults, so sometimes I become a recluse for a few hours because I can't do one more thing that requires me to put on a persona or play a role."

Principal Elsa: "There's this underlying expectation that, as a woman, I should be able to multitask effortlessly—manage a school, be a supportive wife, a loving mom, and do it all with a smile. But it's incredibly hard to keep up with these demands. At work, I have to be authoritative to manage the staff and students, but if I'm too firm, I'm labeled as aggressive or unapproachable. Then, when I get home, I'm supposed to switch gears and be nurturing and attentive, which is difficult when I'm drained from a long day of work.

I feel so bad with my own kids because I've been patient all day with other kids, but my own kids get no room for grace because I'm so tired. Then I feel guilty when I think about it, because my husband does so much. Honestly, if he didn't have the job flexibility that he does, I know I couldn't do this role. That should feel good, but it doesn't, because I feel like, as the mom, I should be the one doing all the breakfasts, lunches, doctor visits, school volunteering, and things like that. Last week, I finally got to go to my kids' school, and it was great, but it also broke my heart because I don't get to do it enough—and that was a reminder. I feel like if I'm crushing it at work, that usually means I'm failing in the personal areas I want to excel in. On the other hand, when I feel like I'm nailing it at home or as a mom, I feel like work takes a hit. It's a no-win, and I sometimes wonder how long I'm going to keep doing it. It's like you're expected to be perfect in every aspect of your life, and that pressure can be suffocating."

Principal Virginia: "The hours in the day haven't changed, but the expectations have doubled. I'm expected to be everywhere—monitoring classroom instruction, meeting with parents, ensuring everyone is doing what they are supposed to be doing—all while being available for my own family. There's this constant pressure to be perfect in all roles, and it feels like there's no room to breathe. The pandemic didn't just add to our workload; I feel like it shifted the entire framework of how we operate as leaders and caregivers. I find myself constantly battling guilt—guilt for not being present enough at school, and guilt for not being present enough at home."

These responses illustrate how the expectation to handle multiple complex issues affects female principals on multiple levels. The demands of their roles are compounded by societal expectations that they must perform well in both their professional and personal lives, often at

the cost of their own well-being. The need to balance firmness with femininity adds another layer of complexity, influencing how they perceive themselves and how they navigate their career paths in educational leadership.

Subtheme: Personal challenges overcoming gender stereotypes

Female principals like Principal Maya, Kylie-Jo, and Reese discussed the persistent need to overcome gender stereotypes in their roles. These expectations require them to continuously prove their competence and leadership capabilities, often more rigorously than their male counterparts. This added pressure affects their leadership roles by sometimes limiting their opportunities for advancement and influencing their interactions with colleagues and staff. The need to validate their professional worth perpetuates a cycle where female principals must work harder to achieve the same recognition and success as their male peers. This constant validation process can lead to stress and burnout, and it also perpetuates the stereotype that women must work harder to achieve the same level of success.

In their journeys as secondary school principals, several participants shared experiences of overcoming deeply ingrained gender stereotypes that have long shaped expectations for women in leadership. Despite facing assumptions that women are less capable of handling the complexities of school administration, these female principals have navigated these biases with resilience and determination, forging paths for themselves and future women leaders.

> *Principal Kylie-Jo*: "There's this underlying assumption that, as a woman, I should be softer and more nurturing. But when I made tough decisions, I was labeled as too harsh or cold. I had to constantly prove that firmness in leadership doesn't diminish my empathy. It's a tightrope—being firm but not too firm, being empathetic but not a pushover, especially in secondary education, where everyone already expects to see a male as the

leader of the school. It's exhausting, but I've learned to embrace my leadership style and stand by it, no matter what labels get thrown my way. There are more women in secondary education now than I ever remember, and that helps, but you can still feel the undertone of a male ceiling. Even with more women in leadership, we are still reminded that this role is not the norm for us and that we must work extra hard to prove we are here because we earned it."

Principal Elsa: "I've been told many times that I should smile more, that I should be more approachable. It's like there's this expectation that, as a female principal, I should be the 'nice' one—always ready with a smile and a kind word, even when making tough calls. But my job isn't about being liked—it's about leading effectively. I've learned to redefine what it means to be a woman in leadership on my terms, not according to outdated stereotypes. That's hard though, don't get me wrong. I know people associate my demeanor with being cold or disconnected, but I'm trying to help them move past outdated beliefs about women in general. I also know it's different in elementary school. When I was an elementary principal, people couldn't handle it if I wasn't warm, smiley, and giving everyone a hug. It's like that comes with the expectation of being an elementary principal. In the past, though, that wasn't the expectation for secondary, but now it's here too, though I see it more within the building. Parents are still looking to see this older person with years of experience. I still get asked, 'You're the principal?' It's like they can't see me in the role. In the beginning, I thought it was because I didn't really see myself in the role either, but now I feel like it's because the role is changing, yet not everyone has caught on to the changes. Honestly, I don't know that they ever will.

Being a female principal means constantly walking a tightrope. On one hand, I must be assertive and make tough decisions; on the other, I'm expected to be nurturing and understanding. It's like there's this invisible line that I can't cross—if I'm too firm, I'm seen as cold and a witch; if I'm too gentle, I'm seen as weak. And then there's the added layer of being a wife and mother. The expectations don't stop when I leave the school—they just shift. I'm supposed to be present and engaged at home, but the reality is that I'm often exhausted. It's like I'm always trying to prove that I can do it all, but sometimes it feels like I'm failing everywhere."

Principal Virginia: "As a younger woman in this role, I often felt like I had to work twice as hard to earn the respect that was automatically given to my male counterparts, or even to some older women. There were times when I was talked over in meetings, or when my ideas were credited to someone else. But I've learned to assert myself, to own my voice and my authority. It wasn't easy, and it still isn't, because I was raised to be kind, respectful, and to never be bold about certain things. But I'm not backing down. I've made it clear that I'm here because I'm qualified."

Principal Maya: "There's this constant balancing act—being strong without being perceived as aggressive and being compassionate without being seen as weak. When I first started, I was constantly worried about how I was perceived, whether I was being too 'bossy' or not 'feminine' enough. But over the years, I've learned that leadership isn't about fitting into a mold; it's about being authentic and effective, and that doesn't have a gender. I've stopped apologizing for being a woman in leadership, and I've started embracing it. It feels strange sometimes internally, but I've also become more mindful that I cannot let that show when others see me or my leadership. It's especially hard as a

> Black woman because I feel like I have to be aware of both racial and gender stereotypes, so that I can avoid missteps that could potentially pigeonhole me for my whole career. I've seen it happen, so I know I have to be mindful in ways others may not. For example, I always think about how I'm presenting or talking to my whole staff, because I never want to come across as the 'Angry Black Principal.'"

These reflections note the challenges in overcoming stereotypes and ingrained bias, which requires female principals to challenge and confront external factors of perception, while also addressed internalized limitations and structures. These responses highlight the challenges of societal norms such as undermining women in authority figures, while also recognizing how internalized bias and prescribed gender norms that have been noted from earlier years can also impact self-esteem and outcomes for women. By recognizing these and rejecting the implications, female leaders can lean into their roles with out prescriptive expectations of function, and freedom to experience greater confidence. Shedding such biases and stereotypes is not easy and requires significant reflection. Through this process of personal reflection and growth, women leaders can lean in with greater authenticity, inclusive practices, and diverse appreciation of their work both personally and professionally.

The "Superwoman" Archetype

The "superwoman" archetype significantly influences the perceptions and behaviors of female principals. Participants such as Principal Elsa, Kylie-Jo, and Maya described the pressure to manage multiple complex issues simultaneously, from ensuring equity in education to innovating curriculum delivery while maintaining personal and familial responsibilities. This captures the superwoman archetype at play. This archetype fosters unrealistic expectations, in this study therefore leading secondary female principals to associate their ability to perfect tasks

and outcomes in both professional and personal context as the marker for quality. The archetype captures an intrinsic willingness to overextend themselves to meet both real external demands, but also perceived internal demands. Principal Elsa noted that this expectation impacts career trajectories by increasing the risk of burnout and hindering their ability to seek mentorship and professional development opportunities, as they are constantly balancing their numerous responsibilities. Additionally, in the role of secondary female principal this archetype can lead to feelings of inadequacy when imposed expectations are not met, further impacting their mental health and job satisfaction.

Subtheme: Coping with the Superwoman Archetype.

The participants shared multiple accounts of experiences that they felt were rooted in the Superwoman Archetype. These perspectives are rooted in the pressure to excel and experience success in all areas of personal and professional life. All participants voiced that the belief of the archetype is dangerous for both mental and physical health, as it is not realistic; however, they all voiced a continuous pressure to still achieve on all fronts. These achievements were often described as being a present principal, attuned with all areas of the school, while also being attuned to all the needs of their loved ones and homes. Research Question 4 addresses some supports employed by these participants to address the demands in their role; however, all participants agreed that releasing the belief of comprehensive presence and omnipotent self-defined engagement was not likely and a key obstacle in their own daily stress release.

> *Principal Kylie-Jo*: "Oh my gosh, I have tried so many times to be Superwoman. I feel like it’s inevitable in this role, especially if you are both a parent and a principal. My kids are older now, but I remember thinking in the beginning, 'There’s no way I’m going to be able to be a principal and take care of my house in the way I’m supposed to.' I started out

in a smaller district, and I honestly think that helped a lot. My kids went to school with me, and I felt less guilt because, in some ways, I truly got to be Superwoman. I knew everything going on in every aspect of my kids' lives, and I got to be at their school every day. They spent more time with me, and it made it, so I was always there. It was a smaller district, so it felt like everyone knew everyone, and all the events I had to be a part of were ones my kids wanted to go to anyway. It's different in larger districts, which is why I'm glad my kids are older now. Here, I feel like I'm trying to get everything done at school, and then I'm racing home to make sure the house is clean, dinner is ready, and things like that. It's definitely better with my kids being older, but now that they're older, if they need me for something, I get chaotically frantic because I feel like I have to do whatever they need while still handling everything the school needs."

Principal Reese: "Honestly, when do I not feel like I have to lean into being Superwoman? I'm still trying to figure that out. This is my second school, and at the first one, I thought it was because I was new and still learning everything. Now, this is my second rodeo, and I feel like I'm still trying to do everything for everybody. My son is older now, so he's doing his own thing, but when he was younger and I was working, I don't know how I did it. I was trying to burn the candle at both ends, while my hand was burning from the flame. I was trying to get him to school, make sure he felt like he had everything he needed—and a lot of what he wanted—because that's what good moms are supposed to do. I was also going through a divorce at the time, so I felt like I had to put forth even more effort to make sure I covered everything. At work, it's hard because when I feel like I'm on top of everything or everyone there, I have nothing left when I leave."

Principal Shayna: "I think a lot of people look at me and assume that because I don't have kids, I must have an abundance of time. I really don't feel that way, though. I'm always tired. This job has ungodly hours associated with it. Some days, I get to school at 6:30 a.m. and don't leave until 11:00 p.m. Other days, I might leave at 8:00 p.m. or 10:00 p.m., but it's consistently late. When I get home, I feel like I need to prioritize being present with my husband. On the weekends, I'm trying to prioritize him, my parents, and our family, but it's hard. I don't know where my friends fit in, but with this job, I feel like I have to be so careful with my time. I can't let my relationship with my husband or our home fall apart, so when I get home, I'm trying to do the 'wife' things and make sure he sees and feels that. It's not about him; it's about me recognizing that this relationship is supposed to be about both of us. But make no mistake, I'm tired. Still, I agreed to that role too, so as much as I put in at school, I have to put on the cape when I leave and be Superwoman for my house. I try not to look at that as a task because I'm thankful and grateful for it all, but I'm still tired."

Principal Elsa: "Yes, this question is hard for me because the only way I feel like I can be okay is by embracing the concept of doing it all. Deep down, though, I feel like I'm still coming up short with my kids and husband, and that breaks my heart. I get up and try to put on a good face for them, but in the morning, I'm already anxious about my day and what's ahead of me. Then I get to school, and I have to put on the face of control for my staff because I have to save the day every day there. When I come back home, I'm exhausted from dealing with kids, adults, parents, and whatever else has been thrown at me that day. But I try to separate myself from that so I can be present with my family. They don't deserve me to be out of it every day due to exhaustion. I try to keep a finger

on all the things happening, and inevitably, I lose myself in it—but it's what we have to do. If I stop trying, it feels like I'm accepting that I won't be the mom I want to be, or that I'll run the risk of being considered average at my job, and I don't know how to accept either."

Principal Maya: "You know, it's interesting that you asked me this because I've never thought about it as something outside of what was just expected of me. Growing up, all the women in my family were in education. They all worked, they all had families, and sometimes their marriages took a hit, but they kept going. I saw them doing everything on all fronts—they did everything for their families, their spouses, they went to church on Sundays, they cooked homecooked meals every night, and they just did it all.

I looked at them and thought, 'Okay, I'm going to be like that because that's what women in my family do.' Where I am now, it's hard. I don't know if my mom and aunts felt like they had to be Superwoman or if maybe the generations were just different, but I know I feel like I have to keep everything afloat. Then I look at social media and see all these messages suggesting I should be happy staying at home and being a traditional wife and mom. Social media isn't making me feel that way—I already felt that way—but it does bring my attention to it in a way that keeps it at the forefront of my mind."

Principal Virgina: "I definitely feel like I have to be Superwoman. If I'm not trying or striving to be, in some way, I feel like I'm letting people down. I'm sure that's some warped way of thinking from growing up, but I feel like being a good mom, wife, and housekeeper is important to me. That feels like what I signed up to do by having a baby, getting married, and trying to have a life together. When I was growing up, it seemed so much simpler, but maybe it wasn't, and now I'm just seeing it from the other side.

I’m always working and I’m always 'home-ing,' if that makes sense. I feel constantly torn too, because a lot of my friends work and have kids, but nobody else seems to work this kind of job with small kids—or at least, they don’t seem to do it in a way that makes it look doable. My friends all work jobs that allow them to work from home, and they make so much more money. They tell me they have someone to clean the house weekly, and they even have dinner delivered regularly. Then, every principal I ask, at every level, says it’s constantly pulling and constantly stressful. They say they’ve just accepted this perpetual state of exhaustion and disappointment in never being able to fully do the job they thought they would do, either as a principal or as a wife and mom. That hurts to hear because I don’t want to be like that."

Principal Neena: "I mean, sure, I’ve felt like that before, but I know it’s different for me because I’m not married and I don’t have kids, though I would love to have those things. In some ways, I feel like this job has taken up so much of my time that I can’t focus on anything else. Being a high school principal as a woman is brutal, and honestly, I don’t know how anyone could do it with small babies for a long time. You get no personal life. I guess you could take your kids to everything, but depending on the school and the situation, which might not be ideal. If you’re at a school with a lot of concerns, you’re not going to want them running around playing, and in some schools, families and parents will look at you as distracted because of the phase of life you’re in. For me, it’s like I feel like I have to be maximized in my work as a principal because people know I don’t have a family waiting at home. I feel this enormous pressure to be Superwoman at work, and then personally, I feel like I should have everything in order and well put together at all

times—and I don't. So that makes me feel like I'm not doing it right. But also, I don't know if it's even attainable, yet I still feel like it's something I have to work toward."

The researcher noted feedback from each participant around the belief and subscription to Superwoman Archetype. These responses note that secondary female principals often find themselves fully entrenched in the belief that they must be successful in all aspects. They must win professionally and personally. The responses also note that subscribing to this belief leads to turmoil in both realms; however, the desire to still perform drives continuous effort.

Subtheme: Minority observances of gender and racial intersectionality

The literature review chapter of this study indicated research that suggests minority women experience different societal constructs in the United States, based on historical context and feminist standpoint. The literature review spoke to the double jeopardy that black women face in many professional settings. This dual layer of bias in both race and gender undermines the professional setting and the additional structures that also exist in many professional settings. In this student the minority participants underscored the intersectionality of race and gender in their role as secondary female principals. Their responses discussed higher scrutiny, higher demands for success, questions of competence, critique of leadership styles, and greater perceived expectations from supervisory leads. These principals report not only challenges with gender expectations, but also within racial bias.

Principal Reese: "Being a principal is already hard, but when you add being a Black female principal, you have a whole different beast. I came in after a non-minority in my schools, and when I took over, people seemed so shocked by everything I did. If they weren't happy, it was always my fault. They couldn't handle anything I said that caused

them to reflect on their practices. It's hard because I also know I have to walk a thin line. My community will easily take anything I do and run with it if they are against it.

I spend a lot of extra time thinking about how I can roll something out, how I can get people on my side, and how I can make sure I'm being seen as thoughtful and caring. I know other women think about this, and maybe some men do too, but it feels different on my end. I feel like if I fail at anything, it's off with my head, and everyone is going to make sure I pay for it."

Principal Shayna: "I've been around long enough to know that being a Black female principal is definitely a different block. You have to be so methodical about everything. Listen, you can make the same mistake as others, but I've seen Black women lose their contracts over much less than their peers. As a Black woman, you have to make sure everyone feels you are organized, together, and well-spoken. You cannot afford for people to think anything less. If they do, you're going to suffer. People will try to undermine your authority, especially in middle and high school. At this level, people really expect Black women principals to be angry, hard, and prude. It's hard because in some ways, you do have to be unmoved by emotion in this job, but as a Black woman, you have to play your cards carefully so that everything doesn't backfire."

Principal Sofia: "For me, my school community embraces me. Here, I think it's a benefit that I'm bilingual and can relate to so many families and teachers. It fits the purpose and structure of our school. I'm sure in other places it might be different, but being in this community fulfills me because they see value in who I am and where I come from. That pours into me, and I feel like these are my people, and I'm motivated to show up for them in that way.

When people see me, they might not immediately know that I'm Latina, but it is who I am. Being able to be myself at work feels like a huge relief because it's so deeply tied into who I am. I feel for people who can't show up as themselves at work—that adds a layer of stress that could be burdensome."

Principal Maya: "When I think about things that impact women as principals, I have to say, for me, it's my experience as a Black woman. I've had so many experiences that make me aware that everyone doesn't see me the same way they see some of my colleagues. It's hurtful sometimes, but you just kind of figure out how to work around it or move past it. It could be a teacher openly challenging you in a meeting, a colleague making a comment about why you're at a particular school, or a parent expressing their desire to work with a different administrator. When it happens, it hurts, but I have to be strong enough not to let my emotions get the best of me. At first, that was hard, but over the years, I think I've become better at it. I mean, you have to—otherwise, you'll go crazy letting it stress you out."

