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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

FEMINISM AND SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: A QUALITATIVE STUDY UTILIZING
EFFECTIVE WOMEN PRINCIPALS' SELF-PERCEPTIONS TO DETERMINE
WHAT MAKES THEM SUCCESSFUL

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

PROGRAM IN ADMINISTRATION AND SUPERVISION

BY

CHRISTINA SYLVESTER

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

AUGUST 2019

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Dedicated to Mom, Dad, and Thomas.

Thank you for always supporting and believing in me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	vi
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Significance of the Study	5
Rationale for the Study	6
Definition of Terms.....	8
II. LITERATURE REVIEW	10
History of the Principalship	11
History of Women in K-12 Leadership Roles	14
Statistical Data	16
Critical Feminist Theory Framework.....	21
School Performance Framework.....	22
Summary	24
III. METHODOLOGY	26
Research Methodology	26
Context.....	27
Data Collection and Analysis.....	29
Measures Taken to Minimize Bias	35
Positionality	36
Summary	38
IV. RESULTS	39
Theme One: Relentless Commitment to Engage in Meaningful Work	40
Sub-Theme: Clarity of Purpose and Confidence in Self.....	50
Sub-Theme: Actions Grounded in Values	52
Theme Two: Gender is Both a Hindrance and Asset in School Leadership.....	57
Sub-Theme: Being Treated Differently Because of Being a Woman.....	60
Sub-Theme: Navigating Both Being a Mother and an Effective Leader	66
Theme Three: Leadership as a Collaborative Effort.....	70
Sub-Theme: Leadership Centered on Trust, Relationships, Communication and Collaboration	73
Summary	75
V. DISCUSSION	77
Theme One: Relentless Commitment to Engage in Meaningful Work	81
Theme Two: Gender is Both a Hindrance and Asset in School Leadership.....	84
Theme Three: Leadership as a Collaborative Effort.....	86

Implications for Practice 87
Limitations 90
Implications for Future Research 91
Conclusion 92

APPENDIX

A. LETTER OF COOPERATION 94
B. CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH 97
C. CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT 100
D. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL 102
REFERENCE LIST 107
VITA 114

ABSTRACT

Women are underrepresented in a variety of fields, including educational leadership. Upon assuming leadership roles, women often struggle to effectively lead due to a pervasive context of sexism and genderism in the workplace. Schools are not immune to this phenomenon. Since women comprise approximately 50% of the population, it seems logical that they should assume a comparable percentage of leadership roles in education, but this is not the case. Beyond parity, it is important that there are not only more women leaders in educational administration but also that those women in leadership roles are supported within a context that enables them to thrive. It is important that educators develop an awareness of what is working and contributing to the effectiveness of these principals. Society will benefit from more equitable representation and experience of women leaders in schools. For the purposes of this study, I selected effective women principals in Colorado using the School Performance Framework implemented by Denver Public Schools, which rates schools on a color scale aligned to performance. This study considers student growth and achievement, parent and community engagement, teacher retention and closing gaps for marginalized student populations. I utilized a strengths-based approach to identify women principals who had a green or blue rating on the School Performance Framework for the 2017-2018 school year. Then, utilizing qualitative research methodology, I interviewed these women principals to ascertain their self-perceptions as to what makes them effective in their

leadership practice. The study considers what contributes to a women principal's effectiveness, as reported in their own words. I coded the interviews and identify trends. The study's results and findings are beneficial to women leaders as well as all educators and leaders interested in fostering a less sexist, more equitable society where leaders can flourish and our students can thrive.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Women have made tremendous strides in terms of acquiring college and advanced degrees at a rate comparable to or even greater than males. In fact, women earn 60% of all undergraduate degrees and 60% of all master's degrees (Center for American Progress, 2014). Unfortunately, this trend has yet to translate into leadership roles for women, across a wide array of fields (Bierema, 2005). Moreover, once women assume leadership roles, they are placed in high-stakes, difficult environments, where they must prove themselves in contexts that would be difficult for even seasoned leaders (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). The gender leadership gap, while troubling, is not the focus of this study. Instead, this research inquiry seeks to utilize a strengths-based approach to identify the factors that contribute to the success of women leaders who have proven effective in their roles, specifically as principals in middle schools.

Lack of parity amongst men and women in leadership roles is pervasive across settings, and school leadership is no exception. Given the percentage of women who earn degrees in higher education, the percentage of males in leadership roles is disproportionately high (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011). In the elementary school setting, women occupy leadership roles more often than they do in high school settings. The higher the grade level, the less likely there is to be a women principal (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). There is a dearth of research pertaining to women leaders at the

Middle School level. For that reason, this research study will focus on women Middle School and secondary principals, to add to the existing body of research about women leaders in school settings. While many studies focus on Superintendents, this study focuses on building-level leaders as that is a critical stepping stone for educational professionals who desire to lead in district-level leadership positions. Since it is well documented that women have to work harder than males to advance (Kurban, 2014; Rouleau-Carroll, 2014; Young, Reimer, & Young, 2010) it seems appropriate to focus on the role of principal as it provides women an opportunity to “prove themselves” and therefore advance to higher rungs of educational leadership (Bierema, 2005).

It is critical for women leaders to excel and advance in school settings as a way to address the systemic sexism that exists in a larger societal context. Parity is not the goal, but one means to achieve the end of having a more equitable society. The purpose of this study is to help women principals lead more effectively and to encourage more women to hold leadership roles in school settings. I used a strengths-based approach to identify effective women principals utilizing the Denver Public School’s School Performance Framework (SPF). I interviewed these women principals and used qualitative methodology to ascertain themes or commonalities amongst these leaders. The study seeks to answer the following research question: What do women middle school principals attribute to their effectiveness? Answering this question will enable other potential women leaders in the field to understand what contributes to one’s effectiveness as a middle school principal and utilize that knowledge to advance or enhance their careers and leadership practice.

Systemic sexism contributes to the current conundrum in education in which women occupy significant percentages of the teaching force and a substantially lower percentage of leadership roles (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). More women occupy leadership roles in the elementary realm; however, as the grade level increases the representation of women in leadership roles decreases (Jean Marie, 2013). Historically, this has not always been the case. In fact, males were the first teachers and it was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that teaching became “feminized” (Blount, 1998). The increase of women in the teaching force represented a shift that caused many men to leave the field and other men to believe that males should supervise this largely female workforce, and not leave women to their own devices. Males did not afford women the autonomy their male counterparts experienced as teachers; rather, male supervisors watched over women and supervised the school buildings and classrooms (Brown, Irby, & Jackson, 2012). Eventually, these supervisory roles evolved into the hierarchical structure of management that exists in schools today, and males tend to occupy the roles higher up on the management chain (Moore, 2009; Rouleau-Carroll, 2014; Young et al., 2010). This is problematic on a variety of levels. The supervision of schools has evolved to be thought of as a leadership practice, not as management (Ely et al., 2011; Rouleau-Carroll, 2014). Nonetheless, the damage has been done in that higher rungs of leadership in schools are, and historically have been, male dominated.

This long history of systemic sexism means a paradigm shift is necessary. Women, represented proportionally in leadership roles, may serve as models for others,

and help society come to envision women as leaders. Systemic barriers and a culture of sexism have contributed to a lack of women leaders in middle and high school settings (Brown et al., 2012; Ospina & Foldy, 2007). Researchers have not adequately determined what contributes to a woman's effectiveness in a middle school principal role (Ballard, 2010; Jones, 2006). The more school administrators who appreciate and value women leaders, the more women may want to lead. Bronars (2015) argued that women are hesitant to move to leadership roles due to competing obligations of family and a pervasive culture of sexism that makes an already difficult and somewhat unappealing role even less desirable for teachers considering an administrative or principal leadership role. In order for more women to embrace principal opportunities, researchers must produce more scholarship to help women lead more effectively and educate others about the context in which women leaders thrive. While much research exists to explore differences in leadership styles of males and women (Dugan, 2011; Elsesser & Lever, 2011; Ely et al., 2011) there is a dearth of research pertaining to effective women middle school principals and what they draw on to effectively lead (Chappell, 2000; Young, 2008). This inquiry seeks to understand what women principals perceive as helping them be effective, therefore, I will utilize the School Performance Framework from Denver Public Schools to first identify effective leaders then interview them and code the data to uncover important findings to serve other women in the field.

The purpose of this study is to help women principals lead more effectively by examining what effective women principals do. It is my intention of that this study will not only be impactful for women leaders, but will also address the context of sexism

prevalent in the field of educational administration by offering suggestions to improve the chances of success for women leaders. The hope is that more women will want to assume leadership ranks because of this study, which will serve as a tool to understand how effective women middle school principals lead.

Significance of the Study

This study makes a significant and original contribution to the profession, as there is little existing research about women, middle school principals. There is research about the lack of women leadership in the K-12 setting; but much of it focuses on the causes or historical context leading to the current reality (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). This study takes a strengths-based approach to women leadership and emphasizes the actions that women can take to be effective middle school principals. It is important beyond the realm of educational administration as the underrepresentation of women occurs in a variety of fields (Sandberg, 2013). It has significant implications for women teachers looking to make a transition to school leadership as well as implications for all educators and leaders as to how to accomplish a more equitable representation of women in leadership.

This study utilizes qualitative methodology. I identified leaders using the School Performance Framework, a metric implemented by Denver Public Schools to assign ratings to schools. I selected five women middle school principals with effective schools as measured by the School Performance Framework, which color codes these schools as “Blue” (most effective) and “Green” (effective). This study focuses on the following research question: According to women principals, what makes them effective leaders? I

identified and asked women principals to participate in the study, which consisted of an in depth interview about their leadership experiences and practice. The emphasis is on obtaining rich data from those women who do fulfill the requirements for this study. I utilized qualitative methodology, with in-depth interviews comprising the majority of the data. I comprehensively interviewed women principals following a protocol and interview format. All research participants answered the same interview questions. I then transcribed and coded the interviews to ascertain similarities or trends in responses. The strengths-based approach to this methodology asked women principals to reflect on what makes them effective and how they have navigated barriers to their practice.

Rationale for the Study

As this is a qualitative study, I sought rich description and data from the participants. The fundamental research question influencing the specific interview questions asked is: According to women principals, what makes them effective leaders? The women middle school principals self-reported, therefore, their voice and perspective directly shaped the research findings. The interviews yielded valuable insights as to their self-perceptions about what makes them effective leaders. Among the women middle school principals interviewed, similarities emerged that shaped the findings of the study and contributed to a body of research about what makes women effective leaders in school settings.

There are many limitations to this study. First, a sample size of five is small, making it difficult to have a preponderance of evidence to support the findings. In addition, there is very little research about women as middle school principals. This is

limiting because the literary analysis does not pertain to this specific of a topic, but broader generalizations about women leadership in k-12 settings. As such, there is very little basis for comparison. Another limitation is investigator bias. As a middle school principal and a woman, I am uniquely, personally invested in the study and have experiences that may shape my interpretation of other women middle school principals. Reflexivity was critical in preserving the fidelity of the study and its results. Another limitation was using the Denver Public Schools' School Performance Framework to identify the sample. This is a rigorous measure but it does not include staff perception so that is a limitation in terms of understanding how well the leaders serve their teachers. Narrowing the sample is definitely a limitation in an already small pool of individuals who qualify for the research sample.

I implemented delimitations to narrow the scope of the study intentionally, in response to the lack of research specifically pertaining to women middle school principals. In addition, this addresses the void in research and adopts a solution-oriented approach to women leadership as opposed to a deficit model admiring the problem. I interviewed effective women principals to yield the non-deficit responses sought. To that end, sample selection included a measure whereby women leaders demonstrated their effectiveness. In this case, the means to identifying these leaders was the School Performance Framework implemented by Denver Public Schools, but it is only one way of quantifying effectiveness. Leadership is multifaceted and principals can be effective in myriad ways, so there are certainly effective women leaders who won't be captured by this tool. The boundaries of the study helped me select only the most appropriate leaders

for the study, which therefore generated reliable and rich data highly specific to the research question.

I began this study with the assumption that women middle school principals can and do lead effectively in U.S. public schools. This is supported by a body of evidence to suggest that women can and do lead in impactful ways (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Smith, 2018). It is also assumed that the context of sexism and genderism impacts a woman principal's ability to effectively lead (Ballard, 2010; Brunner & Grogan, 2007) and that these leaders must rise above societal confines and perceptions to be effective middle school principals.

Definition of Terms

Critical Feminist Theory – Examines the power relationships between and among groups through the lens of gender.

Female – This is a term used to note one's one biological sex. It connotes the physical attributes including biology, physiology, and reproduction (Harewood, 2014).

Leadership – Ability to lead, direct, or manage, the office or position of a leader.

School Performance Framework (SPF) – Rating framework utilized by Denver Public Schools to ascertain how effective schools are at growing students, including closing gaps for students of color, students in poverty, students who qualify for special education services, and students who speak English as a second language.

Successful – With a record of significant achievements, as measured by attainment of goals. For the purposes of this study, successful and effective will be used interchangeably.

Urban Public Schools – As classified by the National Center for Education Statistics, urban schools are those located in cities with a population of 250,000 or more.

Women – This is a gendered term. Researcher will use the word women when talking about gender and/or when literature that she is directly quoting or citing uses that term.

According to Harewood (2014), using the term female is less and less intended to invoke a reference to biology, reproduction, the body, or women's and men's differences in these domains. Gender is complex and multidimensional, and researchers often use the word woman is to evoke gender. In this study I have used the term women, but without intent to invoke biology, reproduction, or bodies.

In conclusion, what follows is a brief executive summary of the remainder of the dissertation. Chapter I introduced the statement of the problem, purpose of the study, limitations, and delimitations. Additionally, I presented the conceptual basis of the study and clarified the research question. Chapter II contains literature and research related to the broad topics pertaining to women leadership in U.S. public schools as well as a description of the conceptual framework, critical feminist theory. In Chapter III, I present the methodology for this study including research design, sample selection, data collection tasks, and data analysis procedures. Research findings will be available in Chapter IV. The final chapter, Chapter V, will discuss the study's findings in relation to the conceptual framework and literature review. Chapter V will also include implications for research and practice in the field.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is important and relevant to conduct an asset-based qualitative study about what makes women principals effective. This chapter delves into appropriate literature to support the rationale for why this study is important. The context for the current state of women principals in middle schools serves as the foundation for this literature review. I explore the history of the principalship as well as the history of women in K-12 leadership roles, along with statistical data to support a need for this study. The literature review also exposes a dearth of research pertaining to successful women principals and the drivers to their success. This study addresses gaps in the research by looking at what women middle school principals perceive makes them effective.

After context for the study is established, relevant school leadership theories and models are unpacked, as they relate to women in leadership roles. I evaluate a variety of research-based frameworks for school leadership and women leadership theories, reviewing the literature from a critical feminist lens. Discussing examples and models of how research on women principals has been done previously illuminates why my study is important.

This study takes place in Denver Public Schools and utilized DPS's School Performance Rating Framework (SPF) as a tool for identifying research participants. Therefore, it is appropriate to review the existing literature supporting the use of this

framework and grounding the study in the current state of the district. Specifically, the study explores the SPF rating metric, the history of the SPF, as well as the specific indicators on which data is collected and outcomes are measured.

This chapter concludes with a synthesis of the literature, highlighting why this study is of particular importance in both addressing a void in the current research as well as contributing positively to a challenging field of study. I provide rationale as to how the literature supports the recommended methodology. Finally, as a woman middle school principal, this research is directly applicable to the work that I do to serve students, and I elaborate on how the research has influenced my thinking about this study.

History of the Principalship

Exploring the history of the principalship lends valuable insights to this research study; however, very scant research exists around the topic (Kafka, 2009), in spite of the fact that the position has remained relatively stable for decades (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Much of the research conducted regarding the principalship has focused on offering advice to school leaders absent analysis of historical context (Rousmaniere, 2007). Kafka (2009) posited, “With some exceptions, principals have essentially fallen through the middle – neither close enough to the ‘ground’ for social historians nor far enough at the ‘top’ for scholars of the politics and institutions of schooling” (p. 320). In spite of a lack of research, there are still some slim historiographies from which one can glean context.

As the one room schoolhouse evolved and grew into grade level classrooms in the early 1800s, the “principal-teacher” emerged (Pierce, 1935). A man usually occupied this position, who conducted clerical and administrative tasks to keep the school in

running order, including scheduling classes and conducting discipline (Kafka, 2009).

The principal's additional roles earned him authority over the other teachers in the school, and by the end of the 19th century, the principal was recognized as a powerful and important head of the school (Pierce, 1935).

Kafka (2009) suggested that the "prestige and authority" of the principal increased from the 1860s through the 1930s for five main reasons:

First, as district bureaucracies grew, central offices in many cities were forced to hand over more and more responsibility and decision-making ability to school head. Principals also fought for increased authority [to make independent decisions about their schools]. Third, principals gained local authority and increased their prestige by working to professionalize the principalship. The fourth way that principals raised both their status and their authority in the 1800s and early 1900s was by increasing their supervisory position over teachers. Finally, principals were able to raise their status and authority by establishing themselves as local leaders. (pp. 321-323)

Increases in autonomy and authority came from the increased size of school districts and the inability of superintendents to oversee each school thoroughly. In addition, principals earned the right to make decisions about curriculum, hiring, and student assessment, yielding increased independence and authority. Professional organizations such as National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) were established in 1916 and 1921 respectively and added legitimacy to the principalship by suggesting the role requires a

specialized skill set and warrants research. Further, principals continued to relinquish teaching responsibilities to teachers and asserted supervisory and evaluative authority – principals increasingly came to be viewed as teachers of teachers (Kafka, 2009). Finally, principals became important in the local community and both invited the public into the schools and made regular appearances at important events. By the 1920s, the principalship was fully established, and similar to what the position looks like today. Responsibilities ranged from bureaucratic to managerial to instructional to community engagement (Rousmaniere, 2007).

Legal and societal changes influenced the role of schools and principals as well. Schools increasingly replaced churches as U.S. society's central site of socialization (Kafka, 2009). Compulsory attendance laws implemented in 1940 meant that more and more youth attended school for more years, thus making education an increasingly important part of U.S. life. "School leaders gained prominence in American communities in tandem with the rise of education itself" (Kafka, p. 325). As public education became more responsive to and reflective of the public, principals were increasingly mired in legal requirements, demands of the local community, and changes initiated by state and federal governments (Rousmaniere, 2007). The principal became simultaneously less connected to student learning, yet somehow more responsible for it. The role of the school head officially changed from instructing students to supervising teachers instructing their students. "Modern principals came to have less to do with student learning and more to do with upholding administrative structures and responding to public pressures" (Rousmaniere, p. 27).

History of Women in K-12 Leadership Roles

Throughout the evolution of the principalship in the 18th and 19th centuries, the role became an increasingly esteemed role, distinct from that of the classroom teacher. In addition, the role became increasingly defined as White and male (Kafka, 2009), with a marked downturn in the number of women and Black school principals in the second half of the 20th century (Blount, 1998). For the purposes of this study, sex and gender will be looked at independent of race or other factors to the extent possible. Although the school principalship was almost completely male from its inception, by 1905 nearly 62% of elementary school principals were women, in comparison to less than 6% of secondary school teachers (Tyack & Hansot, 1982, p. 132). This distinction existed because “Women were more likely to be found in positions supervising women than supervising men, and were more likely to occupy lower status and lower paying supervisory positions” (Kafka, 2009, p. 327). Elementary school teachers were almost exclusively women at the turn of the century. Further, elementary school principals were more likely to have to assume teaching and lunchroom duties, and less likely to have clerical or administrative support. This made women more poised to secure elementary principalships than high school principals, who would often hold advanced degrees that were difficult for women to attain, and they were paid more for their work (Rousmaniere, 2007).

The elementary principalship was at least able to provide women with leadership opportunities, community status, and even occasionally district associate superintendencies and directorships (Kafka, 2009); however, opportunities for women in

leadership roles diminished through the middle of the 20th century. “By 1973...fewer than 20% of elementary school principals were women, and less than 2% of high school principals were female” (Tyson & Hansot, 1982, p. 183). This quote uses women and female in a distinct way, referencing the gender in the first portion of the quote and sex in the second part of the quote. This research, conducted in the 80s, signifies that biology still factored into the perception of a woman’s qualification to be a high school principal. School consolidation played a role in this phenomenon, as schools were combined to be bigger and more bureaucratically organized, and women were increasingly structured out of jobs (Blount, 1998). Both during and after World War II, state and federal government recruited more men into schools as teachers, promising quick ascendancy to administrative positions where they could earn more money and enjoy higher status, to make what was considered a lowly woman’s job more attractive (Kafka, 2009). Opening the door for millions of men to enroll in college and graduate school (an option not available for most women at the time), the GI Bill indirectly played a role in the decline of women principals, for whom it was increasingly difficult to obtain advanced degrees in educational administration. (Kafka, 2009). Today women comprise nearly half of all school principals in the United States but remain underrepresented as middle and high school principals. “In the 2003-2004 school year, only 26% of public secondary school principals were women, compared to 56% at the elementary level” (NCES, 2007). Questions remain around why this is and what can be done to impact change and increase equity in gender representation in the principalship at all levels of schooling. In middle schools, 40% of principals are women (U.S. Department of Education, Nation Center for

Education Statistics, National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS), “Public School Principal Data File,” 2015-2016). Middle schools are typically defined as 6-8, and junior high is typically 7-9 (Chappell, 2000).

Statistical Data

The U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, and National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) conduct comprehensive surveys to ascertain characteristics of school leaders. These include gender, race, age, number of years of experience, and grades served. Much of this research comes from synthesis of the results from the 2015-2016 National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS), conducted by NCES. NTPS is a redesign of the Schools and Staffing Survey, which was conducted on a 4-year cycle beginning with the 1987-1988 school year. The purpose of the NTPS is to collect information that can provide a detailed picture of U.S. elementary and secondary schools and their principals.

During the 2015-2016 school year, there were an estimated 90,400 public school principals of k-12 schools in the United States. Overall, 54% of public school principals were women, but the percentages of women principals varied significantly based on school level. Women comprise 68% of primary school principals, 40% of middle school principals, and 33% of high school principals. Of all principals in K-8 schools, 42% are women. The percentage of women principals working in cities is 61%, as opposed to 46% in rural communities. In terms of student enrollment, women occupy a greater percentage of principalships for schools with fewer than 1,000 students. In schools where there are more than 1,000 students, 61% of the principals are men compared to

39% of the principals being women. In schools where 75% or more of students qualify for free and reduced lunch, 59% of principals are women and 41% of principals are men (U.S. Department of Education, Nation Center for Education Statistics, National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS), “Public School Principal Data File,” 2015-2016).

In terms of longitudinal trends, the percentage of public school principals who were women increased between 1993-1994 and 2011-12, with the majority of this increase occurring between 1993-94 and 2003-04. The percentage of women principals in 2015-16 (54%) was higher than the percentage in 2011-12 (52%) and higher than the percentages in 2003-04 and 1993-94 (48% and 35% respectively). There was no measurable difference in the 2007-2008 and the 2011-2012 percentages of women public school principals.

From the preceding data, we can see that women have increasingly occupied the principal position in the past 20 years, but parity has yet to be attained as women still occupy more elementary roles as opposed to middle or high. Women occupy a greater percentage of public school principal positions in cities, which could be related to more progressive and liberal attitudes of individuals living in cities (Ballard, 2010; Wang, Chiang, Tsai, Lin, & Cheng, 2013). Women tend to be principals when schools have fewer than 1,000 students, while men are usually principals in schools with over 1,000 students. This has implications about the “size” of the job and if women are perceived as fit to run large schools. Since women are also less likely to be High School principals, this makes sense that they would be principals at schools with less enrollment, because high schools tend to be larger and enroll more students than elementary, middle or K-8.

Additional implications include salaries, which tend to be higher for high school principals (Young et al., 2010). The statistical data revealed many ways women are still seeking equity and parity in principalships in U.S. public schools.

There is a profound dearth of information and research with respect to women middle school principals. It is a primary aim of this research study to shed light on the topic of women principals at the middle school level. Trends must be gleaned from interviewing women middle school principals as research about what makes these women effective is practically non-existent. There are some articles, such as “Effects of Organizational Characteristics and Human Capital Endowments on Pay of Female and Male Middle School Principals” by Young et al. (2010) that focused on pay. This particular article found that differences in pay are negligible for women and men principals the middle school level; however, articles of this nature shed little light on practices of effective women middle school principals. While it is possible to find statistical and demographic information about women principals, it is not specific to middle school. Taie and Goldring (2017) is a typical example of the research available, with demographics pertaining to elementary and secondary schools, but not middle school. Search after search yielded nothing pertaining to this topic. I was able to locate a dissertation entitled, “The other leadership: The nature of the leadership experiences of Anglo female middle school principals in a male-defined arena” by C.A. Jones (2006) as a sole example of middle school specific research. I also found many articles about principal preparation programs and the implication of these, and Ed.D. programs on women in principal positions; however, this again fails to identify assets that women

bring to these roles (Sultana, 2012; Young, 2008). Finally, it should be noted that there is copious research about gender and school leadership (Bronars, 2010; Curry, 2000; Elsesser & Lever, 2011; Ertac & Gurdal, 2012); however, very little of it is specific to middle school. Jones' (2006) dissertation is a rare example of scholarship specific to middle school.

A plethora of school leadership research exists to identify strategies principals can employ to be effective in their roles. Bambrick-Santoyo and Peiser's (2012), *Leverage Leadership* is one such text, which encouraged leaders to focus on the most impactful levers for change: culture, instruction, data, and professional development. *Breakthrough Principals: A Step-by-Step Guide to Building Stronger Schools*, by Jean Desravines, Jaime Aquino, and Benjamin Fenton (2016), outlined a sequential approach for a leader to systematically improve schools. A third example is *Unmistakable Impact: A Partnership Approach for Dramatically Improving Instruction*, by Jim Knight (2011), which focused on collaborating with key stakeholders (students, teachers, and families) to impact instructional outcomes. These studies were conducted with the expressed purposed of improving leadership practices at scale in order to increase outcomes for students of all backgrounds. These are empirically researched texts, using longitudinal data and in-depth case studies of schools, principals, teachers, and student outcomes. In all of these texts, the topic of gender is omitted from the discussion. If all it requires is tools to be an effective principal, why is there a disparity in gender representation at different levels of educational leadership? Folmar's (1989) research suggested, "School board members see female leaders as less effective than their male counterparts" (p. 16).