Principal Neena: "I absolutely feel like my gender plays a role in my work, but more so it's my gender and my race. People see me and already make assumptions about how it's going to be with me as the principal. When I first got to this school, I could see it on their faces in meetings. Everyone would question every little thing I did. When we did something well, everyone was happy and ready to take ownership of the success, but when something didn't go well, I was left out to dry alone.

I feel like I'm extra careful now with my staff because I know one thing can make them see me as the 'Angry Black Woman,' and I work hard to avoid that—though sometimes I feel like it's unavoidable and just part of the job. Principals can't make everyone happy

all the time, and it's like if I say no and you think that makes me an 'Angry Black Woman,' well, okay, I've tried my best, and that's all I can do.

I feel like it's different in different communities too. When most of the kids are minorities, everyone seems fine with you being the principal, but when the demographics don't reflect you, it feels different."

As reflected in these responses, minority female principals are aware of the intersection of race and gender in the workplace. These principals not only address the professional role, but the responsibility that comes with gender and race. Their experiences reflect a balancing act of challenging stereotypes while still striving for success and progress within their buildings. Observing this connection with race and gender in their leadership highlights the need for continued systems and supports to recognize the impact and potential burden this can have on female leaders.

These narratives reveal the resilience and adaptability of female principals as they navigate and challenge the gender stereotypes that still pervade the field of educational leadership. Their stories underscore the importance of redefining what it means to be a woman in leadership, moving beyond traditional expectations to create a more inclusive and equitable environment for all.

Research Question 3. What post-COVID career obstacles are currently faced by secondary female principals?

The role of a school principal has always been demanding, requiring a delicate balance between leadership responsibilities and personal life. However, for female principals, these challenges are often amplified by societal expectations and gender norms, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter delves into the specific career obstacles currently

faced by female principals, focusing on the theme of balancing leadership and personal roles. The post-COVID educational landscape has introduced new stressors and intensified existing ones, making the already complex role of female principals even more challenging. Through the voices of eight participants, this chapter explores how these women navigate the dual pressures of professional leadership and personal responsibilities, and how these challenges vary across different contexts.

Theme 3: Polarization of education, people, and communities in the post-Covid setting.

The post-COVID era has significantly reshaped the role of school principals, placing new demands on their time, energy, and emotional resources. For female principals, these challenges are often compounded by the need to fulfill traditional gender roles at home while also excelling in their professional duties. The pandemic has blurred the boundaries between work and personal life, creating a scenario where the demands of both spheres constantly intersect, often to the detriment of the individual.

> *Principal Virgina:* "Now, it feels like every day is a political minefield. I'm constantly negotiating with parents who are more vocal and divided than ever before, balancing their demands with the demands of an ever-changing school district, and making sure that the building is not just a place of learning, but a safe environment. The stress of trying to keep everyone happy while also maintaining our school's standards is overwhelming. I feel like at one point, parents were somewhat in favor of school structures, but now it feels like the climate is so volatile for everyone. I cannot be sure if someone wants to talk or if someone is getting ready to make a formal complaint against the school and me."
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> *Principal Reese*: "The stress levels among students, parents, and staff are through the roof. I've had to step into roles that go far beyond education—counselor, mediator, even

sometimes a family advisor. And while I'm trying to support everyone else, I'm expected to keep my own stress in check, to be the steady hand guiding the ship. But there are days when it feels like I'm the one about to capsize. The pandemic has magnified every challenge we face as leaders, and it feels like the weight of the world is on my shoulders. Communities don't trust schools anymore. I can't decide if that's all due to COVID-19, or so many other political challenges that bubbled up around the same time, but people do not trust schools anymore. There is a constant stress that someone is going to escalate something higher, and once it's escalated, it's like it never comes down again. There used to be amicable disagreements, but now everything feels etched in distrust, anger, and some sort of resentment. I also think that has played into student behaviors. Now it feels like the student discipline piece is so big when it comes. Of course, schools always had disciplinary concerns and situations, but nothing is clear anymore. We're all worried about school safety, but then we've got people telling us that we are always the problem in the situation. I do know that sometimes teachers and schools are not trained to support some of the needs we face, but at the same time, it feels like everything is blamed on us, even when we really don't have the means and opportunity to course-correct all that we are tasked with. Post-COVID, I feel like my job has become less about education and more about managing a building that happens to have classrooms. On top of that, there's the added stress of handling increased communication—everyone has an opinion, and they expect immediate action. It's exhausting to be pulled in so many directions, and I often find myself questioning whether this is really what I signed up for."

Principal Elsa: "I feel like the climate now is so edgy that you try to walk everything with a small space for error because you know that if you don't, you're going to have to clean up a bigger mess. For example, after COVID, I felt like everyone had a note of some sort. I felt like it was no longer an outlier to have anxiety or mental stressors because everyone seemed to have them. Staff had them and wanted support, parents were getting their children evaluated for anxiety all around, and I feel like everyone wanted special support for it. I am sure we all had some level of anxiety after things picked up from the pandemic, but now it feels like you can't do anything right unless it's giving in completely to what someone else wants. I'm now asking teachers to support more accommodations for students than ever before, while I'm also recognizing the need to support more adult accommodations professionally as well. I feel like I need my own support, but the expectation is that, as the principal, I deal with it all gracefully."

Principal Shayna: "COVID really did a number on schools. Sure, we were closed, but what it did was put schools on the map for public debate, public scrutiny, and public focus. One thing everyone has an opinion about is school. That's not new, but what is new is the platform to say something on a big stage about it. During COVID, social media kind of blew up in a way that it hadn't before. Everything is recorded now in real-time, everything is shared, and what people like and dislike becomes public discourse. I'm not saying people don't have a right to speak out—they certainly do—but I'm just saying there is no longer this feeling of decorum or protocol to honor a process. People get wind of something and polarize it before you have a chance to even address it one way or another."

Principal Neena: "It's like every decision I made was scrutinized through the lens of public opinion, and not just within the school, but throughout the entire community. Then, when we came back to school with everyone, it was amplified. I had to manage parents who were deeply divided over issues like masks, and teachers saw me as an adversary because they saw me as the one who made them come back to work. We went from saying that everyone needed grace to, okay, back to business as usual. Now it's no longer just about leading a school; it's about navigating a complex web of community relations, polarized communities, and educational expectations, often with little to no guidance. I honestly can't remember what expectations felt like before COVID-19, but it felt like we at least had expectations. Now, everything feels negotiable."

Principal Sofia: "The shift has been dramatic. Before, my job was challenging, but it was centered around educational leadership. After we returned, I felt like I was doing everything but true educational leadership. It's a bit better now, but right after we returned from the majority of students learning remotely, I was spending more time dealing with things like public health directives, managing parent expectations, and even navigating the political landscape of our community—like whether I was going to publicly agree with mask mandates. There's a level of stress that comes with knowing that every decision you make could be scrutinized not just by the school but by the board, the entire community, and, with social media, even the nation or world. It's a level of pressure I didn't anticipate, and it's changed the way I approach a lot of things in this role."

Subtheme: Personal challenges immediately following the Covid-19 Pandemic

The expectations placed on female principals often extend beyond their professional lives, affecting how they manage their personal roles as wives and mothers. Principal Maya, who is both a principal and a mother, described the continuous demand to perform at an elevated level in all aspects of life.

> *Principal Maya*: "There's this pervasive notion that, as a woman, you have to be everything to everyone—an excellent leader, a perfect mother, a supportive wife. The pandemic only heightened these demands. My husband's career didn't slow down, and neither did mine, but I felt like figuring out how to take care of the kids while everything else was going on was in my bucket. It's as if the world expects women to have this infinite capacity for multitasking, and when we inevitably fall short, we're the ones who are judged. It's a constant juggling act, and sometimes it feels like all the balls are going to drop. I try not to judge myself, but it's hard. We don't have a lot of family here, so it feels harder sometimes. For a while after schools opened back up, it was difficult because there were so many requirements for staying out after exposures. If the kids had to be home, I knew I had to do my part in scheduling days to be with them. We try to share the load, but I still feel I have to take the lead in that way."
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> *Principal Elsa*: "The pandemic blurred the lines between work and home, and that kind of just continued. There were days when I was trying to manage a crisis at school while also trying to do something with my own child at home. It's like being pulled in multiple directions at once, and it's exhausting. There's an expectation that, as women, we should be able to handle it all, but the reality is, it's crushing at times. I've had to learn to set

boundaries, but even then, there's always something that needs my attention, whether it's a student issue at 9 PM or a family concern during the school day."

For some participants, the gendered expectations in leadership roles have added another layer of complexity to their professional lives. Principal Elsa reflected on the need to balance firmness with femininity in her leadership approach. She shared,

Principal Elsa: "There's always this underlying expectation that I should be both strong and soft at the same time. I'm supposed to make tough decisions without coming across as too harsh, but also be nurturing and supportive. It's a delicate dance—one that my male colleagues don't seem to have to perform. And it's tiring because, no matter what, someone will think you're doing it wrong. The pandemic has only amplified these expectations, as we're now expected to be everything to everyone, all while keeping a smile on our faces. I used to talk to friends about my job, but now I don't. It alienates them and me because the expectations of my job are so unreal, and they don't understand. When I would tell them about things, I would get annoyed at them and myself because it felt like I was choosing to put myself in this overly stressful situation."

Principal Neena: "COVID alone was hard for me. I felt like I was shut off from all my friends and connections, but then there was this part of me that was happy to sit still, I guess because I was going so hard at work. Then, when we shifted to everyone going back to the way it was before, it was hard. My own mental space took a hit, but I felt like I couldn't explore why or what that meant for me because I had to be centered on everyone else at work. I would come home so drained from being interactive all day, but I felt like I couldn't say that because it would be like saying I wanted to go back to social distancing, which I don't think was what I wanted. I was craving a slower pace, time to

myself, time to focus on my own wellness and my family—time that I feel I might never get again because work takes such a front seat."

The experiences shared by the participants in this study highlights the unique and multifaceted challenges faced by female principals in the post-COVID era. The pressure to balance leadership responsibilities with personal roles, coupled with the heightened stress and demands brought on by the pandemic, has created an environment where female principals are constantly navigating complex and often conflicting expectations. These challenges are not just professional but deeply personal, as these women strive to meet the demands of their careers while also fulfilling their roles as mothers, wives, and caregivers. The insights gained from this study underscore the need for greater support and understanding of the specific obstacles faced by female principals, particularly in times of crisis. By acknowledging and addressing these pervasive challenges, educational institutions can create more sustainable environments where female leaders can thrive, both professionally and personally.

Research Question 4. What personal and professional supports do female principals perceive they need to maximize their effectiveness and wellness, personally and professionally?

The journey of female principals, especially in the post-COVID era, reveals a critical need for targeted personal and professional support to maximize their effectiveness and well-being. This chapter focuses on the perceptions of female principals regarding the supports they need to excel in their roles. A prominent theme that emerged is the demand for intentional mentorship and support from other women in leadership. Female principals highlighted how such mentorship can significantly enhance their professional growth, resilience, and overall wellness.

Theme #4: Intentional mentoring and female principal networks are sustaining.

Research underscores that women experience greater success when they are part of environments crafted to be intentionally supportive, where their voices are heard, and where there is an opportunity for transformational learning. Such spaces provide not only safety and validation but also facilitate deep, impactful learning experiences that can drive personal and professional growth. The safety of voice and the likelihood of transformative experiences are critical factors in these supportive environments, enabling women to navigate the complexities of their roles more effectively. Through the lens of this research, the chapter will explore how these elements contribute to the effectiveness and satisfaction of female principals in their demanding roles. Through the voices of six participants, this chapter explores their insights into the types of support they believe are crucial for thriving in their challenging roles.

> *Principal Elsa*: "Having a network of women who understand the unique challenges of being a female principal has been invaluable. I've found that intentional mentorship from other female leaders provides not only practical advice but also emotional support. It's essential to have mentors who can offer guidance specific to the pressures we face as women in education. This support helps me navigate the complexities of my role and maintain my well-being. I wish there were more structured programs to facilitate these connections and ensure ongoing support. These people and my middle school group keep me going. I know that I can pick up the phone and call them at a moment's notice, and they understand what I'm going through."
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> *Principal Kylie-Jo*: "The challenges of being a female principal are magnified without a strong support system. I believe that intentional connection from women who have walked this path is critical. It offers a level of career guidance and personal

encouragement that you're not going to get from a general principal's meeting. It's not just about having someone to turn to for advice, but also about building a community where experiences are shared and validated. This type of support is essential for managing the unique pressures we face and for sustaining long-term career success. When you know other people have been where you are, it feels a little more realistic to see it through."

Principal Virgina: "To me, my connections and circle of support from other women in leadership roles have been a lifeline. It provides a space to discuss what I am dealing with on both the professional and personal fronts. It is an opportunity to talk about what I encounter and to share strategies for handling whatever I might be dealing with at the time. The insights and solidarity from female mentors have been crucial in helping me navigate both personal and professional challenges. I strongly believe that intentional, women-focused mentorship programs would greatly benefit female principals by offering tailored support that addresses our unique needs and experiences."

Principal Maya: "One support system that has helped me tremendously has been the intentional mentorship from other female leaders. They have been the ones to say, 'This is not going to help you,' or 'Avoid doing this,' before I even knew how to avoid it. These relationships offer not just professional advice but also emotional support, which is essential for maintaining my wellness. Having mentors who understand the pressures of balancing leadership with personal responsibilities helps me stay grounded and focused. I've found that when these connections are made intentionally and structured to provide ongoing support, they make a significant difference in my career and personal life. It also creates a space of safety that is often rare in this role because it's lonely. As an assistant

principal, you feel close to teachers or other team members, but as the principal, you are often on your own."

Principal Shayna: "For middle and high school female principals, mentorship from other women is more than just beneficial—it's crucial. The support and guidance provided by female mentors help to navigate the unique challenges we face in leadership roles. This mentorship offers real advice, emotional support, and a sense of community that is vital for managing the demands of the job. Structured mentorship programs that focus on the needs of female principals would be incredibly valuable in helping us achieve our professional and personal goals. I try to create my own structures and regularly mentor new administrators in the field, but I also maintain a close connection with other women in the same role so that we know we are supporting one another. We also know we can come there first out of safety and security. Being vulnerable happens more authentically when you know others are experiencing the same things you are."

Principal Reese: "Having a network of supportive female leaders has been instrumental in my career. Intentional mentorship provides not only guidance but also a space where we can share our experiences and challenges. It's important to have mentors who can relate to the specific pressures of being a female principal, and who can offer strategies and encouragement. This kind of support is essential for maintaining our effectiveness and well-being, especially as we navigate the complexities of our roles in education."

The responses from the participants underscore the vital need for intentional mentorship and support from other women in leadership roles. The experiences highlight how such support can enhance effectiveness, resilience, and overall well-being for female principals. By establishing structured mentorship programs and fostering strong networks of female leaders,

educational institutions can better support their female principals in managing the dual demands of their professional and personal lives. Recognizing and addressing the unique challenges faced by female principals through targeted support not only aids in their individual success but also contributes to a more supportive and inclusive leadership environment in education.

Subtheme: Strong Support Systems

Participants like Principal Sofia, Elsa, Kylie-Jo, Shayna, Maya, and Virgina emphasized the importance of having a dedicated support system at home. This support includes spouses or significant others who share caregiving responsibilities and provide emotional support. The presence of a supportive network enables female principals to manage their dual roles more effectively and maintain their well-being. These support systems are crucial in helping them navigate the demands of their jobs and personal lives, allowing them to focus on their professional responsibilities without compromising their personal commitments.

> *Principal Sofia*: "I am so fortunate to have this amazing partner who holds me accountable. He makes sure that I'm eating healthy, that I'm going to the gym, and that I'm living fully. He will get up early and make my breakfast and lunch. He will text me throughout the day and remind me of what time I'm doing other things outside of my job, and he makes sure I get to the gym. It's amazing. I didn't always have that, and it was hard. I found myself so much more entrenched in work with no professional boundaries, but he helps me have boundaries and keep them. I feel like my workload is more manageable now because I have someone who helps me grow and flourish into who I should be as me, not just as a mom and principal. It took time to get there, though. After my divorce, I realized I needed to pour into myself, and for so long I hadn't done that. Now, my partner helps me do that."

Principal Elsa: "I feel like I'm only able to be successful in this job because of my husband. He practically does all the things I would typically think I should do as the mom in the house and the wife, but he does it. It makes me tear up to think about how much he supports me in this role, but it's true. His support really keeps me going because, without it, I know I couldn't. He is there getting the kids off the bus, getting them ready for the next thing, and paying attention to the many things that I feel could easily get overlooked on my end. He does that, and I don't know how I would do it without him. I also want to say that having a strong team within my school helps me too. I know I can rely on my admin team to have my back. They know what is needed and they do it. I don't have to worry about something being left off the list. That honestly helps make the day-to-day a little more bearable."

Principal Shayna: "My husband is a strong support for me, but it's not always easy. Sometimes this job gets in the way of us. I try to limit that, but it's real. Still, when he knows I've had a hard day, he's there for me, and when I call him at school, he's always willing to listen to me. In prioritizing him, I'm also prioritizing boundaries for myself from always being consumed by the job. He will make sure we take long weekends or vacations—things I normally wouldn't do. I would also say my friends are a dynamic support for me. They keep me grounded and lighthearted, which is essential to staying positive in this work."

Principal Maya: "Well, here it's just my husband and me, so we have to depend on each other for pretty much everything. That gets hard though; I won't act like it doesn't. It's hard to find babysitters. We've even thought about moving to be closer to family and have more support so we might be able to do things together more. But for now, it's just

us, and we have found ways to make it work so that we can both work and feel somewhat present in our careers."

Principal Virginia: "My family is a huge support for me. My husband is amazing. He helps me with everything at home, but we also rely on family, and they help a lot. It's hard as they are aging, and I don't want to burden them, but it's been a lifesaver to know that you have someone to call when you need help. My husband will do things like make my lunch, and while that seems so small, it makes me feel less alienated and alone from my family, and yes, it's one less thing to think about. He is also patient with me when I feel like I'm failing at all roles. He will remind me that I'm not, that I'm human, and that I get to be an imperfect human. Of course, I know that, but it's nice to have a reminder too."