Folmar utilized surveys of school board members in Michigan to identify their perceptions of men and women leaders. In an effort to understand better pathways to school leadership, Restine (1997) took an empirical look at role transitions in over 100 public schools, and suggested that male teachers continue to take on nearly twice the number of leadership roles in schools. Coffin and Ekstrom (1977) examined the long-term goals of 64 prospective women leaders and found that one of the reasons given to women candidates for not being hired in a position for which they believed themselves qualified was that men do not want to take directions from a woman. These studies demonstrate the challenges and pre-conceived notions that must be overcome as they seek to attain leadership roles. These studies, conducted from 1979-1991, remain useful as they provide context of the barriers that women must overcome as they move up the ranks of school leadership. Given the fact that women are at a disadvantage in a leadership role, simply because of gender, it is essential that gender is considered in discussions and theory pertaining to educational leadership.

It is difficult to locate articles specific to women middle school principals; however, it is possible to find articles pertaining to effective leadership practices for middle schools leaders, albeit not disaggregated by gender or sex. Sanzo, Sherman, and Clayton (2011) conducted an inductive exploratory study to provide insight into how successful middle school principals facilitate high levels of student achievement. She found that leaders who engage teachers in weekly meetings around student data and respond to those meetings with accompanying interventions to close gaps in academic standards mastery improve academic outcomes for students. While data teams and

interventions are useful structures for leaders to employ to attain success, it does not take into account the nuanced gender differences between women and men occupying the principal position. In 2013, Kinney and Tomlin performed an inductive exploratory study designed to provide insight into how successful middle school principals facilitate high levels of student achievement. Common themes of practices enabling the principals to serve effectively in their schools emerged from the conversations and were grouped in the following categories: sharing leadership; facilitating professional development; leading with an instructional orientation; and acting openly and honestly. Again, these are all excellent attributes for middle school leaders but they do little to shed light on practices that will support women principals in the field, serving in middle schools.

Critical Feminist Theory Framework

This study used Critical Feminist Theory as a conceptual framework. A variation of Critical Theory, Critical Feminist Theory examines the relationships between and among groups through the lens of gender (Rouleau-Carroll, 2014). According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), Critical Theory “is critical of social organization[s] that privileges some at the expense of others” (p. 22). Simply stated, Critical Theory focuses on political, cultural, economic, and social relationship within a culture, particularly as they relate to which groups have power and which groups do not. Critical Theory examines the power relationships between and among groups. Bogdan and Biklen pointed out that “critical theorists who do qualitative research are very interested in issues of gender, race, and class because they consider these the prime means for differentiating power in this society” (p. 22). Critical Feminist Theory is an extension of Critical Theory. It examines

women's social roles, their experience, and feminist politics in a wide variety of fields to understand the nature of gender inequality (Acker, 1990; Acker & Armenti, 2004; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011). Generally, Feminist Theory provides a critique of social relations and it can focus on analyzing gender inequality, the promotion of women's rights, women's interests, and women's issues (Aker, 1990; Ely & Meterson, 2000). Some of the topics explored within Feminist Theory include discrimination, stereotyping, objectification, and oppression (Rouleau-Carroll, 2014). Feminist Theory and practice emerged and traversed qualitative research in the late 1970s and early 1980s and has continued to influence many qualitative research projects (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Through the lens of Critical Feminist Theory this research study explores the topic of effective women middle school principals and the assets they bring to their leadership practice.

School Performance Framework

In addition to a critical feminist conceptual framework, I also utilized the School Performance Framework. Together, the two frameworks will allow me to assess the effectiveness and success of women principals but also to see how gender impacts their leadership in the principal role. It is essential to discuss the School Performance Framework, the rating system used to measure the effectiveness of schools in the Denver Public Schools system. Every school is evaluated annually on the following indicators:

1. Growth Indicator - How much are students growing academically each year?
2. Status Indicator - Are students at our school performing at grade level?

3. Family and Student Engagement - How satisfied are students and families with our school?
4. Post-Secondary Readiness - How well prepared are students for college and career?
5. Post-Secondary Readiness - How much is our school improving in preparing students for college and career?
6. Academic Gaps Indicator - How well is our school closing academic achievement gaps for historically-underserved students?

For the purposes of this study, the post-secondary readiness indicators will not be detailed as they are only included in the School Performance Rating for High Schools. The growth indicator captures how much progress students have made from one school year to the next or from the fall to the spring. Instead of providing a snapshot of how a student performed on a given day or test, the growth indicator captures how far they have advanced over a period of time, such as last year to this year. The status indicator describes how well students have performed within a given school year. Status is also referred to as proficiency when discussing student performance. The family and student engagement and satisfaction measures pull from a variety of data sources including two district administered surveys to parents and students. DPS has instituted a measure of student success that focuses on key populations such as Students of Color, English learners, and students with disabilities. Academic Gaps takes measures from other indicators and provides a snapshot of how well schools are serving their most vulnerable populations (Denver Public Schools School Performance Framework, 2018). This study

used this conceptual framework to look at how effective principals at the middle school level are deemed effective based on how their school performs on these indicators. Other researchers have used critical feminist theory to determine the impact of gender on leadership and coupling this theory with the school performance framework enabled me to answer my research question by answering both what and how. What are women principals doing to render them effective (as measured by the school performance framework) and how are they leveraging their talents and skills as women to have impact even in light of copious obstacles to doing so (by using the critical feminist lens). Using both frameworks enabled me to answer my research question and better understand the literature I reviewed.

Summary

This chapter highlights the research that exists around the topic of women principals to include history of the principalship and statistical data. These reveal a need for additional research as there is disparity in the number of women principals at the high school and middle school levels. There is very little research pertaining to women middle school principals, and the literature review reflects the lack of information specific to this age group. The study was grounded in the conceptual framework of Critical Feminist Theory and the School Performance Framework. An explanation of the Critical Feminist Theory and the School Performance Framework implemented by Denver Public Schools concludes the literature review as they establish how the lens of gender/sex will be viewed and the context for effectiveness of principals as defined by

this study. The following chapter will elaborate on the research methodology selected in response to the literature review.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter highlights the research methodology utilized in this exploratory study. The aim of the study is to identify effective women principals in Denver Public Schools (DPS) and conduct interviews to identify what they draw from to be effective, as measured by the DPS School Performance Framework. As there are fewer women in middle school principal roles, the rationale is to increase parity and success rate of women upon assuming leadership roles. This chapter will discuss the research design, limitations, interview protocol and questions, as well as a description of methods used to collect and analyze data.

Research Methodology

The research perspective in this qualitative study is interpretive. According to Merriam (2009), “Interpretive research...assumes that reality is socially constructed, that...there is no single, observable reality” (p. 63). The aim of this study is to describe, understand, and interpret the responses of women principals to questions about their leadership. Below, I discuss contexts of their leadership scenarios and critically analyze their responses to ascertain any commonalities or strategies they draw from to lead effectively.

In this is qualitative study, I focused on understanding the strategies that effective women principals utilize to guide their leadership. As the researcher who interprets the

interviews of each participant in the sample, I constructed meaning based on the data.

The objective of this type of study is to understand how people make sense of their lived experiences (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative studies seek to understand (1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam, 2009). A qualitative study is most appropriate for a study of this nature, which seeks to understand and interpret the lived experiences of women principals in an urban public school setting. Since the purpose of this study is to determine how women principals make sense of their lives and their worlds, it is most appropriate to conduct a qualitative study, as the primary goal of a study of this nature is to uncover and interpret these meanings.

Context

This study has been conducted in Denver Public School District No. 1, which was founded over 100 years ago in 1902. In the 2017-2018 school year, Denver Public Schools was comprised of 207 schools from Early Childhood Education (ECE) to 12th grade. Middle schools comprise 38 of the schools in the system. Of the 38 middle schools, 15 principals are women and 23 principals are male. The district has a diverse student demographic with 67% of the population qualifying for free or reduced lunch. Gifted and talented students comprise 11% of the district's students. Hispanic students make up 56% of the population, followed by Caucasian students who comprise 24% of the population, and African American students who account for 13% of the population. Finally, 37% of the students in Denver Public Schools are English Language Learners.

I selected Denver Public Schools for this study because it is a diverse, urban district that has earned accolades for innovative and effective practices. In February 2017, Education Resource Strategies (ERS), the nation's leading research organization specializing in analyzing the performance and direction of urban school districts, conducted an independent analysis of Denver Public School District's effectiveness. The study found that of the nearly 300 school districts in the United States serving at least 25,000 students, DPS has had the second-highest academic growth in the nation. It is clear that Denver Public Schools is taking great strides to serve all learners, and recruiting strong teachers and leaders is one way they are going about doing this, which makes this the perfect setting to identify and interview effective women principals.

It is important to identify what constitutes a middle school and why I chose middle school for this study. Middle schools consist of students in grades 6-8, typically aged 11-14. The time of adolescence is unique and physical, social and emotional development occur rapidly. The rationale is that an independent middle school for 6th-8th graders better serves students than either a K-8 or 7-9 model. In middle schools, it is essential to provide supports not only to bolster the academic prowess of students but also to nurture their social and emotional development. There is not much research on women principals, particularly women principals at the middle school level. For this reason, I have chosen middle school for this study. Students in this age range are developmentally unique and their needs warrant a setting with students in a like age range and competent, capable adults to holistically support them. To address the dual dearth in research with respect to middle schools and women principals, middle schools and effective women

principals in this age range are studied to ensure that there is research in this area that can assist women leaders and the students they serve.

Denver Public Schools employs a rigorous evaluation system to ascertain the effectiveness of each school. In 2008, DPS implemented the School Performance Framework (SPF) to measure and rate each school against a set of criteria, and assign a color rating to indicate the effectiveness of that school. The 2016 iteration of the SPF included student achievement, student growth, parent/student engagement, equity, and post-secondary readiness. The SPF uses a color-coded “stoplight” system to show at a glance how a school is performing. Based on how many points a school earns in each of the areas, a school receives one of five ratings: Blue (distinguished), Green (meets expectations), Yellow (accredited on watch), Orange (accredited on priority watch), and Red (accredited on probation). I selected principals from Green or Blue schools for the 2017-2018 academic year, as outcome data demonstrated that these schools meet or exceed expectations for school performance in Denver Public Schools.

Data Collection and Analysis

A qualitative design is the most appropriate research method for this study, as interviews are utilized and individuals lived experiences will form the basis of the researcher’s findings and conclusions. The School Performance Framework has been used to identify successful female principals. Success is evidenced by outcomes or tangible examples of impact, as are quantified on the SPF. This framework was chosen as it is based on outcomes rather than perceptions. I utilized data from the framework to inform selection and questions for the interviewees. Data has been collected via

individual interviews with each participant in the sample. Individual interviews consisted of the interviewer and interviewee in a location that is comfortable and familiar to the person being interviewed in which the same series of interview questions were asked by the researcher of each interviewee (Merriam, 2009). The sample selection was purposeful (Rapley, 2014) and intentionally targeted women principals from Denver Public Schools whose schools are deemed effective as measured by the district's School Performance Framework. The term purposeful sampling is strategically selecting subjects (in this case, interviewees) from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research study (Rapley, 2014), in this case, highlighting the attributes of effective women middle school principals. Below I explain how recruitment, data collection and analysis were conducted.

This study seeks to answer the question, "To what do effective women leaders attribute their success?" Of the 28 middle schools assigned a rating on the most recent School Performance Framework data, 12 are considered to be effective or highly effective. Of the 12 effective schools, six have women principals. Since there are only six principals who met the criteria, I decided to use this number for the sample; however, only five women agreed to participate in the study, so ultimately I was only able to secure five participants. Selecting middle school principals only remains true to the objective of this research study, because the aim is to identify what women middle school principals do well. Increasing the sample size, for example by adding elementary or high schools, would mean compromising the fidelity of the study as it is geared towards middle school principals, an under researched population. I conducted interviews with questions

specifically aimed at identifying what aspects of the interviewees' leadership contribute to their effectiveness. In lieu of generating a hypothesis, I preferred to let the data speak for itself, and to let trends, themes or categories authentically emerge from the interview responses across participants. This is highly in line with qualitative research methodology, as the researcher constructs meaning from the data collected (Merriam, 2009).

The sample selection was purposeful and intentional. It is large enough to identify commonalities but not so large as to dilute the sample by compromising the quality of each candidate. Five women principals identified as effective by the School Performance Framework agreed to be interviewed. All of these women serve as Middle School principals with varying years of experience in the role. Two women are in their second year as principal, one woman is in her third year, one woman is in her fourth year, and one woman is in her seventh year. Three women identify as Caucasian, one as Latina and one as Asian. The experiences and backgrounds of the women principals span the gamut with four of the five having teaching or leadership experiences in either elementary or high schools, in addition to middle school. The schools themselves are equally diverse. One of the five middle schools is a charter school, but they are all part of the Denver Public Schools. The middle schools vary in size from 260 to 670 students, with between 42%-89% of the population qualifying for Free and Reduced Lunch. In spite of the differences in the schools, the women leaders are able to meet or exceed both growth and status expectations for their students.

Only effective women principals can be interviewed in order to obtain the most relevant data to the study (Rapley, 2014). Denver Public Schools was identified as the pool from which to select the sample because it is an urban school district with highly diverse schools. Urban schools often come with challenges that more affluent school communities may not face. For that reason, it was imperative to select women principals in challenging schools, so that the success of the school can be a true measure of the principal's leadership. In addition, choosing one district contextualized the study so that the principals can be more easily compared and similarities drawn from their responses. This study intends to understand, in broad strokes, the commonalities amongst effective women educational leaders. Therefore, women principals in Denver Public Schools were selected to be interviewed, based on effective ratings in the School Performance Framework. Women Middle School principals were identified from the green and blue groups and invited to participate in interviews. These criteria were utilized to identify those women principals who are most effective in their school leadership practice. Principals were recruited with a letter (see Appendix A) and email inviting them to participate in the study, which will contribute to a body of research to better serve women in their roles as school principals.