The need for healthy support systems was highlighted by these participants. Having access to dedicated support structures beyond the professional setting and within the school creates an opportunity for greater success and satisfaction. These supports enhance their capacity to lead and foster their professional growth.

Subtheme: Self-Care

Principal Sofia, Reese, Kylie-Jo, Neena, and Shayna identified self-care as an essential strategy in managing stress and prevent resentment toward the role. Time management and trusted administrative delegation can allow secondary female principals to balance their professional and personal responsibilities effectively. Prioritizing self-care and establishing boundaries helps them navigate their multifaceted roles and sustain their career trajectories. These strategies are crucial for maintaining their mental and physical health, ensuring they can continue to perform at their best in both their professional and personal lives.

Principal Sofia: "I used to stay in the building until all hours of the night, but not anymore. I leave, and I make it my responsibility to get to the gym. It's rare that I'm not sprawled out on the gym mat, drenched in sweat, crying from my workout. I do it religiously because I know it's what keeps me going. I eat to live now—I don't keep all kinds of snacks in my office, even though people bring sweets to principals daily. I try not to eat things that won't fuel my mind and body. I know how that might sound to some people, but I'm determined not to let this job take over my body and mind. I'm present when I'm here, but when I leave, I truly try to disconnect."

Principal Reese: "Listen, my self-care is non-negotiable. I used to be one of those principals who never took a day off. Not anymore. I've seen too many principals lose everything to this job, and I don't want that to be me. Now, I take the days off. I try to take at least one day a month to either work from home or to completely disconnect and take the day off. It's essential for my mental health. Sometimes, when I get home, I take a nap or binge-watch a show just to give my mind a break from decisions. I learned last year that no one is going to make me take time off. People will expect me to keep going as long as I can—until I burn out. That's not healthy for me, and it's not healthy for the people watching me either. I'm not a robot, and I need everyone to know that."

Principal Kylie-Jo: "Family will always come before work for me. If my kids call me, I'm going to stop what I'm doing and respond to them. I've started looking at myself the same way. I need to prioritize myself sometimes too and take that breather—so I do. We try to take long weekends and family trips regularly to make sure we're getting away. Now that the kids are older, we can also focus on our marriage in a way we didn't before. Honestly, making time for myself and my husband allows me to return to work with a

better outlook. I'm more patient, I'm refreshed, and I'm able to lean in. For me, compartmentalizing is huge. I'm not sure if that's specific to secondary, but when I'm at work, I'm fully at work. When I leave, though, I'm fully focused on being at home. In a way, this is a professional boundary, but it's also a form of self-care."

Principal Neena: "I feel like I work hard, so I should be able to enjoy my life outside of work with just as much intention. That doesn't happen perfectly every month, but I'm always planning my next trip or getaway with family or friends. It's a must for me. Without it, I'd drive myself crazy, constantly thinking about work and never coming up for air."

The intersection of professional and personal responsibilities has forced many female principals to adapt in ways to preserve their individual wellness. The responses shared by participants acknowledge self-care as an essential practice in maintaining mental wellness and physical wellness in their role.

Subtheme: Purposeful Joy

All eight participants shared a professional strength in their work as a sustaining factor in their continued success, purposeful joy. These secondary principals found joy in their roles by making a meaningful impact on the lives of students and their communities. Even with the challenges of the role, these principals felt a deep sense of satisfaction in seeing success for their students and schools. The select quotes below capture these sentiments.

Principal Kylie- Jo: "I wanted to be a principal to make a difference in schools, and when I see that happening in my building, I get so hopeful about the future of our students and

our communities. I'm still opening schools and doing what I do because I believe it still matters, and it's still making a difference for someone. That's all I've ever wanted to do."

Principal Reese: "This role was attractive to me because I thought I could influence change for people and students who were low on hope. When I see kids thriving in my building or creating new pathways for success, I get excited. My heart smiles when I see these moments because it affirms why I'm here."

Principal Shayna: "A high school like this one is hard. You depend on so many people to make your vision happen. I like having my hands in everything, but at this level, you can't be everywhere. So, I get excited when I see something I've talked about with my team and my teachers coming to life. When I see the students benefiting from what we've planned, it's like the ultimate full-circle moment. I'm still in this for the kids, but now it's also to see others I've poured into be successful. I've led several schools now, and I love seeing the spaces I've left continue to grow and thrive. That's what keeps me going—seeing the work continue no matter where I am in the process. In high school, the students are given an added bonus. I love the way we connect and how they're so real about everything. They'll tell you if they don't like something, but they'll also tell you when they feel you believe in them."

Principal Maya: "I am very sensitive about this role because the kids here need a lot of help. I love these kids, and I know they often don't have anyone else who believes in them, so I do that—I believe in them, so they know they have someone in their corner. Seeing them accomplish things is like the icing on the cake for me because I know how many odds are stacked against them. Though we are in an alternative school, I feel like

> I’ve made our own little space for us. I know the kids feel emotionally cared for and safe, and that just feels right to me."
>
> *Principal Sofia*: "You know, I’ve thought about leaving this role for other positions on numerous occasions. I’ve thought about it to reduce my stress level and to have more time, but every time I get close to doing it, I get a reminder of my why and my purpose. Here, in this school, I feel so much joy in what I do and in the people that grow here. It feels like family, and I feel like I am honoring my purpose. Because it’s aligned, I feel good about it. I feel like I’ve created this sense of connection and community that is so special to us."

These quotes underscore that secondary female principals find purposeful joy in their roles through the meaningful connection and impact they have on schools and their communities. Though they face continued challenges in their professional and personal roles, they gain deep satisfaction from seeing academic outcomes, success, inclusivity, and growth in their school. Their ability to see the product of their labor reinforces their why and drives their desire to see continued positive impact. Ultimately seeing joy reinforces joy. Drawing from the insights of the participants, it is evident that their experiences of purposeful joy as secondary female principals resonate deeply with Shakeshaft's concepts of leadership and the synergist theory of female leadership. Shakeshaft notes that female leadership often emphasizes collaboration, nurturing, and community-building—traits that are clearly reflected in the participants' descriptions of joy they perceive in their role and in the creation of their school communities.

Additionally, the participants' emphasis on balancing professional and personal responsibilities, despite societal expectations, underscores the synergist theory of female leadership. This theory suggests that female leaders excel in managing multiple complex roles by

integrating their personal and professional lives, thus creating a holistic approach to leadership. These stories of resilience, adaptation, and continuous learning further illustrate the dynamic and multifaceted nature of female leadership among secondary female principals, as proposed by both Shakeshaft and the synergist theory. These narratives not only highlight the unique challenges female principals face but also showcase their ability to thrive by fostering strong relationships, advocating, and prioritizing student well-being, thus embodying the core principles of these leadership theories.

Methodology Summary

The methodology of this study was deeply grounded in qualitative research, chosen for its ability to explore the nuanced and complex experiences of secondary female principals. After conducting a thorough literature review on the evolution of gender roles, norms, and racial implications in educational leadership, it was clear that a qualitative approach would allow for a more profound understanding of the persistent and emerging challenges these leaders face. The focus on themes such as gender bias, the "superwoman" archetype, and post-COVID educational leadership complexities indicated that qualitative methods were best suited to explore how these factors shape the professional journeys of female principals (Creswell, 2007).

The research adopted a qualitative, interpretive framework using grounded theory principles, a method that allows themes to emerge directly from the data collected during participant interviews. According to Creswell (2007), grounded theory is an ideal approach when the goal is to generate a theory or explanation from the lived experiences of individuals. In this study, the narratives of the participants were analyzed to uncover both the challenges and strategies these female principals employed to navigate their leadership roles. The analysis provided insights into the underlying power structures shaped by gender norms and racial biases,

aligning with feminist standpoint theory, which asserts that individuals from marginalized groups possess unique perspectives that can offer more objective insights into power dynamics (Harding, 2004).

The geographical context of the study—a diverse, suburban public school district in North Carolina—was significant in providing a specific cultural and policy environment in which to examine these experiences. The study also incorporated elements of Irby et al.'s (1999) Synergistic Leadership Theory (SLT), which asserts that women contribute unique leadership skills and behaviors that are often underrepresented in traditional leadership models. SLT posits that leadership is influenced by external and internal factors such as organizational structures, personal values, and gender norms, making it a fitting framework for examining how female principals balance professional demands and personal responsibilities (Irby et al., 1999).

The use of qualitative interviews allowed the study to capture the depth of the participants' experiences, especially in terms of how they navigate the intersections of race, gender, and leadership within an educational context. By leveraging the theoretical frameworks of feminist standpoint theory and Synergistic Leadership Theory, the study was able to draw connections between participants' lived experiences and broader structural issues in educational leadership, highlighting the unique challenges faced by women in these roles (Hartsock, 1983; Wood, 1993).

The qualitative methodology was essential for revealing the complexities of secondary female principals' roles, offering rich insights into how societal expectations and gendered leadership challenges are experienced in modern education. Through participant narratives, the study provided a detailed account of the tensions between maintaining instructional leadership while also managing the emotional well-being of staff and students, particularly in the post-

COVID era. This qualitative approach proved invaluable in capturing the resilience, adaptability, and strategic thinking of female leaders in navigating these complex landscapes.

Theoretical Framework and Application

This study was framed through Shakeshaft's concepts of leadership and the synergist theory of female leadership. Shakeshaft's theory focuses on how gender influences educational leadership, highlighting the unique challenges female principals face in a traditionally male-dominated field. The synergist theory, which emphasizes collaborative and integrative approaches in female leadership, provided additional insight into how women principals manage their complex roles.

Shakeshaft's theory was integral in shaping the research questions (RQs) and designing the study instruments. The framework's focus on gender-related leadership challenges guided the creation of questions aimed at uncovering the specific obstacles female principals encounter, including gender bias, role expectations, and the intersectionality of race and gender. This theoretical lens ensured that the survey and interview questions were aligned with the core aspects of gendered leadership dynamics. For instance, questions were crafted to explore how female principals perceive and navigate gender-specific expectations and how these perceptions affect their professional experiences and career paths.

The structuring of the study instruments into subscales was also influenced by the theoretical framework. Subscales addressed various areas such as work challenges, gender-specific obstacles, and post-COVID impacts, reflecting Shakeshaft's emphasis on gendered experiences in leadership. This organization helped to capture the complex interplay between professional responsibilities and personal roles, as well as the impact of systemic biases on female principals' experiences.

Upon reflecting on the study's findings, it is evident that Shakeshaft's concepts of leadership and the synergist theory provided a solid foundation for understanding gender-related challenges and leadership styles. These frameworks effectively framed the exploration of how female principals balance their professional and personal responsibilities while navigating systemic biases. However, the study revealed additional dimensions of the intersectionality of race and gender that Shakeshaft's theory alone did not fully address. This highlights a need for an expanded theoretical approach that incorporates a more nuanced understanding of the intersectional challenges faced by female principals.

The findings from this study underscore the value of Shakeshaft's theory in analyzing gendered leadership dynamics while also pointing to areas where the theoretical framework could be further developed. The evolving challenges faced by female principals, particularly those related to race and gender, suggest that future research could benefit from a broader theoretical perspective that encompasses these intersectional experiences more comprehensively. The study demonstrates that while Shakeshaft's theory and the synergist approach offer valuable insights, there is room for growth in how these frameworks address the complexities of contemporary leadership challenges faced by female principals.

Qualitative research was the ideal methodology for this study because it allowed for an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of secondary female principals, a group whose voices are often marginalized or underrepresented in leadership literature. According to Creswell (2007), qualitative research is particularly well-suited for studies seeking to understand how individuals make meaning of their experiences within specific social and cultural contexts. In this case, the qualitative design enabled the study to capture the nuanced and deeply personal

challenges faced by female principals in balancing professional expectations with societal gender norms and racial biases.

Creswell (2007) emphasizes that qualitative research is most effective when the goal is to explore complex, multifaceted issues that cannot be easily quantified or reduced to numbers. The subjective nature of leadership experiences, particularly the intersectionality of gender, race, and leadership in a post-COVID educational environment, made qualitative methods the most appropriate choice. This approach allowed for rich, detailed data collection through interviews, providing insights into how female principals perceive and respond to the evolving expectations of their roles.

By using qualitative research, this study was able to explore the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of leadership, aspects that quantitative methods may overlook. The open-ended nature of qualitative data collection facilitated the emergence of themes and subthemes directly from the participants' narratives, which offered a more comprehensive understanding of their lived realities. Qualitative research provided the depth and flexibility necessary to fully explore the complexities of gender and leadership in educational settings (Creswell, 2007).

Chapter Summary

Career obstacles such as gender bias, balancing leadership with personal responsibilities, and navigating the dual complexities of race and gender persistently affect female principals' professional paths. Despite these challenges, robust support systems at home, targeted mentorship, and ongoing professional development opportunities play a critical role in enhancing their effectiveness and well-being. Additionally, strategies for establishing boundaries and

prioritizing self-care are essential for sustaining their performance and maintaining their overall wellness.

Understanding these dynamics is essential for fostering leadership pathways for women in education and ensuring they are equipped and supported to ascend to higher administrative roles. The insights gained from this research highlight the need for systemic changes to address gender biases and provide the necessary resources and support for female principals to thrive in their careers.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this study was to delve into the complex and multifaceted challenges experienced by secondary female principals throughout their careers, particularly focusing on the impact of societal expectations and the "superwoman" archetype. This research aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the unique barriers secondary female principals face, such as gender stereotypes, balancing professional and personal responsibilities, and navigating the educational climate post-Covid. By examining these challenges, the study sought to uncover how these societal expectations shaped and influenced their professional journeys. The study explored the specific strategies employed by female principals to navigate and overcome these obstacles, highlighting their resilience, adaptability, and resourcefulness in leadership roles. This included their approaches to managing work-life balance, fostering community support, and leveraging mentorship and professional development opportunities. Through this exploration, the research aimed to shed light on the many ways female principals exhibited strength and determination in the face of adversity.

This study aimed to illuminate the experiences of female principals, highlighting their triumphs and the ongoing challenges they faced. By bringing these issues to the forefront, the study sought to contribute to the broader discourse on gender equity in educational leadership, advocating for systemic changes that promote a more inclusive and supportive environment for female principals.

This chapter provides an exploration into the findings uncovered through the viewpoints of female secondary principals in a suburban school district in North Carolina. The research questions established guided the discovery of themes and subthemes related to these principals. The questions presented during the semi-structured interview were organized around the guiding

research questions. The study's research questions will guide this discussion review. 1. What do secondary female principals identify as the key expectation in their role? 2. How do secondary female principals believe the "superwoman" archetype, or the assumption that women should manage multiple culturally constructed roles, influence their perceptions about the principalship, behaviors in the principalship, and career trajectories? 3. What post-COVID career obstacles are currently faced by secondary female principals? 4. What personal and professional supports do secondary female principals perceive they need to maximize their success and wellness, personally and professionally? These questions provided a clear connection to gender and its influence on secondary female principal behaviors and experiences.

The study employed qualitative methods to explore how individuals interpret a social and human issue (Creswell, 2007). This approach was centered on examining the lived experiences, personal viewpoints, and decision-making processes of secondary female principals. Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews, which provided the insights necessary to address the research questions.

Semi-structured interviews are particularly beneficial in studies like the one on secondary female principals because they provide a balance between flexibility and structure, allowing researchers to explore complex, context-specific issues in depth. According to Creswell (2013), semi-structured interviews enable researchers to follow a set of predefined questions while also allowing the conversation to evolve based on participants' responses, ensuring that unexpected but valuable insights can emerge organically. This is especially important in a study exploring leadership experiences, as it allows participants to share detailed narratives about their professional challenges, including issues of gender and race, which might not surface in more structured formats.

Kallio et al. (2016) highlight that semi-structured interviews are effective for exploring subjective experiences, which is central to qualitative research. In this study, the ability to probe deeper into the individual experiences of secondary female principals—such as how societal expectations influence their leadership roles—would have been limited with fully structured interviews. Semi-structured formats give participants space to reflect on their unique leadership journeys and to express their views on sensitive topics like gender bias or the post-COVID challenges they face in education.

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) note that semi-structured interviews allow for a more relational dynamic between interviewer and participant, creating an environment where participants feel more comfortable sharing personal or emotional experiences. This relational aspect is crucial in studies focused on the human aspects of leadership, such as resilience, stress management, and work-life balance, which are deeply personal and can be difficult to articulate in rigid interview structures. Thus, semi-structured interviews provided the necessary depth and adaptability to capture the rich, multifaceted experiences of the study's participants.

In qualitative research, themes and subthemes are essential in organizing and interpreting data, allowing researchers to identify patterns and make complex, context-specific experiences clearer. Creswell (2013) defines themes as broad, overarching categories that emerge from the data, capturing significant ideas or patterns across different participants' responses. Themes represent the core elements of what is being studied, offering insight into recurring concepts or issues. Subthemes, on the other hand, are more specific patterns that fall under the umbrella of the main themes, providing additional depth and nuance to the data (Creswell & Poth, 2017). These subthemes help to break down the larger, often abstract ideas, into smaller, more

manageable units of meaning, allowing researchers to understand the finer details of participants' experiences.

Researchers identify themes and subthemes through a process of coding, which involves reviewing the data (typically interview transcripts, observations, or other textual data) and assigning labels to recurring ideas or patterns. This process often begins with open coding, where broad categories are developed, followed by axial coding, where relationships between codes are identified, and finally selective coding, which refines and integrates themes and subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The development of themes is iterative, meaning it evolves as the researcher continues to analyze and reflect on the data. This process allows for the capturing of both the explicit and implicit meanings embedded within the participants' narratives, contributing to a richer understanding of the phenomenon under study. In the context of a study on secondary female principals, for instance, themes such as "work-life balance" or "gender bias in leadership" may emerge, with subthemes like "parenting stress" or "mentorship and support" providing further insight into specific aspects of these broader categories (Creswell, 2013).

By addressing these components, this chapter will provide a comprehensive conclusion to the study, offering valuable insights and recommendations for enhancing the support and development of female secondary principals in the educational landscape.

Key Findings

Research Question 1: What do secondary female principals identify as the key expectation in their role?

Caring for the social and emotional wellness of the school community.

The feedback uncovers a multifaceted and deeply personal struggle to balance the expectations of academic achievement with the growing mental health needs of both staff and

students. This balancing act has become a defining feature of modern educational leadership, especially in the aftermath of COVID-19. The participants repeatedly emphasized how their roles have expanded beyond traditional expectations, turning them into emotional caregivers while still being held accountable for student outcomes and operational efficiency.

Before 2020, many of these leaders maintained high, non-negotiable standards for both staff and students. Principal Kylie-Jo's example highlights this shift: previously, if a teacher was late five days in a row, it would have been addressed swiftly to ensure classroom continuity and student learning. Now, however, there is a need for increased flexibility. Kylie-Jo expressed how she no longer feels able to enforce strict accountability because she fears losing staff in a time when filling positions is nearly impossible. "I'm just happy to have a teacher in a position," she said, revealing a resignation to the harsh reality of staffing shortages. This relaxation of certain expectations is not a reflection of lower standards but a survival tactic in an increasingly understaffed and overwhelmed educational environment.

This shift in leadership approach is emblematic of a deeper problem. Many of the participants feel caught between their district's high academic expectations and the need to maintain a supportive and understanding environment for their staff. As Principal Kylie-Jo reflected, her superintendent frequently inquires about how she is supporting her staff, but at the end of the year, the focus returns to test scores and academic performance. She described the constant tension of trying to be both flexible and demanding, a balance that feels nearly impossible to maintain. Her statement, "They can't both be taken care of all the time without sometimes pushing the demand," highlights the central conflict that many principals feel: how to care for people without sacrificing performance.

Similarly, Principal Reese spoke of the "spiral" that her day-to-day job has become. What was once a role focused primarily on instructional leadership has transformed into one where she constantly juggles multiple operational and emotional challenges. Open positions, behavioral crises, and the emotional well-being of her staff all compete for her attention, leaving her feeling like she is never able to fully meet anyone's needs—including her own. Reese feels unsupported by Central Services, who she believes are "so far removed from being in a school" that their goals no longer align with the immediate and pressing needs of her building. This disconnect has left her feeling isolated in her role, forced to take on additional managerial tasks and feeling overwhelmed by the sheer volume of her responsibilities.

A particularly striking theme that emerged is the emotional toll on these principals. Principal Elsa described how she used to have clear standards for professionalism and participation. For instance, five years ago, teachers would vie for the chance to lead prestigious extracurricular groups like the National Junior Honor Society. Today, however, Elsa finds herself leading those clubs because staff no longer have the bandwidth or willingness to volunteer. She mentioned how teachers now "book it out of the building" as soon as the final bell rings, a far cry from the more engaged and invested faculty she once managed. Some of her teachers, especially post-COVID, have adopted the mindset that they no longer need to overextend themselves for a field that offers limited financial rewards and increasing emotional burdens.

This shift in attitude is echoed by Principal Shayna, who highlighted the increasing contradictions within her responsibilities. On the one hand, her district expects her to improve staff satisfaction as reflected in the Teacher Working Conditions Survey, which means creating a positive and supportive environment. On the other hand, she is tasked with reducing disciplinary

incidents and boosting academic outcomes. But, as Shayna pointed out, these expectations often conflict. Her teachers want disruptive students removed from the classroom, while her district pushes her to reduce suspensions and keep students in school. The pressure to excel in all areas is relentless. Shayna poignantly described how she feels she must always "keep a calm and composed exterior" because any sign of frustration or exhaustion could lead others to perceive her as ineffective. This constant balancing act has left her questioning whether her drive to succeed is healthy, as it often feels like the odds are stacked against her.

In all these accounts, the role of the principal has become more than just managing academics or ensuring discipline. The principals now see themselves as the emotional backbone of their schools, responsible for holding their communities together amidst ever-growing pressures. The post-pandemic reality has led them to make personal sacrifices—longer hours, taking on extra responsibilities, and neglecting their own well-being—to support their staff and students. Principal Kylie-Jo's admission that she takes on additional duties to avoid further burnout among her teachers exemplifies this new reality.

At the same time, the participants expressed frustration with the lack of external support, feeling as though their districts have not adapted to the new demands placed on schools. Principal Reese's observation that Central Services seems detached from the daily realities of running a school reveals a disconnect that exacerbates the principals' sense of isolation and stress. Without adequate support, these leaders are left to navigate a never-ending cycle of conflicting demands and expectations on their own.

Their reflections reveal a profession that has become more complex and emotionally draining, where they are expected to seamlessly integrate the roles of instructional leader, therapist, and manager. Their feedback exposes the toll that this ever-expanding role takes on

their professional and personal lives, as they grapple with maintaining the well-being of their schools while striving to meet academic benchmarks. The increasing demands, both external and internal, have left many feeling as though they are always walking a tightrope, constantly sacrificing parts of themselves to ensure the success and stability of their school communities.

The feedback highlights a powerful and growing trend: the increasing responsibility they feel for fostering social and emotional well-being in their schools. This shift is particularly pronounced in the aftermath of Covid-19, as schools have become spaces not only for academic instruction but also for emotional care and support. They reflect on how their roles have expanded far beyond traditional leadership expectations, as they find themselves at the forefront of managing mental health needs—both for their staff and students.

The rise of social and emotional awareness in schools has placed a new level of responsibility on principals. The participants describe how they are now expected to be more than instructional leaders; they are also seen as emotional anchors, a term that captures the weight of their roles in maintaining the emotional stability of their school communities. Principal Kylie-Jo, for instance, shared how her approach to leadership has changed post-2020. Before the pandemic, she enforced hardline expectations around punctuality and professionalism. Now, she feels compelled to be more flexible, understanding that her staff's personal and family challenges—exacerbated by the lingering effects of the pandemic—necessitate compassion over strict enforcement. This shift in attitude is emblematic of a broader movement toward social and emotional supervision, where principals must balance maintaining high academic standards with supporting the well-being of their teachers and students.

One of the most significant challenges these principals face is the conflict between meeting academic expectations and ensuring emotional well-being. Principal Shayna spoke

candidly about the pressure to "juggle everything flawlessly," from improving graduation rates and academic outcomes to keeping staff morale high. She expressed frustration with the contradictory expectations she faces: she is tasked with reducing disciplinary incidents and increasing student engagement, but also with improving staff retention and satisfaction. These goals often clash, as teachers want students removed from classrooms when they are disruptive, yet the district expects her to keep students in school to reduce suspensions. This constant tension underscores the complexity of their role in addressing both academic and emotional needs in tandem.

The rise in social and emotional focus in schools impacted an ability to maintain professional boundaries and standards. Principal Elsa reflected on how, prior to the pandemic, she had clear expectations for staff professionalism—whether it was punctuality, dress code, or willingness to participate in extracurricular activities. Now, however, she feels compelled to lower those expectations because of the heightened emotional demands placed on her staff. Many teachers, post-COVID, have reassessed their work-life balance, choosing not to invest the same level of time and energy in school-related tasks that once seemed essential. Elsa shared that she now takes on many of the extracurricular duties herself because her teachers simply do not have the capacity to do more. This shift reflects a growing trend in schools where the social and emotional health of staff is prioritized, even if it means absorbing additional responsibilities to keep things running.

This new emphasis on social and emotional awareness has placed principals in a difficult position. As Principal Reese noted, her job has become more scattered, with increasing demands to address mental health crises, behavioral challenges, and staffing shortages, all while maintaining academic rigor. Reese expressed how she feels unsupported by Central Services,

whose distant expectations seem disconnected from the realities of day-to-day school life. This disconnect leaves principals feeling isolated, as they must find ways to address the emotional needs of their schools without adequate guidance or resources. The result is an overwhelming sense of responsibility, where principals must shoulder the burden of supporting their entire school community's mental health while also being held accountable for academic outcomes. The growing focus on social and emotional well-being in schools has fundamentally changed the role. No longer are they simply tasked with ensuring academic success and school discipline; now, they must be deeply attuned to the mental and emotional states of their staff and students. This shift has added new layers of complexity to their jobs, as they must navigate how to care for others while still fulfilling their professional obligations. The participants repeatedly emphasized how this dual responsibility creates conflicts in expectations and increases their stress levels.

For instance, Principal Kylie-Jo illustrated the delicate balancing act when she explained how her superintendent regularly checks in on how she is "taking care of [her] people." However, at the end of the year, the conversation inevitably shifts to academic scores, leaving her feeling conflicted. The social and emotional focus demands a more empathetic, flexible approach, but the pressure to meet academic benchmarks has not lessened. This tension is felt acutely by principals who are responsible for both maintaining their school's emotional climate and achieving academic success.

The participants also pointed out that the heightened focus on social and emotional health often comes at a personal cost. Principal Elsa, for example, shared how she now leads multiple extracurricular clubs because her staff is unwilling or unable to take on additional responsibilities. Similarly, Principal Reese mentioned how she often takes on extra managerial tasks to avoid overburdening her already stressed administrative team. These examples illustrate

how the rise in social and emotional focus has led to principals taking on more work themselves, sacrificing their own time and well-being to ensure that their schools remain functional.

In summary, the rise of social and emotional awareness in schools has placed principals in a challenging and evolving role. They are now expected to lead with empathy and understanding, balancing the emotional needs of their staff and students with the demands for academic achievement. This shift has increased the complexity of their work, often leading to personal sacrifices and heightened stress. While the importance of fostering social and emotional well-being in schools is clear, the feedback from these principals highlights the urgent need for better support and resources to help them manage these competing priorities effectively.

Research Question 2. How do secondary female principals believe the "superwoman" archetype, or the assumption that women should manage multiple culturally constructed roles, influence their perceptions about the principalship, behaviors in the principalship, and career trajectories??

Managing the impacts of ingrained gender bias on ambition, self-esteem, and professional practice.

The "Superwoman" archetype refers to the societal expectation that women, particularly those in leadership roles, should excel in all aspects of their personal and professional lives, balancing career, family, and personal well-being without showing signs of weakness or fatigue. This archetype imposes unrealistic demands, leading many women to overextend themselves in an effort to meet both external pressures and internalized standards of perfection (Harris et al., 2020). In the context of educational leadership, female principals often feel the weight of these expectations, as they strive to manage complex school environments while maintaining responsibilities at home (Harris et al., 2020). Shakeshaft (1989) highlighted the unique

challenges faced by women in leadership, noting that they are often expected to outperform their male counterparts to prove their competence. This archetype exacerbates such pressures, leading to burnout and mental health issues as women struggle to meet these unattainable ideals. Shakeshaft's work underscores how these societal expectations impact the career trajectories of women in leadership, often hindering their advancement and limiting opportunities for personal and professional growth.

In exploring the experiences of female principals, particularly within the secondary environment, several recurring themes emerged, reflecting the complex nature of leadership, societal expectations, and the intersection of personal and professional roles. One of the most prominent themes involved the pressure to fulfill not just the demanding role of a principal, but also the traditional roles of spouse, homemaker, and caretaker. These women expressed the challenge of managing multiple identities, navigating the fine line between being strong, decisive leaders and nurturing, attentive mothers, and wives. The overwhelming emphasis placed on their ability to be present and successful in both spheres of life—professional and personal—significantly shaped their self-perception, behaviors, and career trajectories.

A central theme that arose from the participants' narratives was the expectation to perform as highly effective leaders while simultaneously meeting historic societal expectations of women as primary caregivers. This expectation contributed to a constant balancing act in which female principals felt they had to excel in both arenas without letting either falter. Success, for many of them, was defined by the ability to maintain this balance and be present in both aspects of their lives.

Principal Sofia's reflection illustrates this tension well: she grew up believing that being a mother and wife were non-negotiable roles for women. This deeply ingrained belief influenced

her decisions, leading her to delay her professional goals in favor of meeting family obligations. Sofia's narrative highlights the challenge of reconciling personal ambitions with traditional gender norms, a struggle that was shared by many other participants. Even when she did enter the workforce, the pressure to maintain her household and caregiving role weighed heavily on her, influencing her sense of success and failure. This notion was echoed by Principal Maya, who discussed the overwhelming expectation to "be everything to everyone" both at work and at home. These reflections reveal how societal expectations about gender and caregiving responsibilities deeply influence women in leadership, causing them to feel as though they must carry the weight of multiple demanding roles simultaneously.

The participants also shared how these pressures extend beyond their own self-perception, influencing how they are viewed by others. Principal Maya noted the unique expectations placed on female principals to perform a delicate balancing act. They are expected to be firm enough to command respect yet gentle enough to avoid being perceived as harsh or unapproachable. These shifting expectations place a heavy burden on female principals, who must constantly navigate perceptions of their leadership in both the workplace and their homes.

Another prominent theme among the participants was the ingrained gender bias that permeates their professional lives, affecting both their ambition and self-esteem. For female principals, the constant need to prove their competence, assert authority, and maintain a particular demeanor—while not crossing certain invisible lines—creates a unique set of challenges that their male counterparts do not face as acutely. Several principals reflected on the need to be firm in their leadership, yet careful not to come across as too forceful, which would risk being labeled as "aggressive" or "cold."

Principal Shayna emphasized this challenge, noting that female principals are often expected to strike a perfect balance between strength and femininity. While male principals can be authoritative without question, female principals must be authoritative but not too authoritative, compassionate but not too soft. The inability to fit into this rigid mold often leaves female leaders feeling constrained and exhausted. Principal Shayna, who does not have children, highlighted another layer of pressure: the perception that she should be able to do it all since she does not have the demands of parenting. This added expectation reinforces the broader societal belief that women—whether mothers or not—must be able to juggle everything seamlessly.

Participants like Principal Virginia and Principal Elsa also discussed how the weight of these gendered expectations extended into their personal lives. Virginia expressed the difficulty of maintaining her composure at work while managing the emotional demands of her personal life. Meanwhile, Elsa reflected on how the expectations to manage everything with a smile and warmth felt incredibly draining. For these principals, there is little separation between the high demands at work and home, resulting in a constant pressure to be perfect in all spheres of their lives. The idea of "having it all" is both suffocating and unrealistic.

A subtheme that emerged strongly from the participants' responses was the challenge of overcoming ingrained gender stereotypes in their professional practice. For many of the women, these stereotypes manifested in assumptions about their capability to lead. Principal Kylie-Jo shared how she faced expectations to be "softer" and "more nurturing" in her role as a leader, which often conflicted with her need to make tough decisions. She found herself walking a tightrope between being firm and empathetic, as deviating too far in either direction would result in negative perceptions of her leadership.

The participants discussed how the persistence of gender stereotypes creates a professional landscape in which female principals must constantly validate their worth. Principal Elsa described how she has been repeatedly told to "smile more" and appear "more approachable," signaling an expectation that female leaders should conform to a stereotypically feminine demeanor. Such comments reflect an implicit bias that women in leadership roles should be warm and accommodating, even when making tough decisions. This bias reinforces societal norms that women must be likable to be effective leaders, a standard not equally applied to men.

Despite the significant challenges these female principals face, the participants shared stories of resilience and growth. They described how their experiences as leaders have shaped their understanding of gender roles, leadership styles, and the importance of authenticity in their professional practice. By recognizing and challenging the limitations imposed by societal expectations, many of these women have developed a greater sense of confidence in their leadership abilities. Principal Maya, for example, shared how her journey has led her to embrace her leadership style unapologetically. Over time, she has learned to reject the notion that she must conform to a specific mold to be successful. Similarly, Principal Virginia reflected on the importance of asserting her voice and authority in a male-dominated environment. Although the journey to overcoming gender stereotypes is long and arduous, these women have learned to navigate it with courage and determination.

The themes and outcomes from this research reflect the profound impact of gender expectations on the professional lives of female principals. The participants' experiences highlight the constant balancing act they face as they strive to meet the demands of leadership while also fulfilling societal expectations of caregiving and femininity. The pressure to be perfect

in all roles creates a challenging environment where female principals must continuously prove their competence, often at the expense of their personal well-being.

Through their stories, it becomes clear that overcoming these ingrained biases requires significant reflection, resilience, and a redefinition of what it means to be a woman in leadership. The participants demonstrated that while gender bias and societal expectations create obstacles, they also provide opportunities for growth and empowerment. By shedding outdated stereotypes and embracing their unique leadership styles, these female principals are paving the way for future generations of women leaders to thrive authentically, without being constrained by prescriptive gender norms.

Managing the intersection of race and gender.

The intersectionality of race and gender is a crucial factor in understanding the unique challenges that minority female principals face in their professional lives. The study participants highlight how the intersection of these two identities—being both a woman and a racial minority—exposes them to a distinct set of biases and expectations that their non-minority counterparts may not experience. These challenges manifest in higher scrutiny, pressure to succeed, and questions of competence, all of which are compounded by societal stereotypes related to both gender and race. The intersectional experience described by these principals underscores the need for an acknowledgment of the layered complexities they face in their roles.

For many of the participants, the experience of being a Black female principal was particularly challenging due to the historical and societal constructs that continue to marginalize Black women in professional settings. As Principal Reese mentioned, being both a Black woman and a school principal introduced a "different beast," where every decision was scrutinized more heavily than it might have been for her non-minority predecessors. This aligns with what

research calls “double jeopardy,” where Black women must navigate both racial and gender biases simultaneously (Crenshaw, 1991). The heightened scrutiny, often coupled with a reluctance to accept their authority, forces these women to walk a "thin line" in how they present themselves, particularly in ensuring that they do not appear overly emotional or aggressive stereotypes often projected onto Black women.

Principal Shayna’s experience further reinforces the difficulty of navigating this intersection. She articulates how Black female principals are judged more harshly for the same mistakes made by others, often leading to a fear of losing contracts or being seen as inadequate. This pressure to overperform is not only draining but also perpetuates the harmful stereotype of the “Strong Black Woman,” a societal expectation that Black women must endure all challenges without breaking down (Collins, 2000). The emotional labor required to meet these standards while also navigating a White professional environment exacerbates feelings of isolation and stress.