I created and utilized a semi-structured interview as my research instrument (see Appendix D). The instrument consists of 10 questions which were asked of each participant. These behavioral questions were specifically crafted to identify aspects of a woman principal's leadership practice that make her effective, in her own words. Prior to utilizing the instrument to interview the participants, I vetted it with a colleague (a

woman principal and fellow researcher) to ensure the validity of the tool and its ability to elicit the desired responses. I conducted a “practice interview” with a woman principal colleague prior to the actual interviews to pilot the instrument and check wording of the questions to ensure they elicited the thick, rich data sought. The pilot helped me better inform the participants of how long the interview takes to complete. I have included anticipated length of time in the interview protocol along with the caveat that participants can opt out of the questioning at any time. Additional consent documents (see Appendix B) were provided, as detailed later on in this chapter. The interviews have been audio recorded as well as transcribed. The interview transcripts as well as the SPF for each middle school will served as the data source for this qualitative study. The statements have been broken down into the smallest, meaningful units, and categorized to make meaning (Schwandt, 2007).

The women principals have been given several consent forms to inform their participation in the study including a Letter of Cooperation (see Appendix A) and a Consent to Participate in Research (see Appendix B). These letters ensured that the participants were aware of the nature and objective of the study and that they consented for their responses to be audio recorded and analyzed for research purposes. The audio recordings have been transcribed electronically through a reputable transcription website used for scholarly research. Care has been taken to explain the study to the participants and gain their consent and signature on appropriate forms. Hour-long interviews were scheduled at the school of the participating principal. This was intentional so the

participant would feel comfortable in her environment and share more authentic answers (Merriam, 2009).

After the interviews and audio data was collected, the audio file was electronically transcribed. I analyzed the transcriptions for accuracy and send them to each participant for a member check. The window for the member check was two weeks. Once the transcriptions were approved by the participants, I began data analysis. I coded the data using an open coding method so that pervasive or reoccurring themes could be identified and categorized, to derive meaning from the study that is applicable to other women leaders in the field (Merriam, 2009). In addition, I coded the data to connect it to literature and the conceptual framework, critical feminist theory.

This is a qualitative study in which effective women principals were identified and interviewed about their leadership experiences. Five women principals agreed to be interviewed for the purpose of this study and these interviews were transcribed and coded to ascertain broad themes. Prior to conducting the interviews, I conducted a test interview with a colleague who is a female middle school principal but not a part of this study. This assisted in refining the questions so that they could glean the desired responses. All research participants answered same interview questions. The interviews were professionally electronically transcribed and copies of the transcriptions were sent to each interviewee for a member check. The period of time allotted for each principal to member check their interview was two weeks. I coded the interviews to ascertain similarities or trends in responses and synthesized codes into categories and then more universal themes. After my initial coding, I sent my thoughts to a female colleague and

researcher for her feedback and to verify that I was coding objectively, since I am a woman middle school principal.

Coding is the process that occurs between data collection and in-depth data analysis. Codes are words or short phrases that “symbolically assign a summative, salient, essence-capturing and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 4). Repetitive, regular or consistent occurrences of codes that appear more than twice constitute patterns (Saldaña, 2013). The coding process is extensive and consists of multiple cycles of reviewing the interview transcripts to develop richer and more conceptual layers of meaning. I printed all transcripts and highlighted words and phrases to identify codes which could then be used to form patterns, which were ultimately synthesized into themes. This was bias checked by another researcher to ensure my perspective as a female principal was not influencing my findings. The transcripts, codes and data analysis were member checked by the interview participants.

Measures Taken to Minimize Bias

As this is a qualitative study involving in-depth interviews, it was critical to implement safeguards to mitigate bias. It was critical for me to be reflexive throughout the process. In this type of qualitative inquiry, since the interviewer is the research instrument, it is essential to reflect on the self as researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). As a woman principal, it would be quite easy for bias to infiltrate the study, which is why reflexivity and self-reflection have been very important. My biases, dispositions, and assumptions regarding this research are examined and clarified for readers of the study (Merriam, 2009).

Positionality

My journey of becoming a middle school principal began after I graduated college and assumed my first teaching position as a 7th/8th grade Spanish teacher in a diverse school with an array of students. In my second year as a teacher, the principal invited me to join a master's degree program in education that also included the principal/administrator's certification, which qualifies one to assume this role. After five years in the classroom, I accepted a position as an assistant principal at a large middle school. I was in this role for three years before I knew I wanted to pursue a principalship; however, I was unable to procure a principal position at a local district in almost two years of trying. In spite of this obstacle, I continued to pursue principal opportunities for which I thought I would be a good fit, even if it was across the country. I finally secured a Middle School Principal position in Denver Public Schools. I believe that education is the most important work anyone can engage in. It is a privilege and opportunity to serve students, families and community as a middle school principal and an honor to model leadership for aspiring women leaders who are current students in my school.

Although I have excellent educational background and work experience specific to middle schools, I believe it took longer than it should have to procure a position as principal. I identify as a Hispanic female heterosexual millennial. I believe that my gender, age and race were barriers in attaining this goal, based on others' around me who were male or less experienced and would still be offered these positions over a candidate like me. I intend to bracket my experiences and hold them as distinct or separate from the participants' stories by first identifying my bias and engaging in reflexivity. In the

next sections, I will describe how I will utilize various means to increase the validity of my study.

I utilized a member check to ensure that I interpreted the findings of the study in an accurate way. Member checking is when interpretations of the interviews are shown to the participants who were interviewed to ensure that their perspective is being appropriately captured (Merriam, 2009). I showed principals completed transcripts to ensure it captured their words accurately. In addition, I will asked them to review summaries or composites of themes to allow them to verify their appropriateness. They were also able to verify that no identifying information is included. The coding process during data analysis has been thorough and meticulous to safeguard against bias. Coding involved looking for trends and commonalities in the responses of the interviewees to ascertain like themes or motifs from which conclusions can be drawn about the effective practices of Middle School women principals (Merriam, 2009).

It is my intent to add valid and reliable knowledge to the field of educational leadership, specifically to help women principals be effective in their practice. To that end, the study has been conducted ethically with attention paid to removing bias and ensuring a consistent interview experience for all participants. A peer debriefer checked my interpretations of the data after member checking. This peer debriefer is a woman who studies leadership of women using a critical feminist lens and is well versed in qualitative research. However, she is not a middle school principal or employed as a K-12 teacher and is therefore able to provide assistance on how my interpretations of the data are based on the participants' words and not my own experience. This consistency has

bolstered the validity and reliability of the study. I also engaged in reflective journaling after each interview to hold my feelings and experiences as separate from the participants. Per Merriam (2009), it is imperative to control what can be controlled in an effort to pinpoint the differences and ensure they are not circumstantial, environmental, or situational. It is also worth noting that this is a small sample size in a unique district, so the results may be most transferrable to women principals in urban settings.

Summary

This basic qualitative study has identified effective women principals in Denver Public Schools based on their school's performance rating. Interviews have been conducted, coded, and analyzed to determine what makes these principals effective in their roles. A qualitative study was selected as the most appropriate methodology for educational research pertaining to school leadership, as it is contextualized and situated in the lived experiences of each principal. I used a qualitative interview methodology to get stories, illustrations, and narratives for the thick, rich description that is hallmark of qualitative research (Merriam, 2009).

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Women middle school principals are an under researched population whose voices need to be represented in literature around school leadership to attain not only parity in leadership roles but also to empower women to more effectively lead in the service of improving student outcomes. In order to research this population, I identified five effective women middle school principals in Denver Public Schools using the district's research based School Performance Framework. I describe them below as a composite as opposed to individually to protect their identities.

All of the five women in the sample serve as Middle School principals in Denver Public Schools with varying years of experience in the role. Two women are in their second year as principal, one woman is in her third year, one woman is in her fourth year, and one woman is in her seventh year. The women have careers in education spanning 13-22 years. Three women identify as Caucasian, one as Latina and one as Asian. The experiences and backgrounds of the women principals span the gamut with four of the five having teaching or leadership experiences in either elementary or high schools, in addition to middle school. The schools themselves are equally diverse. One of the five middle schools is a charter school, but they are all part of the Denver Public Schools. The middle schools vary in size from 262 to 674 students, with between 42%-89% of the population qualifying for Free and Reduced Lunch. In spite of the differences in the

schools, the women leaders are able to meet or exceed both growth and status expectations for their students.

These women's testimonials informed the development of three emergent themes: (1) Relentless Commitment to Engage in Purposeful Work, (2) Gender as both a Hindrance and Asset in School Leadership, (3) Leadership as a Collaborative Effort. These themes and their corresponding subthemes could prove useful to other women considering advancing to the principalship as they shed light on the practices of effective women middle school principals. In this chapter, we will explore each theme and subtheme before synthesizing the findings into a meaningful summary as a conclusion.

Theme One: Relentless Commitment to Engage in Meaningful Work

The five women shared their leadership journeys including their "why" for engaging in this work. Each one of them started as a teacher, two choose non-traditional paths to education (Teach for America) and three were education majors in college. The following two vignettes offer a glimpse into a traditional and non-traditional leadership journey to the principalship. Of her leadership journey, one of the principals interviewed shared:

So I think that my career journey started when I was a kid. I always wanted to be an educator, and as I watched what teachers did in their classrooms, I just loved working with kids, I loved seeing the planning piece that went into it. I loved just seeing the control, the management of the classroom. I knew from a young age that I wanted to go into school leadership. I was an education major in college but once I studied abroad in Spain I fell in love with the language and knew it

would be something I could teach. I was like this could really be something I could be good at. At 23 I knew I wanted to get a masters. I applied in Florida, I applied in California and I applied here in Colorado. I knew that I wanted to get out of Ohio because there's not a whole lot of Spanish speaking population in Ohio and so I essentially chose University of Denver for my Master's program. And the reason I chose that is because that's where I got a job.

The participant emphasized the importance of being in a diverse school setting. When she moved across the country to assume this position, she unknowingly had accepted a job in a very heterogeneous, white affluent community. She knew she had to get out and go somewhere more diverse as she described equity as a fundamental value and motivator for engaging in the work. She went on,

I kept trying to get into Denver, trying and trying and nothing. I got an elementary assistant principal position but I was demoted to dean after only a year. It was humbling, but I had no business being a leader at that young age without the experience. But I got to really develop my control of student culture and learn to talk with the parents and the students and teachers to work together. I went to work at a Middle School as the assistant principal and their principal was crazy – she was emailing me to set up interviews on the Memorial Day holiday weekend... But I went into the best two learning years of my life as her assistant principal. Then I met the instructional superintendent at our district Values Day and we hit it off – and she wanted me to be the principal of a new school. I went to the doctor the day of my final interview and he was like, ‘you’re having a baby

today' so we had to literally reschedule the community forum with families. I was literally texting being like, 'I'm headed to the hospital, Doctor's orders'. The baby was six weeks early. But I did it. So the last part of the interview process was meeting with the Superintendent of Denver Public Schools. He says, 'this is the really hard work' – I looked at him and said, 'failure is not an option'. And I was given the job. So, that's my story to leadership.

The second woman principal interviewed shared her leadership journey as well. She did not start from a traditional educational journey and it is worth noting that every leader she worked under was a woman until the beginning of her first principal position:

I went to school to be a journalist and I was a newspaper reporter and when I met my husband we were both working in sports television, and just could not imagine both of us having that job in the evenings when sports happen and so thinking of a family, how could we both work nights? I was like, you know what I think I'm going to go teach kids how to write and run a newspaper in a high school, or something. It was a quick turnaround, but I went and got an alternative license and I was hired two days before kids walked through the door, in Mapleton Public Schools in Thornton. And I taught seventh grade language arts and I walked in and it was a bare classroom, no books, no curriculum. There was two pages of standards that I was supposed to hit, no coach, no mentor and I was just thrown in and like figure it out.

This is when she realized that students needed really capable and qualified individuals to teach. She didn't realize that so much of the work was incumbent upon the teacher. She

realized the teacher's critical role in the success of all students and committed to making it happen. Ironically, she went into the profession to be able to spend more time with family but she has found that the time commitments required to be effective as an educator, whether a teacher or leader, are tremendous.

From there I went to Martin Luther King Middle School and I taught there for two years, seventh grade language arts and then I came here to Hill, for seven more years of language arts. So I did seventh grade language arts for 10 years and then I was asked to move and support literacy standards work, and be a literacy coach. When my principal asked me I was very nervous, because I'd loved teaching and I never imagined myself anywhere but the classroom. But our language arts teachers were really struggling with these new Adoption of Standards, and he was like, you know what, people really respect you. And we had a very tough group of language arts teachers that pushed language arts coaches out, one year after another, after another, it was a rotating door and they were not nice about it. My principal's like, you just have such respect from your colleagues would you please do this? I was really nervous but I was like, okay I'll do it. I did that for about a half of a year, and then the following year they asked me to be a part-time, or to be a student advisor because we had 900 kids in this building with one student advisor and that person was just drowning. And so they're like, would you be a literacy coach and student advisor? And that's when I knew that I needed to be a school leader because from that moment on, I literally saw the power of a teacher, and the power the teacher has on an impact of a kid's trajectory.

Thinking about her time as classroom teacher, she really just worked in a silo and did her best for students. Now that she was able to see other lenses and perspectives, she realized how myopic her focus had been. She was able to zoom out to see the bigger picture and the pieces of the puzzle came together more clearly for her, as her leadership experiences and perspectives simultaneously broadened.

I saw there were just some real strong indicators that teachers that are willing to go to the ends of the earth for kids, teachers that are willing to love kids, teachers that can hold them to high expectations the way kids performed in that class versus the opposite. I saw the hurt and the pain when they come into that discipline office, and like, this teacher hates me or I hate this teacher, or this teacher's unfair to me. So seeing the power of a teacher, but then getting the parents to come in for those reinstatement meetings, and dealing with parents, I then was able to see how systemic oppression and poverty and just generation upon generation, of distrust with public education. I got to see that and so seeing the power of the teacher and seeing poverty and lack of education, I was compelled. I was like, we have to do something for our teachers, there needs to be a leader who invests in teachers and honors the love and respect and the work that they do. Because also at that same time, the national spotlight had shifted onto teachers to be a scapegoat for what was wrong with education. And I was like, this is not right, yes teachers hold all the power in a kid's trajectory but they also need to be grown and developed and loved, to become the amazing teachers. So it was with that commitment and with that deep connection that I was making, that I

was like I want to be a school leader that grows and supports and develops teachers to make every teacher in a classroom amazing for our kids because they deserve it.

At this moment she realized her values deeply, internally and profoundly. She knew what she had to do and this commitment was rooted in her belief that teachers are of tantamount importance in student academic success, the most critical outcome and her purpose for doing this work.

So then I was accepted into the Ritchie Program, a leadership program at DU, and they accepted like 1 out of every 100 candidates so it was a big deal. And that's how I got my principal license. Then I was the AP [Assistant Principal] for two years at Morey and when he left I became the interim principal and then the principal. And I love it. It's my community. I wouldn't want to be the principal anywhere else.

All of the leadership journeys shared common themes of each woman arriving at a deep commitment to their personal "why" for assuming the principal role. This commitment enables them to remain steadfast in the face of challenging work. The data above shows a clear "why" for each woman principal, even though they followed different paths.

Without delving into the details of their leadership trajectories, I will share the motivation of the remaining three principals for entering school leadership. While the paths vary, the commitment to doing challenging and meaningful work remains the same. The third principal interviewed shared her why as the following.

I hate saying this as cheesy as it sounds but I wanted to make a difference in the world. And I was like, ‘what’s the most important thing you can do?’ Education, right? It makes sense. Children literally inherit the earth. They literally are our future. What could possibly be more important than ensuring the success of our future – the success of generations to come – what could be more worthwhile? I can’t think of anything.

The fourth woman principal’s why is outlined below:

I was raised by a single mom in Texas. She showed me how to be a strong woman. My mom and my grandma raised me actually. And my grandma didn’t speak English. And she was denied an education for being a woman and a non-English speaker. And that’s not right. I knew in my heart that was not right. All kids, regardless of background, regardless of money, regardless of being able to speak English – all kids need an education. All kids deserve an education. And seeing injustices in my own family, I knew in my heart my work was going to be to make that right.

The fifth principal interviewed elaborated on her ‘why’, sharing:

I can’t imagine not doing work that is meaningful. It’s intimidating, don’t get me wrong. Our work matters and not just sometimes. All of the time. And the stakes are high. The stakes are student lives, families, communities, and essentially the future. My calling is to engage in meaningful and purposeful work every minute of every day and being a middle school principal – actually working in any facet of education really – is an opportunity. It’s an opportunity to be

impactful and we should be grateful for that. I'm intimidated and kind of oppressed by my job – it's just such a big job – but I'm super fulfilled by it to. If that makes sense.

All of the women principals have a clear and compelling reason to engage in this work. In spite of obstacles, they persevere because they are deeply committed to fulfilling their vision and mission for the schools, based on their inherent value sets.

One common theme that emerged from all principal interviews was the notion that being a principal is hard work. The last quote illustrates the magnitude of the job and the principal even describes it as “oppressive.” Another woman principal shared of the challenges of the role:

When I first entered the role, people would always tell me that I needed to have “thick skin” and I was like, ‘okay how does one *get* thick skin – like I really didn't know what that meant.’ And then it took me years, about 3 years actually into my principalship to get it. You just can't give any fs [sic] about what people think of you. There are entirely too many stakeholders – and I hate that word, stakeholders, but you get it -- there are just way too many people to please. And you can't make everyone happy. So you just have to know, like in your belief sets and in your values that what you are doing is rooted in what's right for kids. Because the haters are always gonna hate. Having thick skin means not listening to people or placating people but doing what you know is right just because its right – no matter what anyone has to say about it. Even your boss. One of the challenges for me is all the bureaucracy. So, it's just that being told no, no, no, no

and not accepting that. That's been the hardest part, is the being told no, and I'm like, yeah.

This quote highlights the challenges of meeting the demands of multiple stakeholders and being rooted in having the confidence to do what is right for kids, even if one of the stakeholders is your boss. A final quote highlights yet another challenge of the work:

I always imagine like the plate spinning analogy, right? I think it's a meme, too. Anyway, it's like this constant challenge of keeping all the plates spinning. And what are the plates...scheduling, angry parents, data teaming, observations, parent teacher conferences, open house, whatever it may be, you get it, the list goes on and on. So prioritizing which plate you are actively spinning while the rest of the plates are supposedly on auto pilot. Like you literally have to do 20 million things at once to do this job well. I always think that I would like to clone myself, not once, but twice, so I would have the capacity to be in three places at once. I always feel like I need to be in literally three places at once.

The women principals all demonstrated deep sense of commitment to their beliefs and were grounded in the certainty that the work that they do matters. Not only does it matter, but as illustrated in the testimonials above, it is not for the faint of heart. The word "relentless" was used in four of the five interviews. As gleaned from interviews, relentless means being rooted in purposeful work, in spite of challenges or obstacles, because the rewards of engaging in meaningful work outweigh the tremendous

challenges inherent in the role. In one woman principal's words, "With respect to being a school principal, one woman noted:

I would say that you really gotta want it, otherwise you will not have success, you will burn out really fast. This is something that I wanted for years and it's ... I've always been really passionate about, but if you don't have that internal desire, there's really no reason to step into the role because it's pretty difficult even when you know it is kind of your calling. It still can be extraordinarily challenging. So I would say unless there's that already established passion for leadership, avoid it at all cost.

This quote embodies the relentlessness, grit, and innate passion cited by all the women leaders in regards to the enormous stakes at hand and the amount of determination necessary to commit to the role. This commitment is important because it deeply matters to the participants that students are afforded an equitable education. The participants believe our very future depends on it. A different woman principal articulated her motivation for assuming a principalship as follows:

You don't do the job because you think that it's time for you to do the job, you do the job because you are literally compelled into doing it. Because if you don't have that compelling reason, it's going to be too hard, it's not worth it. It's not worth it. So because I feel really connected to the reason why I'm doing this, and my philosophy and what school I want to lead, it makes me a more effective leader. And it makes everything more worthwhile, and also I don't struggle as much. Anything can come at me and I'm filtering it through my center core of I

know what I want, and I know what I need to do. And therefore I know I can be effective.

It is clear that the women principals have deep respect for the role of the principalship and consider themselves equipped to face leadership rooted in their clarity of purpose and grounded in their beliefs and values.

Sub-Theme: Clarity of Purpose and Confidence in Self

Each of the five woman principals interviewed demonstrated reverence and respect for the role of the principal, humbly admitting how challenging such a critical role can be. Three of the five women spoke explicitly of confidence, and how this shapes the way they show up as middle school principals. One woman noted, “So be strong, be confident in who you are. Make sure you know what your priorities are. Have a clear vision. And knock it out of the park.” She elaborated, “I’m outspoken. I’m clearly very outspoken. I say what’s on my mind. I don’t really care if it pisses anyone off.” She clearly equates confidence with courage to speak your mind in the service of what is best for students. She spoke to her confidence when confronting staff after a strike rocked her school and the Denver Public School district in the winter of 2019. After conducting a restorative circle conversation that did not play out as she had planned,

I basically said to them, I need you to understand that while you all had this amazing, unifying experience outside of the building, people who were inside of the building were leaving here in tears every day. And we really had a hard time and it's really hard to listen to all of these amazing experiences and things that you all were able to accomplish and feel outside of the building. Those of us that were

inside of the building had a very different experience and I will encourage you to talk to others who were here. And then I said, the last thing that I want to tell you is that, is that 80% of teachers returned to schools on the morning the strike was called off and 15% of our staff returned and I am very, very disappointed that that is how those numbers played out because you had a choice that day and if this was about kids then really you should have been there for the kids that day.

Another recalled her journey to feeling confident in her leadership practice, and relayed:

I'd say, be yourself. It's not about trying to be somebody else. I think that advice was given to me. Once I said to a colleague, "Yeah, I'm going to attempt to be [my predecessor]," who was my school leader from the previous summer. And he said, "Oh no, you're not going to be [her], you're going to be [you]." Those words have always stayed with me and stuck with me. I don't need to be somebody else and I'm not going to be somebody else. I'm going to be me. Even when people would make the comment like, "Oh, you have some really big shoes to fill." They would make comments like, "What are you going to do to be like the previous leader?" I very confidently and securely in my own skin said, "I'm not going to be her, I'm going to be myself." But because somebody empowered me earlier on in my journey to be able to be comfortable in my own skin. My advice to aspiring women leaders is, 'just be yourself'.

A third woman principal weighed in on the concept of self-identity and confidence, citing it as critical to success in the role:

I can speak to being a woman leader. Being the person that says no, there's a level of confidence and passion and kind of grit that you've got to have in order to be a leader in schools. I feel like I've always had that, but I've seen women coming into the roles of leadership, whether that's a dean role, assistant principal, or principal role and if they don't have that outward confidence, and if they can't stare the people in the eye and say, no this is what we're doing, and this is why, they're not gonna make it.

In the previous quote, the principal is referring to an innate passion or drive when she says "I've always had that" – she can't attribute it to an event because it is something inherent that she has always had within. All of the candidates interviewed reiterated a theme of self-assurance and self-confidence rooted in a clear sense of what drives them in their work. The driver can be different (equity for English Language Learners, equity for students who qualify for Special Education), but the fundamental passion and commitment to their values is what these women draw from to remain steadfast in their efforts as educational leaders.

Sub-Theme: Actions Grounded in Values

The principals interviewed were so committed to leading from a values centered place; they had words of caution for any aspiring women leaders interested in the role. One asserted, "You cannot be a school principal if you don't have your values and your philosophical understanding of what you want, and what education is to you yet." Another warned, "seriously, as the leader of that building, if you don't have your reason why, and you don't have your values yet, it's going to be much harder. Of course you can

build it as you go, but I'm telling you ... I don't think you're ready if you don't have that yet.”

Each woman cited specific experiences with teaching in which they observed inequities or injustices, and this shaped their desire to enter school leadership. One principal recalled:

My principal consistently didn't include the special education kids. There was a time she failed to include them on the field trip. She didn't order the right busses. And so I got really fired up about that and tried educating her about how she was breaking the law. That's against the law, but that's a whole nother story. But all of that really motivated me to want to be a building leader. That I made sure I had a building that was inclusive for all kids. But that was my initial motivation. My fundamental belief is that as a public school system, we must create a system that educates all kids.

Another shared her motivation for engaging in myriad hours of leadership work to be an effective principal:

Giving our kids the opportunity to compete with kids around the district that have more opportunities that they do... And so for me, it's how do I level the playing field for kids. And how is the work that I am doing making sure that all kids have access and opportunities. Another thing that's really important to me is equity. And I wouldn't work in stuff with Denver if that wasn't important to me. When I had the chance to open my school, I knew the community was in turnaround. Henry Middle School closed down due to low test scores and I now had the

chance to start a brand new school. I had a “year zero” to plan for its opening. I hustled so hard...I had to recruit families because our district implements school of choice – and our community had a bad reputation so I had an uphill battle. But I knew I wanted to be in the far northeast because that was where I was needed. I have always had this saying, “go where you are needed.” I guess that’s what drew me to middle school and it’s definitely what drove me to open up my school. And I ended up with 62 kids on my waiting list for 6th grade that first year. And I wanted to take every single one of them and it broke my heart to not be able to.

A third woman recounted what drives her:

And when I became the disciplinary Dean that’s when I knew that I needed to be a school leader because from that moment on, I literally saw the power of a teacher, and the power the teacher has on an impact of a kid's trajectory. And I never understood how other teachers taught, because I always just stayed in my classroom when I was a teacher and just that awareness of, wow not everybody teaches the way I do, and that's totally fine. Except there were just some real strong indicators that teachers that are willing to go to the ends of the earth for kids, teachers that are willing to love kids, teachers that can hold them to high expectations the way kids performed in that class versus the opposite. I saw the hurt and the pain when they come into that discipline office, and like, this teacher hates me or I hate this teacher, or this teacher's unfair to me. So seeing the power of a teacher, but then getting the parents to come in for those reinstatement meetings, and dealing with parents, I then was able to see how systemic

oppression and poverty and just generation upon generation, of distrust with public education. I got to see that and so seeing the power of the teacher and seeing poverty and lack of education, I was compelled. I was like, we have to do something for our teachers, there needs to be a leader who invests in teachers and honors the love and respect and the work that they do.