The narratives of the Latina participant, Principal Sofia, reveal a different but related experience. For Sofia, her bilingual ability and cultural background allowed her to feel more connected to her school community, where her identity as a Latina was embraced. However, she also expressed an awareness of how her racial identity could be perceived differently in other settings. This reflects the idea that while race and gender intersect differently for various minority groups, the pressure to conform to dominant societal standards still weighs heavily on women of color. The ability to authentically present one’s racial identity in a professional setting is not always afforded, and this lack of freedom can add another layer of stress for minority women in leadership roles.

The recurring theme among these participants is the emotional toll of having to constantly manage both their gender and racial identities in environments that are often not designed to support them. As Principal Neena pointed out, assumptions are frequently made about her competence based on her race and gender, leading to a sense of being perpetually judged more harshly than her peers. This feeling of hyper-surveillance not only makes it difficult to build trust within the school community but also forces minority women to be overly cautious in their decision-making, as they are acutely aware of the consequences of being perceived as an "angry Black woman" or as someone who is unfit for leadership.

The intersection of race and gender for these principals thus creates a complex and unique challenge. They are tasked with not only fulfilling the typical duties of school leadership but also with constantly managing and navigating the biases and expectations tied to their intersecting identities. This dual burden underscores the necessity for more robust support systems and a reevaluation of the societal norms that contribute to the inequities they face. For these women, success in their roles is not merely about meeting professional benchmarks, but also about breaking through the barriers imposed by the intersection of race and gender, a task that requires extraordinary resilience and adaptability.

The study participants' reflections on the intersectionality of race and gender reveal the persistent challenges that minority female principals face. Their stories demonstrate the need for systemic change in how we support minority women in leadership roles, recognizing that their professional journey is shaped not just by their gender, but also by their race. The intersection of these identities creates unique challenges that require thoughtful, culturally competent strategies to foster more inclusive and equitable environments for women of color in educational leadership.

Research Question 3. What are the career obstacles currently faced by female principals?

The post-Covid Principal.

The post-Covid era has fundamentally reshaped the role of secondary school principals, introducing unprecedented challenges, particularly for female leaders who must balance their professional responsibilities with the expectations of gender roles at home. Recent studies suggest that principals are facing increased emotional and mental stress as they navigate an education system forever altered by the pandemic. The demands placed on principals have shifted from primarily educational leadership to crisis management, emotional support, and public relations, leaving many feelings overwhelmed and under-resourced (Stark & Noel, 2022; Berkovich & Eyal, 2021). This shift has blurred the lines between work and personal life, creating a challenging environment for female principals who are expected to excel in both domains. This reflection highlights the experiences of female principals post-COVID, focusing on the challenges of balancing leadership roles with personal responsibilities in an increasingly polarized and demanding educational landscape.

The heightened stress experienced by female principals is evident in the narratives shared by participants in this study. Principal Virginia described the "political minefield" she navigates daily, balancing the demands of parents, district expectations, and a polarized community. According to recent research, the politicization of schools and the increase in community scrutiny are familiar challenges faced by school leaders in the post-pandemic landscape (Torrente et al., 2021). The pandemic intensified public debate around issues like school safety, mask mandates, and remote learning, placing principals at the center of these highly charged discussions (Trujillo et al., 2022). This constant scrutiny can lead to heightened stress and

anxiety, as school leaders are expected to be responsive to the concerns of various stakeholders while maintaining the stability of the school environment.

Principal Reese shared how the post-COVID landscape has blurred the lines of her role, stating that her job now feels like "managing a building that happens to have classrooms" rather than focusing on educational leadership. This sentiment aligns with recent research that highlights the shifting role of principals from instructional leaders to crisis managers (Stark & Noel, 2022). The pandemic has magnified the non-instructional demands placed on school leaders, requiring them to take on roles such as counselors, mediators, and public health officials, often with little to no training in these areas (Berkovich & Eyal, 2021). As Principal Reese described, principals are now responsible for addressing the mental health needs of students and staff, while also managing the increased communication demands from parents and the broader community. This expansion of responsibilities has left many school leaders feeling overwhelmed and questioning their ability to meet the needs of their school communities.

Another challenge brought to light by the participants is the polarization of the educational community. Principal Neena reflected on how every decision she made was scrutinized through the lens of public opinion, which aligns with findings from Torrente et al. (2021), who noted that the public’s expectations of school leaders have shifted dramatically. Decisions that were once the domain of school leadership are now subject to community-wide debates, amplified using social media, where parents and community members can voice their concerns publicly and instantly (Trujillo et al., 2022). This constant scrutiny can lead to increased anxiety and feelings of isolation among school leaders, who often lack the support they need to navigate these complex situations.

For female principals, the challenges of balancing work and home life have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Principal Maya shared her experience of feeling overwhelmed by the expectation to excel as both a leader and a mother, a struggle documented in recent research. According to Thompson and Clark (2023), female principals often face greater pressures in balancing personal and professional responsibilities compared to their male counterparts. This gendered expectation of being "everything to everyone" has been magnified during the pandemic, as women have been disproportionately affected by the increased caregiving responsibilities and household management (Wang et al., 2021). Principal Maya's narrative reflects this, as she describes the difficulty of managing childcare during school closures while also meeting the professional demands of her leadership role.

The emotional toll of these heightened responsibilities is evident in the experiences of Principal Neena, who expressed longing for the slower pace of life that the early days of the pandemic offered. She reflected on how the return to normalcy post-COVID has felt overwhelming, with the constant demands of school leadership leaving little room for personal wellness. This aligns with findings from a recent study by Stark and Noel (2022), which found that principals have experienced increased levels of burnout and stress as they navigate the post-pandemic educational landscape. The pressure to maintain high levels of performance, both professionally and personally, without adequate support, has left many school leaders feeling emotionally drained.

The experiences of the female principals in this study reflect the broader challenges faced by school leaders in the post-COVID era. The position expanded beyond educational leadership, requiring them to manage polarized communities, address mental health needs, and navigate heightened public scrutiny. For female principals, these challenges are compounded by the added

expectation of balancing professional responsibilities with traditional gender roles at home. Recent studies underscore the need for greater support and understanding of the unique obstacles faced by female school leaders in the wake of the pandemic (Thompson & Clark, 2023; Berkovich & Eyal, 2021). By acknowledging these challenges and providing the necessary resources, educational institutions can create more sustainable environments where female leaders can thrive.

Research Questions 4. What personal and professional supports do female principals perceive they need to maximize their effectiveness and wellness, personally and professionally?

Intentional mentoring and female principal networks are sustaining.

The experiences shared by the secondary female principals in this study highlight the critical need for intentional mentorship and support systems designed specifically for women in leadership roles. Post-COVID, the challenges these principals face have intensified, underscoring the importance of providing targeted support that addresses their unique professional and personal needs. Many participants emphasized that having a network of women who understand the complexities of being a female principal can offer not just professional guidance but also emotional validation. As Principal Elsa shared, "Having a network of women who understand the unique challenges of being a female principal has been invaluable." This sentiment reflects the broader consensus that female principals benefit significantly from connections with other women in leadership who can relate to their experiences.

Recent research supports the idea that mentorship is crucial for the success and well-being of women in leadership roles. According to DeAngelis et al., “Women who have access to structured mentorship programs report higher levels of job satisfaction and career advancement

compared to those without such support" (p. 58). This finding aligns with the reflections of the study participants, who repeatedly expressed the need for structured mentorship programs that provide ongoing support. Principal Reese, for example, noted that having a network of supportive female leaders "has been instrumental" in her career, as it offers both guidance and a space for shared experiences.

The need for mentorship goes beyond mere professional advice; it also serves as a source of emotional support, which is crucial for sustaining long-term success. Principal Maya explained that her mentors "offer not just professional advice but also emotional support, which is essential for maintaining my wellness." Research by Arar and Oplatka (2018) corroborates this, stating that emotional support from mentors can help mitigate the stress and isolation often experienced by women in leadership roles (p. 79). This sense of community and solidarity allows female principals to manage the emotional demands of their roles more effectively. The feedback from participants underscores the importance of creating a safe space where female principals can be vulnerable and open about the challenges they face. Principal Shayna highlighted this when she mentioned that mentorship creates "a sense of community that is vital for managing the demands of the job." In their research on female leadership, Thompson and Clark (2019) found that "women who have access to safe, supportive networks are more likely to thrive in high-pressure roles" (p. 66). The participants in this study echoed this, emphasizing that mentorship fosters not only professional growth but also personal resilience. Educational institutions, therefore, must recognize the value of establishing structured mentorship programs that cater to the specific needs of female principals. Such programs would not only enhance their effectiveness in navigating the complexities of school leadership but also contribute to their overall well-being. As Principal Kylie-Jo pointed out, "intentional connection from women who

have walked this path is critical," emphasizing that these relationships provide both career guidance and personal encouragement. By fostering strong networks of female leaders and supporting intentional mentorship, schools can create an environment where female principals are empowered to succeed both personally and professionally. This sentiment also aligns with findings by Collay and Cooper (2008), who argue that "women's leadership requires spaces for shared reflection and collective learning" (227). Female principals often experience isolation in their roles, and structured mentorship programs help break down these barriers, offering them a community where they can safely express challenges and receive constructive feedback from others who have navigated similar paths. For these women, mentorship fosters a space of safety and trust, which is critical for their resilience and ability to manage the emotional toll of leadership.

Networks and mentoring are particularly crucial for Black women in educational leadership due to the intersection of race and gender, which presents unique challenges in navigating White and male-dominated spaces. Black women often face "double jeopardy," a term used to describe the dual discrimination they encounter based on both their race and gender, which can lead to isolation and heightened scrutiny in professional settings (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 140). Mentorship programs that are sensitive to these intersectional challenges can provide Black women with critical support, offering them role models who understand the nuances of navigating both racial and gender bias. According to Johnson (2020), mentorship for Black women in leadership serves not only to advance their careers but also to create a safe space for discussing the complexities of balancing professional responsibilities with the emotional toll of racism and sexism. Additionally, networks of Black female leaders can foster a sense of solidarity and resilience, enabling these women to share strategies for overcoming systemic

barriers and to build collective strength (Dillard, 2018, p. 145). Research suggests that intentional mentorship programs and strong networks can significantly enhance the success, resilience, and well-being of Black women in educational leadership (Brown, 2019). By addressing both race and gender, such programs help create more inclusive environments that support the professional and personal growth of Black female leaders. These reflections of the female principals in this study highlight the need for intentional mentorship and support systems tailored to women in leadership roles. Research shows that these support structures enhance job satisfaction, professional development, and emotional well-being (DeAngelis et al., 2021; Arar and Oplatka, 2020). As educational institutions work to support their leaders post-COVID, prioritizing these mentorship programs is crucial for fostering a more inclusive and effective leadership environment.

Strong support systems encourage professional boundaries and personal wellness.

The feedback provided by secondary female principals in this study highlights the critical role of strong support systems in enabling them to balance their demanding professional and personal responsibilities effectively. Participants, such as Principal Sofia, Elsa, and Shayna, emphasized how having supportive spouses or significant others who share caregiving duties and provide emotional support has been key to their ability to thrive in leadership roles. These networks not only relieve some of the workload at home but also contribute to their overall well-being by ensuring that they can maintain boundaries between work and personal life. Research supports this finding, indicating that strong familial and emotional support systems are essential for female leaders in education, as they face unique challenges stemming from the intersection of their professional and personal roles (Mitchell et al., 2021).

Principal Elsa noted that her husband's involvement in managing household duties, such as caring for the children and handling daily tasks, has been instrumental in her ability to focus on her role as a principal. This kind of support is crucial in reducing the emotional labor typically placed on women in leadership, who are often expected to balance both work and home responsibilities without compromise (Cowan & Goldhaber, 2020, p. 12). Strong support systems also extend beyond the home. Many participants, including Principal Virginia and Elsa, highlighted the importance of a reliable team within their schools, which allows them to delegate tasks and trust their colleagues to ensure the school's smooth operation. This intra-professional support provides a safety net that enhances their leadership capacity by reducing stress and allowing them to focus on strategic tasks rather than day-to-day operations (DeMatthews, 2021). Having a strong support system also allows female principals to set and maintain boundaries between their personal lives and their work. Principal Shayna mentioned how her husband ensures that they take time for vacations and long weekends, which she might not otherwise prioritize. This ability to disconnect from work is essential for preventing burnout, a prevalent issue among school leaders, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Robinson et al., 2022). Studies show that principals who establish clear boundaries and maintain personal time are more likely to experience higher job satisfaction and overall well-being, which, in turn, enhances their effectiveness as leaders (Spillane & Lee, 2021).

These principals underscored the value of having external networks of friends and family to provide emotional support. For example, Principal Virginia shared that her family’s help and her husband’s patience have been crucial during moments of doubt or exhaustion. Research corroborates the importance of these networks, showing that female leaders who have access to supportive relationships outside of their professional sphere are more resilient and better

equipped to manage the emotional toll of their roles (Mitchell et al., 2021). The combination of strong personal and professional support systems fosters an environment in which female principals can flourish, enabling them to handle the demands of leadership without sacrificing their well-being.

The experiences shared by these female principals affirm that strong support systems are vital to their professional success and personal satisfaction. Whether through familial support at home or a reliable team within their schools, these networks provide the emotional, logistical, and professional reinforcement needed to navigate the complex and demanding world of educational leadership. Ensuring that female principals have access to these systems is essential for fostering their growth and effectiveness as leaders in the post-pandemic educational landscape.

Self-care is a means to sustainable success.

Self-care has become increasingly important for secondary principals, particularly in the modern educational landscape, where balancing professional responsibilities with personal well-being is more challenging than ever. Principals like Sofia, Reese, Kylie-Jo, and Neena emphasize the critical role of self-care in managing stress, preventing burnout, and maintaining both mental and physical health. The demanding nature of the role, which often includes long hours, complex decision-making, and managing the needs of students, staff, and parents, has led many school leaders to recognize the necessity of prioritizing their well-being. Research shows that self-care practices, such as time management, establishing boundaries, and engaging in physical activity, are essential for sustaining the career trajectories of educational leaders and preserving their mental health (Wang, Pollock, & Hauseman, 2018).

Principal Sofia illustrates the importance of physical activity in maintaining her health, stating that she makes it a priority to leave work at a reasonable hour and spend time at the gym. She notes how this routine helps her not only stay physically fit but also cope with the emotional and mental demands of her role. Sofia's experience reflects a broader trend in educational leadership, where physical exercise is increasingly seen as a way to manage the high stress levels associated with the job (Miller & Martin, 2015). By focusing on nutrition and avoiding unhealthy eating habits, she reinforces the idea that self-care extends beyond mental wellness to include physical health, which, in turn, supports cognitive function and emotional resilience (Yoon, 2021).

Principal Reese also highlights the importance of taking time off to preserve mental health, noting that she regularly schedules days off to recharge. She emphasizes that without intentional self-care, principals can fall into the trap of overworking, which leads to burnout. Burnout, which has been shown to have detrimental effects on both physical and mental health, is a significant concern in educational leadership, especially in the post-pandemic era (Torres, 2021). By taking breaks and setting boundaries around her work time, Reese models a more sustainable approach to leadership that prioritizes well-being over constant availability. Research supports her approach, finding that regular periods of rest and disengagement from work are crucial for mental recovery and sustained job performance (Wang et al., 2018).

Similarly, Principal Kylie-Jo's focus on family and compartmentalization reflects another key aspect of self-care: maintaining a work-life balance. She underscores the importance of setting professional boundaries and dedicating time to family and personal relationships, which helps her return to work with renewed energy and patience. Studies have found that leaders who can separate their professional and personal lives experience less stress and higher levels of job

satisfaction, which contributes to greater long-term success (Hauseman, Pollock, & Wang, 2017). Kylie-Jo's ability to "compartmentalize" also aligns with research showing that clearly defined boundaries between work and home life are essential for mental wellness and preventing role overload, a condition common among school administrators (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015).

Principal Neena takes a proactive approach to self-care by planning regular trips and breaks, noting that these planned escapes allow her to reset and avoid becoming consumed by work. This practice of scheduling intentional time away from work helps mitigate stress and fosters a sense of balance, which is critical for leaders facing the constant demands of school administration. Studies highlight the importance of vacations and downtime in preventing burnout and improving overall mental health (Hanson, 2020). For Neena, having these breaks to look forward to provides a necessary mental escape, ensuring she stays connected to life outside of work, which is vital for sustaining her well-being over the long term.

The reflections of these female principals illustrate the increasing recognition of self-care as an essential practice for maintaining health and wellness in the demanding role of school leadership. Research consistently supports the notion that school leaders who prioritize self-care and establish boundaries experience better mental and physical health, which allows them to perform more effectively in their roles (Miller & Martin, 2015; Wang et al., 2018). As the demands on school principals continue to grow, the importance of self-care in maintaining longevity and effectiveness in these roles cannot be overstated.

Purposeful joy in sustained leadership.

Finding joy and purpose in work is a powerful motivator for women in school leadership, particularly for principals who face numerous challenges balancing professional and personal demands. Purpose-driven leadership allows female principals to navigate these challenges with

resilience, as they often derive satisfaction from fostering positive relationships within their school communities (Mahfouz, 2018). Women leaders in education tend to emphasize collaboration and community-building, which not only benefits students and staff but also provides a sense of fulfillment and joy for themselves (Wallace, 2019). This alignment between personal values and professional responsibilities enhances job satisfaction and effectiveness, creating a reinforcing cycle where the joy of witnessing student success further fuels their commitment to their roles (Smith, 2020). Lambert and McCarthy (2006) found that female school leaders who find joy and purpose in their work report higher levels of job satisfaction and are better able to cope with the emotional and psychological demands of leadership. Principals who prioritize finding purpose in their roles are more likely to create positive school cultures that foster student achievement and staff collaboration, making purposeful joy a vital factor in effective school leadership (Wallace, 2019).

The concept of "purposeful joy" is a vital force that sustains secondary female principals in their roles, even amid the challenges and pressures that come with leading schools in today's educational landscape. Based on feedback from eight principals in this study, it is evident that finding joy in their purpose—the ability to make a meaningful impact on students and their communities—has been key to maintaining their passion and commitment. This sense of purpose and fulfillment aligns with research on female leadership, particularly the work of Shakeshaft (1989), which emphasizes the relational, community-building approach that women leaders often take. Female principals are more likely to find joy in creating and maintaining supportive, inclusive communities, which in turn inspires and motivates them to continue their leadership journey.