Regardless of the specific driver, all of the leaders interviewed were rooted in a specific value attached to equity and impacting outcomes for all students. The leaders' actions are in line with their values and beliefs and these drive their decision making. According to one leader, when she is grounded in her values, "I am decisive. I can say, yes, we're doing this. No, we're not doing this, because it doesn't align with our values for what we do, or what I believe in." Another leader revealed that she was deterred from talking to staff prior to a strike but her values overrode the directive to keep quiet. She confessed,

So this work is ridiculously hard and emotional, right and so we just did the teacher strike, we had our teachers strike. And 95% of our teachers went on strike but when it was all starting to bubble up and it seemed like it was really going to happen, my HR partner told me I can't talk to the staff about whether they should strike or they shouldn't strike. It just made me all nervous about stuff, but I was like, again I went back to who I am, and I was like, I'm going to talk to the staff about it. So we had our faculty meeting and I told the staff a story about a paraprofessional who was part of our last DPS strike 25 years ago. And she was a para and she had to cross that picket line 25 years ago, and walk into her building

and that strike lasted five days. And she was spit on, crossing that line, she wasn't allowed to strike but the teachers who she served and supported, day after day after day, walking past them they yelled at her, they cursed at her and they spit on her. And that trauma that she endured for those five days had stayed with her for the entire 25 years later, that when the strike and verbiage started to come back up, she had physical reactions of like, oh my god, it's going to happen again! And so when I heard that story, it like broke my heart because we have such an amazing culture, that I couldn't imagine our staff turning on one another like that, right. And so I just started the conversation with the staff of telling that story, and then saying, we're a family here and I would hate for any one of our family members, no matter what choices they make, to feel that way and to be traumatized by each other that way. And so by telling that story, and setting the parameters, we're all a family and we will trust and love and support each other in the decisions we make.

She elaborates on how this confidence and courage payed off, saying

After the strike, I had a special ed teacher come up to me and say, 'I'm actually really proud of the work you did to get us ready for the strike.' And I was like, 'well thank you.' And she said, 'No, I'm serious.' She's like, 'the high school above us, they are in ruins right now, half of them hate each other, they are like just the worst that you can imagine. I was walking in the building with one of them, they asked me, how is it going now with the strike? And I was like, we're fine, we're actually really good, the strike didn't do anything to us. I said, my

principal's really good, she did a really good job getting us ready. And they're like, oh my god, I hate my principal and like, she hasn't talked to me in months. It's horrible.'

This highlights the power of a leader to shape staff culture and to reap benefits from leading from a values based lens. All of the women middle school principals interviewed were aware of the values that drive their leadership practice and in 100% of the interviews, the principals referenced using these values as a touchpoint for action and decision making and were able to name the why that drives them to do this challenging work.

Theme Two: Gender is Both a Hindrance and Asset in School Leadership

The women interviewed expressed a deep sense of awareness of being a woman and the implications that has on how they lead a school as principal. In one principal's words, "All the time that ... I know going into situations and circumstances, I'm very conscious about being a woman, and then about being a strong female leader." Another asserted:

I have learned that being a woman in leadership is a blessing and a curse. Yes, I'm used to being perceived as a bitch, so there's that. But I'm also in a unique position to listen as a woman, and since most teachers are women, they feel the most comfortable with me. When I was the only woman on a leadership team, even though I was only the assistant principal at the time, women teachers would constantly request meetings with me to talk about fertility, pregnancy, even

Parkinson's. There was just that connection. I think all people actually are comforted by a female's presence, so that's something to leverage.

The following story highlights one challenge faced by a female principal when she was still an assistant principal.

We had a challenge. We used to have a school resource officer at my school. We had a really challenging situation and it was really uncalled for. It was really unprofessional. And so we had to address the matter. The SRO basically told a teacher she was sexy. And it went to ... I think it was a commander at the time. From the district. This guy ended up coming in to have a meeting with my boss and I. My boss was like, "Do you want to sit in this meeting as like learning opportunity?" Of course, I took her up on that. But it was at the end of that meeting, like what I witnessed, I was so glad that I was there as a witness.

Because he was so stinking chauvinistic, and his demeanor was just appalling. I remember sitting there thinking, "Oh, my God, if this were a male principal, would this guy have treated ... would he have handled the situation in the same way?" It was ridiculous. It was also that weird feeling of like, "Now, what do we do with this information?" This is like a high ranking official in DPD. What do we do now?" In the end, it worked out and we got our way, and the guy was removed ... the school resource officer was removed from the school. But it was horrific going through that experience. So the treatment, I think, again, because of being a female.

Here is another account from one of the women principals from her very recent past,

It's like, I think about it a lot from that lens. I always have to think of my leadership from my gender lens. I also had, earlier this year, a very inappropriate conversation with my facility manager who no longer is here. Who made some very inappropriate comments about my body and he made some very inappropriate comments about me reminding him of his first girlfriend that he lost his virginity to. I think those things, I don't know how often men experience that in the work place but that was something that this man for some reason felt empowered to tell me and share with me. So that was definitely one of those times where as a woman, I was like, that wouldn't of happened if I were a dude. But, you know, I don't know that I handled it in the right way to be completely honest with you. I immediately sent my husband a text and was like, I think I just got sexually harassed. I'm processing, did that really just happen? And my husband immediately called me. And he doesn't do that very often during the day. He was like, are you okay? Is everything okay? And I was like, yeah I'm fine I am just processing. And it took me a few days to really process through it and to really make sense of it. And to not feel, gross around him. He was leaving the position and it was his last week on the job. Of the Friday before his last week on the job that he made that comment to me. So I had to live with this guy for one more week. And it was really interesting to even have that conversation with my husband. I went back and forth saying, should I say something to human resources? And he said, you will ruin this man's life. Or you could potentially ruin this man's life for a comment. And so in the end I didn't say anything to human

resources because he was leaving the district and actually leaving the state too.

But why should I even have to make that call? So that's definitely a situation I would not have been in if I was not a woman. I think that was really frustrating for me.

As articulated by the women principals, being a woman leader is wrought with challenges especially overcoming others' perceptions; however, being a woman also has tremendous potential to be an asset, if used to endear oneself to others and earn trust.

Sub-Theme: Being Treated Differently Because of Being a Woman

My interviews revealed that four of the five women felt they had been treated differently because of being a woman. The woman who did not believe that she had ever been treated differently said that she had seen other women treated differently but that she had never personally had that experience. One principal recounted a lingering question she often has after conflict:

I think as a woman leader, I remember at different times when we'd have challenges or like when people would challenge me, or how they will challenge me in my decisions, I would often walk away thinking, "If I was a man, would you have treated me the same way?" And even like women, too. Or like if I make a decision, or if I gave a directive or something, I'll tell my other leaders, "If you need me to say this is the decision, I'll say it," because I'm used to being perceived as a bitch...For example, we made the move to require teachers to turn in lesson plans after our test scores dipped after my first year. I was like, 'I need to require these teachers to provide lesson plans and I need to give them feedback so I can

better understand the instruction that is happening in the classrooms.’ I knew I could do it cause the contract states that we can. So I rolled it out to staff, starting with the rationale that it’s best for kids and we have to have a growth mindset and be open to feedback and collaborative in our practice, right? All of the reasons. And I got massive pushback. This had never been requested before and the staff felt really angry. I got a lot of comments like, I’m not treating them as professionals and trusting them to do their jobs. I think it was because I was young and I think it was because I was a woman. I know I was being challenged. I had the authority with the contract and the rationale for why this was important, rubric template and everything, and most importantly – I was prepared to do the hard work myself, I gave *myself* more work because in the contract it says if you require lesson plans you must provide feedback. So I basically gave myself the homework every single weekend of reviewing lesson plans. I know that people don’t like being told what to do – I get that. But I truly believe they especially don’t like being told what to do from a woman.

Another leader stated bluntly, “As a stronger female leader, you are often perceived as a bitch versus male leaders, like there's not a term for it. They're just perceived as a strong leader.” She elaborated, and said:

One of the most reputable guys in our district, principals, is a total jerk. Boys club. I can’t believe I’m saying this in an interview. I mean, he will literally interrupt, completely check out of meetings on his cell phone and laptop, remove himself from meetings to work in the hallway. Like, who do you think you are?

Meanwhile, the women are in the meeting attentive, engaged, participating – but not too much – wouldn't want to come across too assertive. You know what I mean? I don't care about being assertive, but how some men are revered and just allowed to opt out? That I don't get. I don't see women behaving that way. I don't see women entitled to that luxury of being the golden son. Anyway, I'm not sure that's what you're getting at but it's just this entitled mentality coming from some men that's like tolerated and even condoned. Now as women we would not get away with that kind of behavior.

A third leader's voice corroborated this phenomenon when she added:

So I have been given the feedback that I am too assertive. And I am perceived often by people as a bitch. Because I am assertive and because I am a strong advocate for my school and for my kids. So I can [say] something, and I can say the exact same verbiage that a man might say, and they'll listen to the man and take that to heart but for me it's just crazy, or bitching or complaining. And so it's definitely a challenge. I mostly notice it in meetings. Actually the craziest thing happened the other day. We have a new superintendent and I was in the focus group, and she was talking and like, two men were literally having full volume conversation while she was like rolling out her entry plan. A full volume conversation like the entire time. I kept making eye contact with a female principal across the table. Afterwards she was like, 'I can't believe the superintendent kept talking over that I cannot believe she didn't address it'. So it's crazy what we probably don't even notice as women leaders. I'm assertive so

I most definitely would have shut it down – but that’s where I sometimes get in trouble.

Another leader shared a specific story in which she felt dismissed and demoralized by her male supervisor, so she attempted to speak with him about it. She recounted:

I had an instructional leader at the beginning of this year, who's since moved out of the role, who was ...I don't know if this a gender thing, I just haven't interacted with a woman with the same personality traits, but super overly confident, while at the same time being insanely insecure. So being completely unable to receive feedback, and not necessarily jumping in and interrupting me, but just kind of staring up into the ceiling, putting his hand on his chin, appearing that he's thinking about what I'm saying even though the reality was he heard nothing because he didn't do anything to improve his performance. And so what I did in those moments was I would literally stop myself and call out the behavior. So like "Hey, I'm noticing right now that you're leaning back in your chair, your hands are on your face, and you're staring up at the ceiling. That's making it appear that you're actually not listening to what I'm saying." It was almost like a CFU for a child, right? It was hands down the most challenging leadership relationship I've ever had. And he was like "Oh, no no, I'm listening, this is just how I sit." And this was like "Okay, so when you're in coaching meetings and you're sitting like that with our teachers, it appears you are not engaged. Right now I want you to put your forearms on the desk and lean your shoulders forward, so your body

language is telling me that we're in this conversation together. Yeah, it did not go well, as you can imagine, and I am very, very direct with my feedback. So those kind of things it's like, if I have to get that granular and just truly talk you through how to sit to show someone you're listening, then I guess that's where we're at. So again, maybe gender played a role, I've not met a woman or had a woman leader who had the same personality traits, but it was pretty difficult.

All of the women were able to identify leadership challenges based on gender, as well as camaraderie and support of other women leaders as a way to overcome this obstacle. One leader shared, "If a woman principal doesn't last more than a year, like you bet, people are going to say, 'Oh, it's because she was a female. She couldn't do it.'" Another leader noted, "There's this piece of banding together as women, not working against each other. We've got to help each other be successful because people are looking for us to fail."

In every single one of the interviews, each woman principal identified another woman leader who had supported them on their journey to becoming a middle school principal. For one, an instructional coach noticed her skill in the classroom and finesse working with other teachers. While this principal thought she would be in the classroom forever, another woman leader's feedback made her change her trajectory. This has powerful implications for how we can impact not only our own but also others' leadership journeys. It is a testament to the importance of being open to receiving help.

Two women shared how they sought out positions for the opportunity to work with strong women leaders. One stated,

I really wanted to be in this network because of the strong Instructional Superintendent leading the charge. She pushes you...she pushes. But she also supports. And she leads by example and that's what I want to embody as a woman leader – for other women but also for our kids.

Another principal shared that a woman mentor in her journey,

Dragged me to the middle school to be her assistant principal. I thought I would never work in a middle school but she convinced me and I honestly only went for the chance to work with her and learn from her. I said, 'If this doesn't work out I want a position back in an elementary school', but I feel in love with Middle School and I learned so much under [that principal's] leadership.

The women also discussed how they have extended themselves to other women to support their leadership development. One leader relayed,

I had just hired my female Assistant Principal and, through no fault of her own, the transfer wasn't going through. So there was this big delay with her start date and finally I was like, 'No! She HAS to start on this date. We cannot wait any longer. I'm sorry for any inconvenience this causes but it has to be this way'. And I had to say that cause I knew that people would hold her responsible for the mix up, even though it had nothing to do with her. I think that people are always looking at us to fail. Then they can say, 'Yep, it's because she is a woman.'

Others recalled having candid or frank conversations with other women leaders considering entering the field. One principal shared,

My teacher was going into a Dean role. Not too serious but I had to pull her and say to her...you will be tested, stand firm. You will be questioned, be decisive. If you ever need anyone to bounce ideas off of, I'm here.

She explained that she felt compelled, as a woman, to have this conversation with her teacher to better prepare her to be effective and to support her in this transition to leadership. She, and two of the other principals interviewed, recalled stories of supporting other women to attain leadership roles. They have a sense of “paying it forward” or reciprocating the kindness they received by women leaders who mentored them when they were new to the field or role. Banding together for a common good and the sentiment that we are better together was also evident in the principals’ responses. Offering help to and receiving help from other women is a central strategy that women principals draw from to inform an effective leadership practice.