Principal Kylie-Jo highlighted that her drive as a principal comes from seeing the positive differences her efforts make in the lives of her students and the school community. She shared that witnessing these changes gives her hope for the future and reaffirms why she chose this path. Kylie-Jo's experience is a testament to Shakeshaft's (1989) findings that female leaders tend to focus on transformational leadership, where the success of their work is measured by the positive development and well-being of those they serve. Women in educational leadership often prioritize the collective over the individual, finding deep satisfaction in fostering environments that promote student success and community growth (Shakeshaft, 1989).

Principal Reese reflected on how the potential to influence positive change for students who are "low on hope" attracted her. Her joy comes from seeing students thrive, particularly those who may have previously felt disempowered or overlooked. This nurturing and emotionally supportive approach to leadership, as outlined by Reese, aligns with Grogan and Shakeshaft's (2011) research, which emphasizes that female principals often act as caretakers and advocates for students' emotional and academic well-being. This is a key aspect of relational leadership, where leaders derive joy and purpose from creating spaces where students can overcome obstacles and reach their full potential.

Principal Shayna also found joy in witnessing the outcomes of collaborative efforts. While she acknowledged the challenges of managing a high school and being involved in numerous aspects of its operation, she described how seeing her vision come to life through the efforts of her team and the benefits it brings to students is deeply fulfilling. Shayna's experience illustrates the concept of shared leadership, where female principals often foster collective responsibility among staff and celebrate the achievements of the entire school community. Eagly and Carli (2007) noted that women leaders tend to thrive in collaborative environments, where

their leadership is distributed among teams rather than concentrated in hierarchical structures. Shayna's ability to find joy in this shared success reflects how female principals often excel in creating environments where teamwork and mutual support are central to the school's culture.

For Principal Maya, purposeful joy is rooted in the emotional connections she forms with students who may not have dedicated support systems. In her role at an alternative school, Maya expressed a deep sense of responsibility to believe in students when no one else does and seeing them achieve their goals is particularly rewarding for her. Maya's experience highlights the importance of emotional intelligence in female leadership. Research by Coleman (2003) found that emotional intelligence, including the ability to understand and manage emotions in oneself and others, is a critical component of successful leadership. Maya's ability to nurture a caring and emotionally supportive environment is central to her sense of joy and purpose, and it reflects how female leaders often focus on building strong, supportive relationships with students.

Principal Sofia shared that, despite the stress and demands of her role, the joy she feels in creating a family-like community within her school keeps her grounded and aligned with her purpose. Sofia's experience resonates with Shakeshaft's (1989) research on female leadership, which emphasizes the importance of community-building and relational dynamics in the leadership styles of women. Female principals often find fulfillment in fostering a sense of belonging and connection within their schools, which in turn enhances their resilience and ability to navigate the challenges of their roles (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Sofia's commitment to maintaining this sense of community reflects the synergist theory of female leadership, which suggests that women leaders integrate their personal and professional lives in ways that create a holistic approach to leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007). By building strong, supportive communities, Sofia is able to sustain her sense of purpose and find joy in her work.

The reflections of these principals demonstrate that purposeful joy is a critical factor in their continued success as leaders. This joy is not only derived from personal achievement but also from the positive impact they have on their schools and communities. Their experiences align with Shakeshaft's (1989) findings that female leaders prioritize collaboration, nurturing, and community-building as central aspects of their leadership approach. The ability to find joy in these relational and transformational aspects of leadership allows female principals to thrive, even in the face of significant challenges. Furthermore, the participants' ability to balance professional and personal responsibilities, despite societal expectations, underscores the synergist theory of female leadership, where women leaders excel in managing multiple complex roles by integrating their personal and professional lives (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Ultimately, finding joy in their purpose enables these female principals to remain inspired, resilient, and committed to their roles, driving their desire to continue making a positive impact on their students and communities.

Implications for Secondary Female Leadership and Support

The combined impact of race and gender on female principals underscores the need for targeted support and mentorship. The study reveals that intentional support from networks of women and other allies is crucial in helping these principals navigate the complexities of their roles. As Principal Gina Blue, "Having a mentor who understands the unique challenges of being a female principal has been invaluable. It's critical for our growth and resilience." Such mentorship provides a crucial support system for female principals, helping them address the specific challenges related to race and gender and enhancing their overall effectiveness in their roles.

The findings highlight that the intersection of race and gender presents additional layers of complexity for female principals. These challenges require a nuanced understanding of the unique pressures faced by women of color in leadership roles. The study emphasizes the importance of targeted support and mentorship in addressing these complexities and supporting female principals in their professional journeys.

This study underscored the complex challenges faced by female secondary principals, including balancing multiple roles, managing post-COVID stress, handling professional and personal responsibilities, confronting gender bias, and navigating the intersection of race and gender. The findings also highlighted the crucial role of intentional support and mentorship in enhancing the effectiveness and well-being of female principals. The diversity in participants' years of experience, caregiving responsibilities, and marital status illuminated the varied ways these challenges manifest and the supportive strategies that can aid in overcoming them.

Implications for Year-Round and Magnet Principals

The study's findings and participant feedback indicate that year-round principals face additional challenges due to the complexities of the school calendar. Year-round schools operate on a complex calendar incorporating students in multiple tracks that operate during all 12 months of the year, as opposed to traditional schools that operate 10 months out of the year, with a traditional summer break (National Association for Year-Round Education [NAYRE], 2020). These principals expressed that the continuous nature of the year-round schedule exacerbates their workload, leaving little time for breaks or planning. Unlike their traditional calendar counterparts, year-round principals must constantly adjust to staggered student and staff schedules, which adds logistical pressure and limits opportunities for professional development or recuperation. This dynamic creates a perpetual cycle of operational demands, contributing to

heightened stress levels. All year-round principals in the study highlighted the need for additional central office support, emphasizing that they often feel disconnected from district-level processes and decision-making, which they perceive as geared more toward traditional calendar schools.

Magnet schools offer create programs within in school districts across the United States. Magnet schools offer school assignments to students in local proximity, as well as students across various assignment areas to foster greater diversity and programmatic access (Magnet Schools of America, 2021). Additionally, magnet principals face unique pressures related to maintaining their schools' prescriptive vision of attraction and flagship status for the district's magnet imagery. This constant need to market their schools to potential families often conflicts with their ability to focus on academic rigor and implementing data-driven strategies. Magnet principals noted that they frequently feel compelled to prioritize initiatives that promote the school's image over those that genuinely address academic needs. This creates tension between meeting the district's expectations for magnet programs and fulfilling the educational needs of their students. The constant pressure to maintain this dual focus complicates their ability to adopt structures that solely prioritize academic achievement, further stressing the importance of differentiated support from district leadership.

Though this was not an intended component of the research or an explicit focus of the interview questions, the frequency and consistency of feedback regarding the unique challenges faced by year-round and magnet principals suggest that this is an area worthy of further consideration. The repeated mentions of calendar complexities, the need for additional central office support, and the disconnection from district processes indicate a gap in how principals are supported within the broader district framework. Additionally, the magnet principals' concerns

about balancing the prescriptive vision of attraction with academic rigor highlight a tension that may be affecting the long-term success of their schools. These insights, while emergent and unanticipated, should be noted as important indicators for reviewing district practices, procedures, and support structures.

The feedback provided by participants suggests potential areas for future research that could explore how the unique operational demands of year-round and magnet schools impact leadership effectiveness, school culture, and academic outcomes. Investigating how these factors influence principal well-being and decision-making could inform targeted support strategies, and deeper examination may reveal opportunities to optimize leadership in specialized school contexts. Future research could also examine the systemic processes that contribute to the perceived disconnection from district operations, offering insights that could lead to more inclusive and responsive policy development.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Future Research

Change is certain, progress is not. The data provided in this study reflects an increase in female principals; however, the experiences and working conditions captured by study participants reflects a continued need for evolved policy, practice, and direction. This study provides clear implications for how to better support these leaders in their work. A recurring theme among the participants was the importance of purposeful joy in their leadership roles, which they derived from creating strong, inclusive communities and witnessing student success. To sustain this joy and effectiveness, pragmatic and innovative support must be introduced. This section will share five recommendations to support secondary female principals in retention, job satisfaction, and personal and professional wellness, as defined by personal perception. These recommendations include a) policy support through single gender mentorship opportunities, b)

policy support through wellness and balance professional development designed for female leaders, c) practice support by school based administrative and operational support, as response for changing needs of schools, d) practice support in peer support networks for female principals, and e) practice support in how to provide feedback and guidance around transformational practice. The findings highlight several critical policy implications for educational institutions, districts, and policymakers. Policies must evolve to ensure these leaders have the resources and support necessary to thrive in their roles, both for their well-being and for the success of their school communities.

Another key area for policy intervention is the integration of wellness and mental health resources into the leadership framework. Female secondary principals face heightened expectations to support both academic achievement and the mental wellness of their staff and students, which can lead to emotional burnout and stress (Mahfouz, 2018). Districts should establish policies that provide dedicated mental health support teams, as well as professional development programs focused on self-care and wellness strategies for principals. Policies should also promote innovative wellness practices, such as providing wellness coaches or district-sourced support initiatives that allow principals to take time away for their mental health. These programs could include wellness retreats, coaching sessions, and structured opportunities to decompress and recharge. Such policies will help sustain principals' mental well-being, enabling them to be more effective leaders (Wallace, 2019).

Addressing gender bias in leadership evaluations is also crucial. Female principals frequently contend with ingrained biases that influence perceptions of their leadership capabilities, affecting career progression and job satisfaction (Santamaría & Jean-Marie, 2014). Districts must implement policies that promote equitable evaluation processes, training

evaluators to recognize and mitigate implicit gender biases. By ensuring that leadership assessments are fair and gender-responsive, these policies can create a more supportive and equitable work environment for female principals.

Overall, this research calls for a comprehensive policy response that addresses the unique challenges faced by female secondary principals. By focusing on mentorship, mental health support, and unbiased evaluation practices, policymakers can create an environment that supports female leaders and strengthens educational outcomes for school communities.

Policy: Single Gender Mentorship Structures

One major policy implication is the need to institutionalize mentorship programs specifically aimed at female educational leaders. These mentorship initiatives should be designed to provide gender-sensitive guidance, focusing on both professional and personal growth. Research demonstrates that female leaders benefit significantly from structured mentoring that offers emotional support, leadership advice, and strategies for work-life balance (Mahfouz, 2018; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Policy changes that establish gender-focused mentorship and networking opportunities will empower female principals and foster their long-term professional success.

As Principal Sofia noted, the sense of community and family-like support she has cultivated in her school is crucial to her well-being and professional longevity. Similarly, research by Mahfouz (2018) emphasizes that mentorship and professional learning communities that foster relational leadership approaches can reduce burnout and foster resilience among female leaders. Mentorship can have a positive impact on principal experience and work outcomes (DeMatthews, 2018; DeMatthews et al., 2021). Though mentoring can occur in a formal monitored setting, research has reflected that formal and casual structures still provide

positive outcomes for participants (DeMatthews, 2018; DeMatthews et al., 2021). These mentorship programs would not only offer emotional support but also practical advice on navigating the complexities of educational leadership post-COVID.

Supporting mentorship and creating community spaces for secondary female principals is essential for their success, well-being, and long-term career satisfaction. The feedback in this study clearly illustrates the importance of structured, intentional mentorship and peer support systems, where they can engage with other women who understand the unique challenges of their roles. Research supports this, showing that mentorship and community spaces are crucial for building resilience, sharing best practices, and fostering emotional and professional growth among women leaders (Mahfouz, 2018). Female principals, often balancing complex professional and personal responsibilities, benefit from the guidance and solidarity that comes from mentorship relationships and peer networks.

Mentorship provides not only practical leadership advice but also emotional support, which is critical in a field where female leaders are frequently isolated or face heightened scrutiny due to gendered expectations (Wallace, 2019). As Principal Sofia highlighted, having a supportive community of peers helps her maintain a sense of purpose and joy in her work, even when faced with the overwhelming pressures of school leadership. This sentiment is echoed in research by Brunner and Grogan (2005), who found that women leaders often rely on relational networks to navigate the complexities of educational leadership effectively. These networks offer a safe space for sharing experiences and addressing the gendered barriers that female principals encounter, such as balancing leadership with family responsibilities and managing expectations to be both nurturing and firm in their roles.

Structured mentorship programs can play a critical role in addressing the underrepresentation of women, particularly women of color, in educational leadership. Studies show that women are more likely to succeed in leadership when they have access to mentors who offer not only professional guidance but also insights into navigating the systemic barriers of race and gender (Santamaría & Jean-Marie, 2014). By developing mentorship programs that are specifically tailored to the needs of female principals, educational institutions can provide the targeted support these leaders require. These programs should focus on developing leadership capacity, fostering resilience, and providing strategies for work-life balance, all of which are vital for sustaining long-term success (Mahfouz, 2018).

Policy: Differentiated Professional Development to Address Wellness and Work-Life Balance

Another key area for policy intervention is the integration of wellness and mental health resources into the leadership framework. Female secondary principals face heightened expectations to support both academic achievement and the mental wellness of their staff and students, which can lead to emotional burnout and stress (Mahfouz, 2018). Districts should establish policies that provide dedicated mental health support teams, as well as professional development programs focused on self-care and wellness strategies for principals. Policies should also promote innovative wellness practices, such as providing wellness coaches or district-sourced support initiatives that allow principals to take time away for their mental health. These programs could include wellness retreats, coaching sessions, and structured opportunities to decompress and recharge. Such policies will help sustain principals' mental well-being, enabling them to be more effective leaders (Wallace, 2019).

The demands of educational leadership are intellectually, physically, and emotionally taxing, often leaving little room for self-care (Ryer, 2017). Another key innovation involves creating professional development opportunities centered on wellness and work-life balance, as highlighted by Principals Reese and Kylie-Jo. The pressures of leadership are exacerbated by traditional gender expectations, and these principals emphasized the necessity of setting boundaries and prioritizing personal well-being to maintain their effectiveness. According to Wallace (2019), professional development initiatives that incorporate wellness strategies, mindfulness practices, and time-management skills can significantly improve job satisfaction and reduce stress for female leaders. Integrating wellness with leadership training would allow principals to sustain their joy in the role while addressing the physical and mental health challenges they face.

Supporting professional development centered on wellness, work-life balance, and self-care is crucial for sustaining the well-being and effectiveness of secondary female principals. As evidenced by the participant responses in this study, the pressures of balancing professional leadership with personal responsibilities have intensified, particularly in the post-pandemic era. Many participants, such as Principals Reese and Kylie-Jo, emphasized the need to prioritize self-care and establish boundaries to prevent burnout. These reflections align with a growing body of research that suggests professional development initiatives focusing on wellness can play a pivotal role in improving job satisfaction, reducing stress, and sustaining long-term career success (Mahfouz, 2018).

The role of school principals has always been demanding, but female principals often face additional pressures due to societal expectations of managing both leadership roles and caregiving responsibilities. As Wallace (2019) explains, women in leadership are often expected

to fulfill multiple roles with perfection, which can lead to significant emotional and physical exhaustion. Professional development that teaches female principals how to manage their well-being—through mindfulness, time management, and self-care strategies—can help mitigate these pressures. Providing principals with tools to balance their personal and professional lives is essential for their longevity in the role and their overall effectiveness as leaders (Mahfouz, 2018).

One key recommendation is to integrate wellness and self-care strategies into leadership training programs. Principal Reese's reflection on the importance of taking intentional days off to recharge underscores the necessity of self-care in maintaining mental health. Self-care is not a luxury but a critical leadership strategy, as it directly impacts decision-making, emotional resilience, and the ability to lead effectively. Brunner and Grogan (2005) argue that female leaders, in particular, benefit from training that helps them manage emotional labor and prevent burnout. Programs that emphasize wellness can also foster greater job satisfaction, as leaders who feel supported in their personal well-being are more likely to stay committed to their roles.

Another component of supporting wellness for secondary female principals is promoting work-life balance through professional development. Principal Kylie-Jo highlighted the importance of compartmentalizing work and home life, ensuring she can be fully present in both areas. Research by Wallace (2019) demonstrates that professional development focusing on work-life balance helps principals establish boundaries, manage stress, and prevent the common pitfall of overworking. Encouraging principals to set clear boundaries around their time—such as leaving work at reasonable hours or taking planned breaks—can prevent burnout and foster a more sustainable leadership model. Effective time management is essential, especially in high-stress environments, and teaching these skills as part of professional development can significantly impact a principal's overall well-being (Wallace, 2019).

In addition to structured wellness programs, districts can implement peer learning communities that promote discussions around wellness and self-care. These communities offer a safe space for female principals to share challenges, reflect on their well-being, and exchange strategies for managing stress. Santamaría and Jean-Marie (2014) emphasize that peer support networks allow female leaders to maintain their sense of purpose while building resilience through shared experiences. These networks can also serve as a source of accountability, encouraging principals to prioritize their self-care and work-life balance consistently.

The feedback from this study also highlights that self-care is deeply personal and must be individualized. Principal Sofia, for example, found joy and self-care in her daily exercise routine, while Principal Neena focused on planning vacations to maintain her mental well-being. As Mahfouz (2018) notes, wellness strategies are not one-size-fits-all, and professional development must honor the diverse needs of female leaders by offering flexible approaches to self-care. By providing a variety of wellness strategies, professional development programs can empower female principals to find methods that work for them personally, improving their ability to navigate the complexities of their roles.

Professional development programs that focus on wellness, work-life balance, and self-care are essential for supporting secondary female principals in today's challenging educational environment. By providing training in mindfulness, time management, and wellness strategies, these programs can help female leaders maintain their mental and physical health, reduce burnout, and stay committed to their roles. Integrating wellness into professional development not only benefits the individual leader but also creates more effective, resilient, and balanced leadership for the entire school community. Investing in the well-being of female principals is

not just a matter of personal care—it is a strategic decision that will lead to more successful and sustainable educational leadership.