Sub-Theme: Navigating Both Being a Mother and an Effective Leader

Three of the five women interviewed are mothers and each of them spoke to the tremendous challenges of being a mom and a woman principal. One leader describes the challenge of being a woman leader who is committed to having her own family and committed to being an effective principal. Both are demanding, and she describes how it will not be sustainable to do both well for long.

Another flip side of the challenge too is sustainability of the role. I talked about being a mother and having young kids. How do you make the role [sustainable] when you're trying to raise a family and you're trying to have kids? Because I think any way you hack it, the bulk of responsibility of raising kids does come

back to the mother. My husband is wonderful and he's great. He is always there for our kids. He's fabulous, but at the end of the day when my kid is sick, they don't want dad they want mom. And then the other piece talking about sustainability, I know that this job- I can't do this forever. This position has really, it's driven our family decisions as well. I always wanted four kids, my husband always three, but having more than two, because of the stress because of this position first of all, obviously I went into early labor on the day of my community forum for my principal interview! I should have known then that it was too much (laughing).

Another woman principal recalled her journey to the principalship. She was recruited by a female principal she deeply respected to serve as her assistant principal. She felt obligated to reveal that she was pregnant.

When we were thinking about starting a family, women have to make decisions that men don't even have to think twice about; about timing, what's going to happen. Planning as to when you can possibly have a kid so that it lines up to a summer. So it like, doesn't impact your work as much. Some women are like, "It happens when it happens." I commend them for being able to just make that decision. But I felt like I couldn't. I remember even telling her when she asked me to be her assistant principal, out of my mouth came, "We're working on starting our families this summer, so if we do get pregnant, is this still a decision you want?" I know she couldn't have legally said like, "Well, no, I change my mind."

But I felt compelled to say, at least, I give her a heads up. Men don't have to do that.

In the end, she was able to accept the role as assistant principal and she did become pregnant. Now she serves as a middle school principal. A third principal who is also a mother shared:

But all of my female teachers who get pregnant, I always pull them in as they are close to having their babies. And I tell them like, "This shit is hard. Nobody tells you that it's hard. And if it's not hard for you, then you're blessed. But it's hard. And so don't beat yourself up for it." I had a really hard time. I only took a month of maternity leave. But part of it was because I was literally going crazy. But again too, I think it's because I waited to have my kids until I was older. I don't know if it's because I just didn't have enough energy. It was a really hard delivery. Like a lot of craziness. So because of that I always pull them in and say like, "This is hard." People will come back to me later and say, "Thank you for telling me that, it's hard."

In each case, the woman principals shared the unique challenges that are incurred with being a school leader and a mother. Asserting that childrearing is still very much the mother's job, these women nonetheless resolved to stay committed to being school leaders, and also considered how being a woman and mother could favorably impact their ability to lead. One principal reflected:

I don't know what the correlation is but I know that the empathy I have for children and for parents has completely changed. I don't know if that's because

I'm a woman or a mom or just an experienced person. But I connect with people on that human level that I would think it's because I am a woman, you know, I know what it feels [like], I can feel for them. And my heart can ache for them, and I can be angry at them, and I can talk to children like I'm a mom to them and they respond that way to me. I won't say it's because I'm a woman or because I'm a mom or because I've been in education for 17 years. I think all of that plays a part, but I definitely think I'm more relatable and human because of those three things, my experiences.

According to the women leaders in my study who were also mothers, being a woman comes with innate challenges including societal demands for maternal presence in the household; however, motherhood can have inherent benefits for leadership and enable you to more empathetically connect with students, teachers and parents. These rich and robust connections yielded stronger relationships and increased outcomes for students according to the leaders in my study. Another principal elaborated on how being a mother has made her a more relatable leader, she shared:

Now, I speak a lot from the heart. I think that everyone in some way shape or form, has had a mother figure in their life. And I think that for our younger staff, some of them see me in that role. Even though I am not that much older than them. I can do that not only with my staff but I can also do that with my community. So when there are hard decisions that I need to make, I can take a look at those decisions and I can say you know what, how would I feel if the

leader of my kids' school made this decision. Or if my kid was sitting in their seat.

I think that offered me a unique perspective and a unique lens there.

Speaking to the increase in empathy and understanding, one principal shared how becoming a mother has impacted her school environment and staff morale in a concrete way. She stated, “So, there are some cultures, where there is a fear that my kid's sick, what am going to do? And here it's like, your kid's sick. Take care of your kid then come back to work.” She provided another example unrelated to children but that evidenced her empathy,

I had a staff member whose grandmother passed away, and she sent a text last night and said, Grandma passed away, I'm going to need some time. And my first response to her was, take care of your family, take care of yourself.”

Summing up her thoughts about why women should embrace their roles as mothers and translate them to leadership practice, she shared “So that's really important to me too, because if you can't have things good at home then you're not going to be any good when you come to school.” All of the mothers in the study agreed that while it is challenging to balance the demands of motherhood and the principalship, the experience of being a mother is an asset in effectively leading a school.

Theme Three: Leadership as a Collaborative Effort

All of the middle school principals were in agreement that relationships and collaboration are critical in fostering success as a leader. All stakeholders (e.g., parents, community, teachers, staff, and students) were included in this philosophy and one leader emphatically reiterated multiple times, “We're in it together!” Another principal

explained her connection with teachers as integral to impacting positive outcomes for students, reiterating “I want to be a school leader that grows and supports and develops teachers to make every teacher in a classroom amazing for our kids because they deserve it.” Of parents, a different leader noted, “We have to engage them in their child’s learning. There is merit to the saying, ‘It takes a village’. I want to partner with parents because they best know their students.” She added that collaboration with the student is integral as well:

When working with challenging students I say to the kiddo, “Look buddy, I need your help here. You and I have [to] collaborate on a plan so this will work. You say I’m picking on you? Fine, let me see a list of your friends so I can chat with them.” Then I prove to the student that I am willing to work with them by following through on what I say I’m going to do. I’ll come back to the kid and say, “So, you’re friends told me you are angry a lot and that it’s hard for you to not take that out on your teachers. What can we do to get you another outlet for your frustrations?” That, engaging the student in the problem solving...truly helps them buy into the solution. And make him feel like you’re a partner.

A woman principal describes a successful partnership with a community organization.

So we have lots of trauma. Trauma is the thing right now. And we have students who are refugees and who come with just lots of trauma so what’s been really cool is this partnership that we’ve had now for two years with Mariposa. So Mariposa is like art based trauma therapy and so two licensed social workers from Mariposa come to school every week and run small groups with our refugee and

newcomer students. So these are students who are new to the country and they could come from a variety of backgrounds but the one thing is they don't speak English yet, or they're just learning. So we use art as a tool to engage them and the social workers are familiar with the refugee population. Oh! And I should add that we used our parents to pay for it, so it also speaks to how we collaborate with our parents. Some of the parents in our community have means, it's Denver, but yeah, so our PTSA raises money for us and we used it to pay for our art trauma therapy. So it benefits the kids and the teachers because Mariposa then does workshops once a quarter with our teachers and our parent community. We bring in translators for that equity piece, so all can access it. So yeah, that's been successful.

Another principal speaks to the power of partnering with parents, which was a focus for her school and a growth area she specifically identified.

We wanted to bring in more families, so we have our monthly family council, where families come in. We have different topics to discuss from celebrations to concerns. Those are always highly sought out by families. So I would say that's our strongest part of our school. I would say, though, we've made so much strides with family engagement. Just in general, I think there's a lot more opportunities to be had. But I always go at a hundred and fifty at all times.

Partnership with an array of stakeholders was key in successful women principals' effectiveness as school leaders. They all spoke to collaboration and stakeholder

engagement, reiterating a “we’re in it together” mentality throughout. Collaboration is attributed by each of the five leaders as central in effective leadership.

Sub-Theme: Leadership Centered on Trust, Relationships, Communication and Collaboration

Collaboration cannot exist without relationships. The women interviewed had copious things to say about relationships. One leader reflected, “Relationships are another pillar of what I do. I want my teachers and all of my staff to know that I care about them on a bigger level than just that you are a machine that comes to do a job.” Trust and communication were cited as central in building collaborative relationships. One principal remarked, “If you don't have a personal connection with someone, with anyone really, then you don't have trust. And so for me that's really important...to maintain those relationships that are founded in the open and honest communication.” Another spoke about shared commitments, elaborating “Part of this work is human work, what I've learned is if you don't have shared expectations and working agreements and if we don't have something tangible that we can come back to, things can get out of hand.”

Trust and communication came up repeatedly as motifs in each principals’ responses. One principal reflected:

Something that I've also been able to learn in this role, I find that you're managing adult conflict more than I've ever had to and it's bizarre to me that people come and tell you this person said this to me, and I'm like, I am an adult, you are an adult, handle your business. So I really had to teach the staff how to have productive conflict with one another. Focus on communication was essential. So

was building trust. We went through an extensive process, but in the end we were so much stronger for it. Strengthening our trust and creating open communication systems has been a game changer for staff culture.

Another leader shared that communication was central in building trust and therefore promoting collaboration. After a conflict, she reflected on how she handled a situation when approached by a trusted staff member:

I had to listen and hear his perspective. And I think coming back to what my true intent was, I needed to then put myself in a position where I was truly listening with an open mind, with an empathetic lens. So what came out of that, I cleared my calendar a few days later and I just had one on one conversations where people who felt like they wanted to have a conversation or wanted to say something to me could do it. And we created a safe space in our building where we have what is called clearings. Overcoming conflict to build trust changed the way our staff sees me as a leader and opening my doors to them was huge.

In another principal's first year at her middle school, she inherited many challenges and dysfunctions. She shared how she was able to be effective by leveraging collaboration:

The challenge in stepping into the principal [role] my first year there was a lot of stuff going on, and a lot of things that hadn't gone well the previous year that needed to be corrected, so I would say how I overcame it is I had individual one-on-one meetings with every returning staff member, got their feedback, [and] gave them my ideas of where we needed to go. We were able to collectively

create this vision, and then each of us was able to execute it at a super high level because we had collaborated, we knew what we wanted, we knew our potential, we knew what the school could look like. So I would say that collaborative process is what drove us last year.

The women principals were able to list countless stories of building relationships with stakeholders by earning trust, transparently communicating, and collaborating with others around shared values and beliefs. These collaborative efforts were common amongst the stories as were the strategies women principals in this study used to build a collaborative culture, which is built on trust, communication and relationships.

Summary

All of the women principals interviewed demonstrated a deep respect for the magnitude of the principalship and the importance of working in education. They remained steadfastly committed to doing purposeful work, in spite of challenges, barriers and setbacks. Grounded in clarity of purpose with a clear motivation for engaging in this work, every principal rooted their decision making and action in their fundamental values and beliefs. This unwavering commitment to values and beliefs led all the principals to cite self-confidence as an attribute that contributes to their effectiveness as leaders. Driven by deep convictions and resolve, the women principals are confident in their leadership visions and actions as they drive staff towards a clear and critical goal.

The principals interviewed viewed gender as both an asset and a hindrance in their leadership practice. They acknowledged being able to more readily connect with all types of people as a woman, since most individuals have a mother figure. The mothers

interviewed attributed motherhood to increased empathy and compassion for students, parents and teachers. All of the principals expressed deep commitment to family. In addition to serving as an asset, each woman could keenly recall experiences in which they had been treated differently because of gender. This caused an acute awareness of self and others' perceptions and increased these leaders' resolve to lead even more effectively to negate any notions that women cannot lead as or more effectively than men.

The women principals finally expressed a collaborative approach in their leadership practice that centered on trust, communication and relationship building to cultivate a collaboration. There is a strong sentiment that we are all "in it" together doing challenging work and that we must leverage one another to achieve maximum outcomes. Every principal recounted a story of a woman leader shaping their own leadership journey, including providing opportunities for leading and learning. Each woman expressed a desire to help other women seeking leadership roles and emphasized banding together to raise one another up in the field. The themes that emerged are very telling about what successful women middle school principals draw from to lead effectively.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Women Middle School Principals excelling and advancing in school settings is one way to address systemic sexism that exists in a larger societal context. Chapter I set the context and purpose of the study, to understand what assists women principals to lead effectively and to encourage more women to hold leadership roles in school settings. It is my intention that this study will not only be impactful for women leaders, but will also address the context of sexism prevalent in the field of educational administration by offering suggestions to improve the chances of success for women leaders. The hope is that more women will want to assume leadership ranks because of this study, which will serve as a tool to understand how effective women middle school principals lead, as communicated by women principals in their own words. This chapter will include an overview of the study, discussion of findings in light of the literature and conceptual framework, implications for practice and future research, limitations and conclusion.

I used a strengths-based approach to identify effective women principals leveraging the Denver Public School's School Performance Framework (SPF). Five women principals rated Blue (Distinguished) and Green (effective) were interviewed in an effort to answer this study's fundamental research question: What contributes to a woman middle school principal's effectiveness? Answering this question might enable other potential women leaders in the field to understand what contributes to one's

effectiveness as a middle school principal and utilize that knowledge to advance or enhance their careers and leadership practice. It also could shape those who hire and supervise women principals to know what might be effective as they coach and mentor.