A crucial part of self-care is ample preparation. Principal preparation and development should provide real, hands-on experience in principal preparation. Understanding the reality of the position is crucial for equipping aspiring principals with the skills and confidence to confront the increasingly complex challenges of educational leadership. With issues such as post-pandemic learning gaps, mental health concerns, staffing shortages, and achievement disparities now at the forefront, theoretical knowledge alone is not enough to prepare future leaders. Hands-on experience allows aspiring principals to engage directly with these challenges in real-world settings, helping them develop practical problem-solving skills and adaptive leadership strategies. As Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) emphasize, effective leadership requires not only a strong understanding of educational theory but also the ability to apply that knowledge in dynamic, often unpredictable environments. By giving aspiring principals opportunities to lead initiatives, work closely with staff, and address issues such as mental health or community relations, preparation programs can develop leaders who are better equipped to implement transformational leadership strategies and address both emerging and long-standing challenges (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Such experiential learning is key to building the resilience, flexibility, and relational skills that are critical for modern school leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Practice: Increased Operational Response and Support from District Central Services

Additionally, school districts should consider providing greater administrative support and resources to alleviate the burdens of daily managerial tasks. Principals like Shayna pointed out the difficulty of managing high schools where it is impossible to be everywhere at once. Eagly and Carli (2007) suggest that delegating operational tasks to trusted administrative teams

allows principals to focus on strategic leadership and community-building, where female leaders often thrive.

In the wake of COVID-19, the changing needs of secondary schools have become more pronounced, highlighting the critical role of central services in responding effectively to these challenges. School principals, like those in this study, have expressed a need for more robust support from district offices, particularly in areas such as staffing, mental health services, curricular assistance, and addressing achievement gaps. The pandemic exacerbated pre-existing challenges, making it essential for districts to provide comprehensive support that enables principals to focus on instructional leadership rather than administrative overload (Mahfouz, 2018).

One of the most significant issues raised by participants was the need for better staffing support. With increased teacher shortages, especially in hard-to-staff areas, principals like Shayna noted the difficulty of running schools effectively when resources are stretched thin. Central services must prioritize providing adequate staffing and offer innovative solutions, such as recruiting specialized personnel or flexible teaching arrangements (Wallace, 2019). Additionally, the mental health needs of both students and staff have surged, with many participants, including Principal Sofia, calling for more mental health professionals in schools. Research underscores that student well-being is directly tied to academic success, and insufficient mental health services can widen the achievement gap (Santamaría & Jean-Marie, 2014). Without these critical supports, principals are left to manage the increasing emotional burden of their staff and students, which only adds to their own stress and potential burnout.

Moreover, curricular support is necessary to help schools adapt to the evolving educational landscape, ensuring that learning materials are relevant, inclusive, and equipped to

handle the shifts in student learning caused by the pandemic. Central services should work closely with schools to provide updated resources and training, helping principals like Kylie-Jo address gaps in student achievement that have been worsened by prolonged school closures and inconsistent learning environments (Wallace, 2019).

A lack of response or inadequate support from central services creates a compounding effect on principals, as they are expected to manage crises without sufficient resources. This increased responsibility leads to heightened stress and feelings of isolation, especially when facing challenges, they are unequipped to handle alone. Mahfouz (2018) emphasizes that when educational leaders are not supported, they face a greater risk of burnout and reduced effectiveness, which can negatively impact school culture, teacher morale, and student outcomes. Without proper district-level assistance, secondary school leaders struggle to maintain their well-being, manage their workloads, and effectively lead their schools, resulting in a vicious cycle of stress that hampers overall school success.

By enabling principals to work in areas that align with their strengths, such as relational and instructional leadership, they can continue to find joy in their work while improving school outcomes.

Practice: Establish Strong Female Networks

This study highlights the critical role of support systems in mitigating stress and preventing burnout among school leaders. The isolation often felt by principals, particularly in competitive urban districts, can be alleviated through strong professional networks. Participants valued the relationships they had cultivated with colleagues over the years, finding them essential for reducing stress and enhancing their professional practice. Establishing a collegial

environment rooted in relational trust and constructive feedback can significantly diminish the pressures associated with the principalship and foster a sense of community and shared purpose.

Establishing and maintaining female networks is a crucial strategy to support secondary female principals as they navigate the complex demands of educational leadership. Research consistently shows that women in leadership thrive when they have access to relational networks that foster professional growth, collaboration, and emotional support (Mahfouz, 2018; Wallace, 2019). These networks can be established through structured mentorship programs, regular peer meetings, and collaborative learning spaces designed specifically for women leaders. For example, Principal Sofia emphasized the importance of having a supportive community to maintain her well-being and commitment to leadership, underscoring how peer networks can serve as a lifeline for female principals. By creating spaces where women can share experiences, seek advice, and provide mutual support, these networks reduce isolation and promote resilience in the face of the challenges unique to educational leadership (Brunner & Grogan, 2005). Additionally, digital platforms and professional organizations can offer virtual spaces for female principals to connect regularly, ensuring that these networks are accessible even in geographically dispersed areas.

For women of color in leadership, these networks are particularly vital as they help address the additional barriers posed by the intersection of race and gender. Female principals of color often face "double jeopardy," a term used to describe the compounded biases of racism and sexism (Santamaría & Jean-Marie, 2014). In this study, participants like Principal Maya shared how being a woman of color in an alternative school setting required her to be a strong advocate for her students, many of whom faced their own challenges related to race. Networks that specifically include and prioritize the voices and experiences of women of color help address

these dual layers of discrimination by providing spaces where these leaders can discuss strategies for navigating racial bias, building strong, equitable school cultures, and sustaining their mental health. Santamaría and Jean-Marie (2014) emphasize the importance of cross-cultural mentoring and support systems in advancing social justice and educational equity for female leaders of color. Establishing racially inclusive networks ensures that all women in leadership have access to the support they need to thrive in their roles.

In addition to fostering professional growth, female networks can play a critical role in supporting working women who are balancing the dual responsibilities of being both principals and mothers. Many female leaders, such as Principal Maya, Elsa, and Virgina in this study, emphasized the unique challenges they face in managing career demands alongside family obligations. Elsa described the importance of compartmentalizing her responsibilities, ensuring that she prioritizes family time while maintaining her leadership duties. Female networks can provide a safe and supportive space for women to discuss the pressures of balancing work and family, share effective time-management strategies, and offer emotional support during particularly demanding periods. Research shows that women in leadership roles face greater stress due to societal expectations around caregiving, which often leads to increased emotional labor and the risk of burnout (Wheat & Hill, 2016). Open conversations within these networks about work-life balance help women navigate these dual demands more effectively and promote long-term well-being (Mahfouz, 2018).

Additionally, female networks can serve as platforms to advocate for family-friendly policies in education, especially for working mothers. Many female principals, including Principal Reese, emphasized the importance of personal time and flexibility to avoid burnout. Networks that support working mothers can collectively push for structural changes, such as

flexible working hours, remote work options, and access to childcare resources. These efforts can mitigate the "double bind" that women often experience, where they are expected to excel in both their professional roles and their caregiving responsibilities without adequate support (Stone & Lovejoy, 2019). Research by Eagly and Carli (2007) highlights that women leaders often face more challenges in navigating family and work compared to their male counterparts, which underscores the need for networks that address these issues. Furthermore, Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) found that female leaders often carry the added burden of emotional labor in both their work and home lives, making the support of networks vital to their personal and professional well-being. By focusing on both professional and personal development, female networks can help working mothers in leadership sustain their careers without sacrificing their well-being or the quality of their family life.

By fostering female networks that are both inclusive and intentional, educational institutions can ensure that secondary female principals—particularly those from underrepresented racial backgrounds—receive the guidance, emotional support, and professional development opportunities necessary for long-term success.

Practice: Develop Capacity in Distributive Leadership

Emphasizing transformational leadership can significantly support the success and experience of secondary female principals, particularly in fostering inclusive school communities and driving positive change. Transformational leadership is characterized by the ability to inspire and motivate staff, develop shared goals, and nurture a collective commitment to the school's vision (Bass & Riggio, 2006). For female principals, this leadership style aligns with their often collaborative and relational approach to school management, which emphasizes the development of strong, supportive communities. Principal Reese, for example, expressed that her joy in

leadership stems from seeing students thrive and succeed, especially those who were initially low on hope. By fostering a transformative environment, Reese helps create a school culture in which students and staff are empowered to achieve their potential. Research suggests that transformational leadership is particularly effective in educational settings because it builds trust, encourages innovation, and promotes collective responsibility for success (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006).

Female principals like Principal Sofia, who focuses on building a family-like community within her school, exemplify the power of transformational leadership in nurturing positive relationships and a sense of belonging. According to Eagly and Carli (2007), women leaders often excel at transformational leadership because they prioritize collaboration, mentoring, and the development of others—qualities that are essential in educational settings. In Sofia's case, her leadership has fostered a sense of community that aligns with transformational principles, encouraging staff and students to invest in the school's vision and values. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) similarly argue that female leaders are well-suited to transformational leadership as it taps into their natural ability to foster inclusive, supportive environments that enhance team cohesion and individual growth.

Addressing gender bias through transformational learning is also important in creating equitable leadership environments for female secondary principals. Transformational learning, which involves deep structural shifts in personal beliefs and practices, can help dismantle entrenched gender biases by fostering an environment where the unique challenges faced by female leaders are recognized and addressed (Santamaría & Jean-Marie, 2014). Supervisors of female principals, such as area superintendents and superintendents, need training and support to actively engage in this transformational processing, making them better allies and advocates for

gender equity and recognition of gender bias. Providing ongoing professional development and coaching for these supervisors can enhance their understanding of the specific dynamics that female principals face, contributing to more inclusive leadership practices and improved outcomes for school communities. Embedding gender awareness and equity-focused leadership in professional training can thus help align district goals with the needs of female principals, fostering an environment where all leaders are empowered to thrive (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Wallace, 2019). Transformational leadership enables female principals to navigate the increasing complexities of their roles post-COVID-19, when issues such as mental health, staffing shortages, and achievement gaps have become more pressing. By emphasizing shared leadership and collective problem-solving, transformational leadership helps distribute responsibilities across the school, reducing the emotional and administrative burden on female principals (Bass & Riggio, 2006). This leadership approach supports the long-term well-being of both the principal and their school communities, enabling female leaders to continue finding joy and purpose in their work.

Future Research

Future research should explore the experiences of a more diverse range of female secondary principals, focusing specifically on subgroups such as Latina principals. Studies indicate that Latina women are underrepresented in secondary principal roles, facing unique barriers related to both race and gender discrimination (Méndez-Morse, 2004). Investigating the factors that contribute to this categorical underrepresentation could provide valuable insights into the systemic challenges Latina principals face in both accessing and maintaining leadership positions. An exploration of the experiences of African American female principals would be beneficial to understand more deeply how race and gender intersect to shape their leadership

experiences. African American women often encounter "double jeopardy"—the compounded effects of both racism and sexism—which can significantly impact their career trajectories, stress levels, and leadership strategies (Santamaría & Jean-Marie, 2014). By examining how race and gender more robustly intersect, future studies could offer more nuanced strategies for supporting minority female principals in their roles.

Another key area for future research is the comparison of leadership experiences across different educational levels. While this study focused on secondary principals, understanding how the experiences of female leaders differ between elementary, middle, and high school settings could offer valuable insights into how school context influences the challenges and strengths of female leadership. Studies that compare levels would help delineate whether the complexity of student needs, school size, and curricular demands disproportionately affect women in secondary education compared to other levels.

Principal preparation programs also require further scrutiny in terms of how they address gender-related challenges. Many current programs do not adequately incorporate training on gender equity, implicit bias, or the specific hurdles that female leaders face in male-dominated leadership structures (Smith, 2020). Future research could evaluate how these programs could better prepare female principals to navigate these challenges and propose curriculum improvements that focus on gendered leadership experiences.

Additionally, future research should explore how working parents who serve as principals cope with the unique rigor of the role, especially in settings in which they serve as the principal in their children’s school. The demands of balancing leadership and family responsibilities create unique stressors for female principals, especially those who are mothers. Recent research has categorized parenting itself as a mental health stressor, particularly for working women (Kelly et

al., 2022). Studies should further explore how the dual roles of principal and parent contribute to stress and burnout, and what systemic supports could be introduced to alleviate these pressures, such as flexible work policies, childcare support, or more intentional community support networks for working mothers in leadership roles.

Limitations

This study was intentionally designed to focus on a specific demographic: secondary female principals. This focus was chosen to explore the distinct challenges and strengths of women leading at the high school level, where leadership demands are typically more complex due to larger student bodies, more diverse academic and extracurricular offerings, and higher expectations around college and career readiness. The decision to exclude male principals and those from elementary or higher education settings was made to maintain a targeted examination of gender-specific experiences within secondary education leadership. Additionally, this study narrowed its exploration to post-COVID-19 challenges, as these have reshaped educational priorities, leadership strategies, and the well-being of both staff and students in unprecedented ways. By concentrating on this period, the study aimed to capture the unique pressures and adaptations that female principals have faced since the pandemic.

Furthermore, the geographic scope of the study was limited to a specific district or region, recognizing that local policies, resources, and community dynamics play a significant role in shaping the experiences of school leaders. This deliberate boundary allowed for a more in-depth exploration of how female principals navigate challenges within a specific cultural and policy context but may limit the applicability of findings to regions with different educational infrastructures. Additionally, the study focused exclusively on female principals who are currently serving in their roles, excluding those who may have left the profession, which could

have provided insight into burnout or attrition rates among female leaders. By making these specific choices, the study aimed to provide a focused, in-depth understanding of secondary female principals' experiences, while acknowledging that these delimitations create certain constraints on the generalizability of the findings.

Delimitations

This study deliberately focused on secondary female principals, excluding other educational levels such as elementary, middle school, and higher education leadership. The rationale behind this delimitation was to examine the unique experiences, challenges, and leadership styles of women in high school settings, where leadership complexities differ significantly due to the size of the student body, the depth of academic programs, and the emphasis on preparing students for post-secondary education and careers. This targeted approach aimed to provide deeper insights into the gender-specific and context-specific nuances of leadership at the secondary level, acknowledging that the findings may not directly apply to principals working in other educational contexts.

Another key delimitation is the geographic limitation of the study. The participants were drawn from a specific district or region, which inherently reflects the policies, resources, and community dynamics of that area. This focus allowed the study to explore how local educational policies and community expectations shape the leadership experiences of female principals, particularly in the context of post-COVID-19 educational challenges. However, this geographic boundary limits the applicability of the findings to broader national or international contexts where education systems, resources, and cultural norms may differ.

Additionally, this study chose to explore leadership within the context of public secondary schools, excluding private, charter, or alternative school settings. The decision to

focus solely on public schools was made to maintain consistency in the framework, governance structures, and accountability measures that shape the participants' experiences. However, this exclusion means that the findings may not capture the unique challenges faced by female principals in non-public school environments, where leadership dynamics can be significantly different.

The study focused exclusively on active female principals, excluding those who have retired or left the profession. While the intent was to gather current, relevant data from leaders actively facing modern challenges, this delimitation overlooks the perspectives of those who may have exited the profession due to burnout, dissatisfaction, or other reasons, which could provide valuable insight into the sustainability of leadership for women in secondary education. This study did not specifically address the intersectionality of race, gender, and leadership, which could have offered a richer understanding of how minority female principals experience leadership differently from their white counterparts.

By setting these delimitations, the study aimed to provide a focused exploration of the lived experiences of secondary female principals, while recognizing that these boundaries limit the generalizability of the findings across other educational levels, regions, and types of schools.

Similarities with Previous Studies

The alignment between the findings of this study and past research reveals both corroborative evidence and novel insights into the experiences of female principals, and in this study secondary female principals. The study confirms several established patterns regarding the challenges faced by female leaders, while also presenting unique observations based on time sensitive experiences that contribute to the broader discourse on educational leadership. By

comparing the study's findings with existing literature, we gain a deeper understanding of how gender, race, and the demands of the principalship intersect.

The study aligns closely with previous research concerning the multifaceted challenges faced by female principals, particularly regarding the balancing of professional and personal responsibilities. Research by Shakeshaft et al. (2007) and others highlights that female leaders often juggle multiple roles, including professional duties and caregiving responsibilities, which resonates with the study's findings on the intense pressure female principals experience in managing these roles. Additionally, the study supports the findings of Protheroe (2008), who noted that female principals face significant work-life balance issues, corroborating the persistent challenge of aligning professional expectations with personal life demands. The consistency of these findings underscores the reliability of the study and aligns with broader patterns observed in the literature.

Differences and Similarities

Though this study reflects similarities to some prior research around female principals, there are variations between this study's findings and those in previous research. This study on female secondary principals highlights key variations from prior research on the experiences of women in educational leadership, particularly in its focus on post-pandemic challenges, mental health stressors, and the evolving demands of educational leadership. While previous studies, such as Shakeshaft's *Women in Educational Administration* (1989), focused on the systemic barriers women face in obtaining leadership roles, this study emphasizes the heightened complexity of these challenges in the context of Covid-19, where principals are now contending with increased student mental health issues, staff shortages, and widening achievement gaps. Additionally, this study uniquely captures the perspectives of female principals who are

balancing their leadership roles with the demands of parenting, adding to the literature by underscoring the mental health strain of working mothers—a topic less explored in earlier research on female leadership. Unlike traditional studies that primarily focus on gender-based challenges in a pre-pandemic context, this study considers the compounded stressors female principals face today, offering a more contemporary and nuanced understanding of their roles. By exploring the importance of mentorship and support networks, this study builds on existing literature but introduces a new lens by emphasizing the need for intentional peer and mentorship programs designed specifically to address modern-day leadership challenges for women.

One notable novel finding from this study is the heightened impact of post-COVID stress on the role of female principals, particularly concerning increased political and managerial demands. Previous research has not extensively addressed the specific post-pandemic stressors that female principals encounter, such as the need to adapt to rapidly changing educational environments and heightened expectations from various stakeholders. This finding contributes new insights into the evolving landscape of school leadership and the unique pressures that have emerged in the wake of the pandemic.

Explanations for Similarities

The alignment with existing literature can be attributed to the study's adherence to established theoretical frameworks, such as Shakeshaft’s concepts of leadership and transformational learning theories. These frameworks provide a robust foundation for understanding the challenges faced by female principals and support the validity of the study's findings. Consistency across studies highlights the enduring nature of these challenges and reinforces the need for continued focus on these issues within the field of educational leadership.

Explanations for Differences

The discrepancies between this study and previous research may arise from differences in methodologies or sample characteristics. For example, the inclusion of diverse participant backgrounds in this study, particularly with a focus on race and gender intersectionality, offers a more comprehensive view that may not be fully represented in earlier research. Additionally, variations in measurement instruments and study design could account for differences in findings. The study's emphasis on post-COVID challenges introduces a contemporary dimension that may not have been addressed in prior research.

Reflections and Personal Insights

Bell Hooks states, "To be fully self-actualized we must embrace the joy in being woman, not in the romanticized sense, but in the way that recognizes our strength, our resilience, and our capacity to shape the world. We have to be truly visionary; we have to root our imagination in our concrete reality while simultaneously imagining possibilities beyond that reality" (Hooks, 2000, p. 110). Female principals often find themselves managing the weight of overwhelming realities, whether it is navigating post-COVID educational challenges, managing staffing shortages, or addressing the emotional needs of their school communities. Their leadership requires them to remain grounded in these concrete difficulties while also imagining a future where their students thrive and their schools flourish.

The ability to find joy in this delicate balance, as hooks describes, is a testament to the resilience and visionary leadership of these women. They are constantly called to transform difficult realities into opportunities for growth and success. From the participants in the study, it became clear that joy is not something they stumble upon by accident, but something they cultivate through their relationships with their students, their belief in the importance of

education, and their commitment to creating nurturing and inclusive school environments. These principals draw on their personal strength and professional expertise to turn the weight of the present into the promise of a better future, all while facing the gendered expectations and barriers that society places upon them.

For many of these women, triumph is found in the small victories—seeing a struggling student succeed, building a strong and supportive staff, or fostering a sense of community within their schools. Despite the relentless challenges, they manage to cultivate spaces where joy thrives because they are able to root their leadership in reality while always envisioning something better. hooks' words capture this ability to embrace the full complexity of leadership with both optimism and a deep connection to the day-to-day struggles they face. The joy that secondary female principals find in their work is a reflection of their resilience, their vision, and their unwavering commitment to both the present and the future.

As the researcher, this work is especially personal, as a secondary principal, the stories and experiences resonate deeply. Female principals demonstrate remarkable resilience in the face of challenges often defined my internal barometers of success. Their ability to balance professional demands with personal responsibilities, while navigating gender and racial biases, underscores their strength and commitment to their roles. Their resilience is a testament to their dedication to educational leadership and their capacity to overcome.

Chapter Summary

Overall, this study both aligns with and diverges from past research, offering a nuanced view of the experiences of female principals. The similarities reinforce established patterns and contribute to the robustness of the findings, while the differences and novel insights highlight areas for further exploration and understanding. The study’s focus on intersectionality, post-

COVID stressors, and the evolving nature of the principalship enriches the existing literature and provides valuable implications for future research and practice in educational leadership.

This chapter has highlighted the significant findings from the experiences of female secondary principals, emphasizing the unique challenges they face and the supports they need to thrive. By addressing these issues and implementing targeted strategies, we can create a more equitable and supportive environment for female principals in the educational landscape. The insights gained from this research underscore the importance of systemic changes, robust support networks, and continued research to ensure that female principals can navigate their careers successfully and achieve their full potential in educational leadership.

Study Conclusion

This study aimed to delve into the complex and multifaceted challenges that female secondary principals face, particularly in balancing their professional leadership roles with personal responsibilities in the post-COVID educational landscape. By analyzing the feedback from eight diverse female principals, this research sought to highlight how societal expectations—especially the "superwoman" archetype—continue to impact their leadership styles, perceptions, and career trajectories. The study sheds light on the barriers female principals face and the critical supports needed for them to succeed and thrive in their roles.

One of the key findings revealed the immense pressure female principals face in balancing the dual demands of being effective leaders in their schools while also managing personal and familial responsibilities. The post-COVID context has heightened these demands, with participants discussing how their roles have shifted from instructional leaders to crisis managers, focusing on mental health issues, teacher retention, and student achievement gaps. The pandemic’s aftermath has added layers of complexity to their work, including increased staff

shortages, a rise in student behavioral issues, and greater scrutiny from both parents and the broader community. These additional burdens often leave female principals feeling stretched too thin, trying to balance professional excellence with personal commitments.

The study also highlighted the intersectionality of race and gender, particularly for Black female principals, who face compounded challenges due to both racial and gender biases. These principals reported feeling additional scrutiny and pressure to perform, often having to navigate systemic barriers that make their roles even more demanding. This finding aligns with existing literature on "double jeopardy," where minority women in leadership experience both racial and gender-based discrimination, which can lead to higher stress and burnout rates. The study calls for more tailored support systems that address the unique challenges of female principals of color, including specialized mentorship programs that consider both race and gender dynamics in educational leadership.

Another significant theme from the research is the need for intentional mentorship and peer support networks for female principals. The participants emphasized the importance of structured mentorship programs, which not only provide professional guidance but also emotional support. This sense of community and shared experience is essential for reducing the isolation many female principals feel in their leadership roles. By connecting with other women in similar positions, they gain practical strategies for navigating their challenges and validating their experiences. Mentorship programs, therefore, play a crucial role in empowering female leaders, helping them to manage stress and sustain their leadership effectiveness.

The implications of this study are broad and impactful. Educational institutions and policymakers must prioritize the development of targeted support systems for female principals, such as mentorship and professional development opportunities that focus on work-life balance,

wellness, and the unique challenges female leaders face. Central services should also provide more robust resources, particularly around staffing, mental health services, and curricular support, to alleviate some of the operational pressures that principals currently shoulder.

Future research should explore the experiences of Latina female principals, a subgroup that remains significantly underrepresented in secondary school leadership roles. Studies show that Latina women face unique challenges, including cultural expectations and barriers related to both race and gender, which have contributed to their underrepresentation in educational leadership. Additionally, further research should investigate the experiences of African American female principals, focusing on how the intersection of race and gender shapes their leadership experiences and career development. A more nuanced understanding of how these dual identities intersect can inform policies and support systems that are more inclusive and responsive to their needs.

Additionally, this study revealed the need for principal preparation programs to better address gender-related challenges and the post-COVID landscape of education. Current programs often fall short in preparing aspiring female principals for the gender biases and systemic obstacles they will face. By incorporating discussions around gender equity, work-life balance, and the mental health stressors of working mothers, principal preparation programs can better equip future leaders to navigate these complex dynamics.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing discourse on gender equity in educational leadership by providing a comprehensive look at the challenges female secondary principals face in today's evolving educational landscape. The findings underscore the importance of mentorship, support networks, and systemic changes that promote a more inclusive, supportive environment for female principals. By addressing these issues, educational institutions can create

a more sustainable and empowering leadership framework that allows female principals to thrive both professionally and personally.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Invitational Email

Consideration Email
Dear Principal _____,

I hope your week is going well.

I am inviting you to participate in an interview about your experiences as a female principal. I am conducting a study as a part of my doctoral dissertation at North Carolina State University, Raleigh, North Carolina.

You are receiving this message because you are a principal and I believe that your experiences are powerful. Successful school leaders are essential to our schools. As a female leader, I believe that your experiences can expand our field of educational awareness.

The demands of our profession are plentiful and there is no doubt that your schedule is full. I would like to schedule a one-hour interview with you in the coming weeks to discuss your experiences as a female principal. I am interested in how you have navigated challenges and obstacles to manage your career success.

If you are willing to participate please reply back to me, so that I can include your experience. Thank you for your intentional consideration.

For your convenience, you may schedule an interview time below using my calendar. We can meet at a neutral location of our preference. Several location suggestions are included in the calendar app. If you prefer, you are welcome to call me and we can schedule over the phone as well.

Thank you for your consideration. I truly appreciate all that you do and the everyday tasks you cover to support our students.

Invitational Disclaimers
Participation in this study is voluntary. Participants are not associated with the researcher or related research outcomes. Interview transcripts, recordings, and related research content is confidential and will not be used use beyond the scope of this study. Participant names will be changed, and related information used in the research study will not be identifiable by name.

With Thanks,
Mariah Walker

Appendix B: Concluding Disclaimers

Greetings,
Thank you again for your willingness to participate in this leadership study on female leadership. Your time is valuable, and I appreciate your willingness to engage with me. As I am translating these responses and reviewing your feedback, I may reach back out to you to ensure that my interpretations are correct. If you develop any questions or additional reflections that you feel are important to capture, please do not hesitate to contact me and we can schedule an additional time to connect.

Again, thank you for your leadership and time.

Sincerely,
Mariah Walker

Appendix C: Background Questionnaire

1. How many years have you been in your current school as principal?
2. How many years have you been a principal (including other schools)?
3. How many years have you been a school administrator?
4. Would you classify your school as a high needs urban or suburban school?
5. How big is your student population?
6. How do you identify your individual gender and ethnicity?
7. What is your marital status?
8. Are you the primary caregiver for any minor children?
9. Are you the primary caregiver for any adults?

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Good morning/afternoon/evening,

Thank you for taking time to be here with me today. As you know, I am a doctoral student at North Carolina State University. I am completing research about the experiences of female principals in North Carolina. The purpose of this research is to identify challenges and experiences unique to North Carolina female principals. This interview is important to this research as it helps provide perspective and experience. This research will support establishing practices and opportunities to better support female principals in their work and overall experience.

I will be asking you a variety of questions related to your experiences as a female principal and school leader. Some of the questions will be about your work as a principal, but some questions will also be about how you many all the many life tasks that you cover in your life beyond the school. You are a candidate for this study because you are currently a practicing principal in North Carolina. As a reminder, this interview will take about an hour and will be recorded. After the recording is transcribed, it will be completely deleted. In the meantime it will be stored on a protected drive. Any data collected during this interview, and analysis completed after the interview will be kept strictly confidential. If at any time you need a break, or if you are not comfortable answering a question, please feel free to let me know.

Before we get started, do you have any questions about this study?

Are you ready to get started?

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Part I

Professional Entry

1. *How long have you been a principal?*

2. *Tell me why you wanted to be a principal.*

3. *Tell me about your school community.*

Professional Depth

1. *What do you enjoy most about your role?*

2. *What do you spend most of your time doing at work?*

3. *What do you enjoy least about your role?*

Personal Entry

1. *Tell me about your family.*

2. *Marriage (Tell me how long you have been married).*

3. *Children (Tell me how old your children are).*

Personal Depth

1. *How much time you spend at home?*
2. *Are you considered a primary caregiver?*
3. *How much support do you receive at home?*

Part II

Professional

1. How did you become a principal in North Carolina?
2. What helped you become a principal?
3. How are things going in your current school/role?
4. Are there stressors you experience as a woman principal?
5. Do you think your school level, size, or population impacts your experience?
6. Do you think your professional work consumes your time?
7. Can you identify some sacrifices you have to make at home to support your role?
8. Can you identify some professional supports?
9. Can you identify experiences in your role that are unique to your gender? Ethinicity?

Personal

1. What does your family think of your role as principal?
2. Tell me about some of the sacrifices you have to make at work to support your role at home?
3. Tell me how you feel about the responsibilities you have at work and at home?
4. Who or what is your support system?
5. How does your job impact your personal life?
6. Do you have boundaries to protect your time and energy?

Reflection Questions

1. Do you have any regrets with your career choice?
2. Do have guilt in your role at work or at home?
3. Do you feel role conflict In the obligations you cover?
4. Do you have any strategies that help you navigate?
5. Are there helpful things that you have learned to help you?

Is there anything that I have not asked or that you would like me to capture?

Appendix E: Informed Consent

NC STATE UNIVERSITY

Informed Consent Form for Participation in Research

Title of Study: An Exploratory Study on Women Navigating the Landscape of Educational Leadership
IRB Protocol 26571
Principal Investigator(s): Mariah Walker, mathorpe@ncsu.edu, (919) 980-0632
Funding Source: None

You are invited to take part in a research study. Here are some important things to know:

- Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can choose not to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate and change your mind, you can stop participating at any time without penalty.
- The purpose of this research study is to delve into the unique challenges confronted by secondary female principals, with a specific focus on how societal expectations impact their journey.
- You will be asked to complete consent forms, complete a brief demographic questionnaire, and to participate in an interview (lasting approximately 1 hour)..
- You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in this study. Research studies may pose risks to those who participate.
- You may want to participate in this research because it relates to the unique and profound experiences experienced by female leaders who may have a similar affinity to you. Participating may create connections for personal and professional development, a desire to support and advocate for other women, and a commitment to advancing gender equality in educational leadership. You may not want to participate in this research because you may not be able to commit to additional professional or personal activities at this time. Additionally, you may feel that your experiences are not categorically different as a result of gender.
- If you have questions about your participation in this research at any time, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above or the NC State IRB office via email at IRB-Director@ncsu.edu or via phone at 1-919-515-8754

Please read the rest of this consent form for more specific details of this research. If you do not understand something, please ask the researcher for clarification or more information.

What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of the study is to delve into the unique challenges confronted by secondary female principals, with a specific focus on how societal expectations impact their journey.

How many people will be in the study?

There will be approximately 8-10 participants in this study.

Am I eligible to be a participant in this study?

In order to be a participant in this study, you must agree to be in the study and

1. Identify as female
2. Currently work as a secondary principal (middle or high school level)
3. Serve in an urban or sub-urban school setting

Study participants will not be limited by age, socio-economic status, or background to incorporate participants from different social identities.
You cannot participate in this study if you do not meet the inclusion criteria.

What will happen if you take part in the study?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do all of the following:

1. Participants will be recruited via email with informational email and a digital flyer.
2. Participants will be asked to complete a Google Form to indicate their interest and to confirm their voluntary participation in the study.
3. Participants will be contacted by the researcher via email outlining each step of the study.
4. Participants will be asked to complete the Demographic Questionnaire, which includes the voluntary consent form.
5. Participants will participate in an approximately 1-hour virtual individual interview.
6. Participants will be given an opportunity to complete a follow-up interview with the interviewer (Mariah) to capture any components they feel were omitted in their primary interview.
7. Participants will receive a $30 e-gift card to the email address listed on the demographic questionnaire they completed.
8. Participants will be able to view their individual interviews and individual data analyses after they are reviewed and processed by the researcher.

The total amount of time that you will be participating in this study is 90 minutes, which includes time for the background questionnaire and interview.

Recording in research

Participants will be audio and video recorded during the research activities. The video feature will not be used to capture facial interaction, rather it will be used to create transcriptions. If you do not want this information collected, you cannot participate in this research.

We would like to use these recordings for transcription only. We will keep these recordings until transcriptions have been verified, for at least 6 months.

Benefits to participating in this research

The direct benefits to you as a result of your participation in this research include: Participants may benefit from the ability to reflect on their personal and professional experiences and express verbally frustrations or tensions about an environment that they may not have been able to otherwise. In addition, participants may be able to share strategies that were useful to them and

about activities/behaviors of their educational agency staff that have been affirming. Learning about the discovered applied strategies may be useful to others who read about the results of the study. In addition, participants may benefit from reading about the experiences of other participants at the conclusion of this study and feeling affirmed and validated in their experiences and feelings.

The indirect benefits are This study allows for the exploration of the experiences of secondary female principals, this study will include considerations for experiences related to COVID-19 pandemic challenges. Findings will assist educational agencies when making decisions as to how to recruit, retain, and facilitate leadership growth within school-based female administrators. By creating communities, reaffirming experiences, and addressing
barriers, school district administrators will help support the successful persistence, recruitment, and retention of female principals at the secondary level.

Risks to participating in this research

There is minimal risk associated with your participation in this research.

Researcher obligations

Due to my role as a graduate student I have an obligation to report child neglect and abuse, sexual abuse of an adult ages 28 years old or younger, elder neglect and abuse, sexual discrimination and harassment of students. This means that if I observe instances of, or you tell me about thoughts of harming yourself or someone else, I am obligated to report that. The risks associated with reporting this information include contact from a local welfare agency.

What data will be collected about me and are there risks associated with that?

The data that are collected about you include your years of experience, your time in your current role, your current marital status, caregiving responsibilities, and general questions about your role as a secondary principal. This data is not connected to your name or other information that could easily identify you. The risks to you as a result of collecting this information include emotional or physiological in terms of reflecting on hard experiences during the interview process. These risks will be mitigated through implementing data protections in accordance with NC State data protection standards.

How will my identity and the data about me be stored and protected?

After all data is collected, the researchers will go through the data and remove all direct and indirect identifiers from the dataset and create a coded list that connects your real identity to the dataset. Any identifiable information will be redacted to protect participants.

The researcher will go through the transcripts and do her best to remove or replace any information that can identify you directly. Examples of the information we will remove are mentions of specific schools, specific colleagues, supervisors, and any colleague names. After we do this, it is unlikely your identity could be deduced from your responses.

How will the data about me be reported to the public and are there risks associated with that?

We may quote you or share specific responses from you in our publications and presentations, but we will not include your name or any other information that could easily identify you. As a result, there are minimal risks to you as a result of how we report the data.

Right to withdraw your participation

Your participation is voluntary. Even if you agree initially, consent is an ongoing process. You can stop participating at any time for any reason. To do so, tell the researcher immediately through phone call or email. You can also contact Mariah Walker, researcher at mathorpe@ncsu.edu and (919) 980-0632.

If you withdraw, we will stop any procedures or data collection that may happen. We will also delete any data that's already been collected from you whenever possible. We will not be able to delete your data if we cannot identify which responses are yours or if the data has already been published. De-identifying the data will take place approximately 2 weeks after the interviews conclude. Data after this point may not be able to identify which responses are theirs.

Compensation

For your participation in this study, you will receive a $30 gift card. If you withdraw from the study before it ends, you will not receive compensation.

What if you have questions about this study?

If you have questions at any time about the study itself or the procedures implemented in this study, you may contact the researcher, Mariah Walker, at malker@gmail.com. You can also contact the faculty advisor for this research, Dr. Lisa Bass at lrbass@wcpss.net.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact the NC State IRB (Institutional Review Board) office. An IRB office helps participants if they have any issues regarding research activities. You can contact the NC State University IRB office at IRB-Director@ncsu.edu, 919-515-8754, or fill out a confidential form online at https://research.ncsu.edu/administration/participant-concern-and-complaint-form/

Consent to Participate

This informed consent sheet is for your information. By participating you are affirming that you have read the above information. All of the questions you had about this research have been answered. If you choose to consent to participate, you can stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may revoke my consent at any time.