In Chapter II, I addressed the dearth of research pertaining to women middle school principals and provided historical context along with a conceptual framework to define the study. There is little literature specific to women middle school principals. For that reason, I chose to have a highly focused study, in order to glean the results most applicable to the research question. The aim of this study was to identify what makes effective women principals effective, as opposed to focusing on barriers and inhibitors to their success, as is the focus of much existing research. It was easy to find information about the history of the principalship, and how it took women until the late nineties to reach parity with men in terms of principalships at the elementary level. They have yet to assume equal number of principalships at the middle and high school level. Women comprise 68% of primary school principals, 40% of middle school principals, and 33% of high school principals [U.S. Department of Education, Nation Center for Education Statistics, National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS), “Public School Principal Data File,” 2015-201]. Lack of parity is problematic, but beyond parity, tools and strategies are essential for women to be successful in taxing school leadership roles. The principalship is challenging for anyone, but looking at this study through a critical feminist lens, it is arguable that women face unique challenges upon assuming these roles. The findings from the study corroborate this assertion.

Since effectiveness is central to this study, it was imperative to use a research-based framework to select effective women principals at the middle school level. In Chapter Three, I outlined the methodology and sample selection for the study. I utilized the Denver Public School District's School Performance Framework to identify and select effective middle school women principals. This framework has been in place for more than a decade and focuses on multiple metrics to ascertain effectiveness, emphasizing student outcomes as the primary measure. The measure looks at student academic outcomes in terms of both proficiency and growth. Using this research-based framework enabled me to choose the most appropriate women principals for the study and to identify them from a strengths-based context, aligned to the vision that this study be asset-based.

The methodology utilized for this study is qualitative. This study sought to answer the following research question: According to women principals, what makes them effective leaders? I identified women principals and asked them to participate in the study, which consisted of an in depth interview from the researcher. Five women met the criteria and agreed to participate in the study.

As is the goal qualitative research, the emphasis focused on obtaining rich data from the women principals who fulfilled the requirements for this study. I comprehensively interviewed women principals following a protocol and interview format and transcribed and coded the interviews to ascertain relevant themes. The strengths-based approach to this methodology asked women principals to reflect on what

makes them effective and how they have navigated barriers to their practice resulting in three emergent themes, each with accompanying sub-themes.

In Chapter IV, I describe how these women's testimonials informed the development of three emergent themes: (1) Relentless Commitment to Engage in Purposeful Work, (2) Gender as both a Hindrance and Asset in School Leadership, (3) Leadership as a Collaborative Effort. I discussed the themes and accompanying sub-themes in Chapter VI and they are outlined below.

Theme One: Relentless Commitment to Engage in Meaningful Work

Sub-Theme: Clarity of Purpose and Confidence in Self

Sub-Theme: Actions grounded in Values

Theme Two: Gender is both a Hindrance and Asset in School Leadership

Sub-Theme: Being Treated Differently Because of Being a Woman

Sub-Theme: Navigating being both a Mother and an Effective Leader

Theme Three: Leadership as a Collaborative Effort

Sub-Theme: Leadership Centered on Trust, Relationships, Communication and Collaboration

The themes are very telling in terms of what the women leverage to be effective in their roles. It is clear that they are all grounded in values they can easily articulate and are confident to make decisions that are rooted in values, regardless of how that makes them appear to others. They have experienced being treated differently because of being a woman and have learned the joy of banding with other women to both accept and offer help. The mothers interviewed spoke to the challenges of being a good mom and an

effective principal. Finally, they highlighted the communal aspect of leadership and emphasized relationships and collaboration as being central to their effectiveness.

Chapter V provides an overview of how findings of this study align, counter, and contribute to existing literature and the conceptual framework that guided this inquiry. As the central research question of this study stemmed from the dearth of dedicated research related to effective female principals at the middle school level, this study's findings served to fill this gap in the research and provide women principals with resources to draw from to lead effectively, as articulated by other women principals.

The findings from this study aligned to and expanded existing research about women principals and the experiences they have had in the field. The research adds an asset based approach to focus specifically on what enabled women to be effective middle school principals. Below I discuss how the themes relate to the research question, existing research (albeit scarce) and conceptual framework, critical feminist theory.

Theme One: Relentless Commitment to Engage in Meaningful Work

It was clear and recurring in each interview that the women principals were deeply committed to their craft. They cited myriad ways in which the role was challenging but ultimately gave them the sense that they were doing something purposeful. Rooted by a clear purpose for doing the work, the women were able to be confident. Confidence, for them, manifested as courage to do the right thing for students, including speaking up even if that meant they were perceived unfavorably by others. The desire to serve students and engage in meaningful work was something each of the women spoke to; including how this value influenced actions they took as principals.

This theme directly answers the research question, “To what do women middle school principals attribute their effectiveness”? The women resoundingly responded that commitment to engage in purposeful work is what drives them. While their specific drivers and motivators for engaging in the work may vary, they all concede that the work is exceedingly difficult and requires tenacity, commitment and confidence. They attribute their confidence to being grounded in core values, which influence their actions. The concept of being aware of your why for engaging in the work, knowing and being deeply committed to your values, and acting as a leader based on those values is an important finding that directly addresses the research question. I was able to glean less in regards to their purpose for working specifically in middle school, as they did not demonstrate a deep commitment to a certain grade level so long as they were serving students, so that aspect of the question remains unanswered by this theme.

This theme corroborates existing research about best practices in school leadership as being values-based. Values-based leadership informs actions, which drive student outcomes, making a leader impactful in her school (Knight, 2011). It elaborates on the existing research by adding a piece about confidence, which is an outward expression of internal values and reflective of a deep and unwavering commitment to one’s beliefs (Sanzo et al., 2011).

The theme aligned to the conceptual framework, Critical Feminist Theory, which examines women’s social roles, their experience, and feminist politics in a wide variety of fields to understand the nature of gender inequality (Acker, 1990; Acker & Armenti, 2004; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011). Critical theorists who

do qualitative research are very interested in issues of gender, race, and class because they consider these the prime means for differentiating power in this society (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). It is important to note that the intersection of race, gender, sexual orientation and socioeconomic class contribute to these women's identities. For the purpose of this inquiry, gender is being explicitly studied; however, it is impossible to isolate gender from other influencing factors. One Hispanic woman principal who was raised by a single mother and grandmother felt influenced by the presence of strong, independent and hardworking women. She attributed her upbringing to her work ethic and confidence. There were three white women interviewed and all attributed their effectiveness, in part, to their confidence. Since they are white and of a privileged class, it is possible that their confidence is received more favorably by others than other minority races. Similarly, the Asian woman interviewed may benefit from being of the model minority group and be perceived as intelligent and capable. She also shared that because of her stoic Asian disposition she is routinely perceived as being a "bitch" or "aloof". All of the women interviewed are heterosexual which is a dominant group and as such likely contributes to them being perceived favorably. The complex intersection of identity is difficult to parcel out, but undoubtedly contributes to each woman's perception of confidence and how that confidence is received by others. This study contributes to Critical Feminist Theory by providing a strategy that all five women highlighted in their interviews, the concept of having a clear and definite purpose aligned to actions and believing fundamentally that the work principals do is important work.

Theme Two: Gender is Both a Hindrance and Asset in School Leadership

The women principals identified copious reasons why being a woman had both a positive and negative impact on their leadership trajectory. Four of the women recalled specific instances in which they thought colleagues treated them differently because of being a woman. Two women indicated that they believed being a woman helped them do their job more effectively, because there are more women educators and they naturally feel more comfortable coming to a woman, especially with medical or health concerns. The other women who considered their gender an asset believed that everyone was comforted by the presence of a woman because everyone has, on some level, a mother or a mother-figure. The three mothers interviewed contended that motherhood greatly enhanced their ability to empathize with students and families. All of the women were cognizant of gender and how gender influenced one's perception of them.

This research is highly in line with existing research concerning women's experiences and challenges in leadership positions. Women are often hyper-cognizant of their gender, and how gender shapes others' perceptions of them (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2016). It is also documented in the literature that women have to work harder to procure and retain leadership roles in organizations (Sandberg, 2013). Further, there is a plethora of research highlighting the challenges of motherhood and woman leadership (Bronars, 2010; Curry, 2000; Elsesser & Lever, 2011; Ertac & Gurdal, 2012), but little discussion of how being a woman or mother is an asset when in a school principalship. This study adds to the existing research by highlighting the positives aligned with being a woman principal including connecting with women teachers, having empathy for students,

teachers and families as a result of motherhood, and connecting with others as a mother-figure.

This theme resonates inherently with Critical Feminist Theory, which examines the relationships between and among groups through the lens of gender (Rouleau-Carroll, 2014), critical of social organization[s] that privileges some at the expense of others based on gender. These women principals experienced firsthand the injustices that are associated with being a part of a less privileged group than men. One white woman in her early thirties experienced extremely inappropriate comments about her body from a building custodian. She believed that this was motivated by her gender and also by her age. Age has implications on others' perceptions including how they perceive sexuality and capability. For example, younger women are typically perceived as more sexually desirable and also less competent. Another woman had a male supervisor who showed her very little respect and was dismissive with his body language and by rejecting her feedback. As a young white woman leader in her late twenties, she felt compelled to reach out to a supervisor for support, even though she wanted to handle the situation herself. An Asian principal recalled a situation with a school resource officer where he was caught in the wrong but denied it and was condescending in his interactions with her. He called her a princess which is indicative of his contempt and tantamount to calling someone entitled and privileged. In each case, race and age (among other factors) played a role but the women attributed the treatment to their gender, which corroborates the theoretical framework of this study. Their experiences lend credence to and corroborate Critical Feminist Theory.

Theme Three: Leadership as a Collaborative Effort

Each woman in some way attributed their success to collaboration with others. They all maintained a “we’re in this together” mentality when engaging other stakeholders. The women were able to recall specific instances collaborating with community organizations, teachers, parents and the students themselves to reap the results they were seeking. They reiterated that relationships are the basis of collaboration and relationships can only exist in the presence of trust. They spoke to the ways they establish trust with all stakeholders, highlighting the essential role of communication in healthy relationships. This theme answers the research question by asserting that establishing relationships build on trust, communicating clearly with all stakeholders, and collaborating to overcome obstacles are essential components of effective school leadership.

There is much leadership research that corroborates these findings, with many of the studies isolating collaboration and shared decision making as a tool to overcome change (Bambrick-Santoyo & Peiser, 2012; Fenton et al., 2016). This study’s findings suggest that collaboration is not just a tool principals utilized in times of change or disequilibrium, but as a preemptive strategy to ensure successful outcomes for students. Collaboration occurred frequently and with all stakeholders to yield the desired results.

Collaboration was essential to the success of these women principals, and this pertains to Critical Feminist Theory in the sense that the women have to leverage others to ensure success. It implies that on their own, women, being from a subjugated group, do not have the power in and of themselves to lead but that they must acquiesce to

society's perception that they are less than and employ others to add credence to their leadership. This strongly connects to the socialized views of women as relational and collaborative by nature, which means this research could inadvertently contribute to stereotypes about women. For women leaders who are not relational or collaborative, this study provides strategies such as earning trust and communicating openly and honestly. These strategies will allow them to lead in a more relational way, as the data from this study demonstrates that effective leaders leverage collaboration as a key strategy. This research corroborates the sentiment that women have to work harder and be smarter about their leadership moves by engaging others in order to attain success and be effective.

Implications for Practice

These findings have implications for other women leaders in the field and for women who are considering transitioning to leadership roles. By understanding what effective women principals are doing well, we can transfer that to others' leadership practices to improve their performance and increase outcomes for students at scale. I identified the women principals based on their outcomes and track records of affecting student academic outcomes. All of the women met expectations for student proficiency in math and language arts on grade level standards. Further, these women grew students who were not at grade level more than an average amount so that the average amount of student growth was more than a year's worth of learning per student. Their outcomes were observed for all students and they also had to meet a rigorous equity metric to demonstrate that adequate percentages of students with IEPs, students learning English as

a Second Language, students in poverty and students of color were meeting expectations for proficiency and growth. In addition, knowing what women principals are effectively leading middle schools could attract other women to the field as they have some ideas of what worked for these women leaders.

Principals, supervisors of principals, mentors and coaches all play a role in ensuring that more women enter the school leadership field. These individuals can help aspiring women leaders identify their why and serve as mentors when inevitable challenges arise. When women leaders are aware of their values and use them to drive their actions, they reap effective outcomes. Women considering the principalship must be cognizant to hone their why and link these values to leadership actions in order to be effective. The findings of this study's first theme are useful to other women leaders because it gives them perspective that even experienced and effective leaders find this work to be very challenging. It is simply challenging work and knowing that opinion from the mouths of other principals can be relieving for an aspiring woman leader who may think the work is challenging because she is not equipped to do it. This study's findings are useful to those in and considering leadership roles by emphasizing that even for effective leaders the role is demanding, by encouraging leaders to find and be guided by their core values and beliefs, and by grounding leadership actions in values.

In addition, the study has implications for other women principals in terms of how they can use their gender as an asset and be aware that it can be a hindrance. It is important that women know how they can be perceived by others and these testimonials shed light on the phenomenon of women being perceived differently because of age,

gender and/or race. Multiple women cited being able to empathize with mothers and families and leveraging their gender to connect with staff in a maternal way. The second theme highlights the importance of banding together as women to overcome barriers and that implementing a “we’re in it together” mentality has proved effective for women principals in the field. Two ways women discussed unifying with other women was by giving and accepting help. Looking for other women leaders to support and be supported by is one way that aspiring leaders can find success. Those who mentor aspiring women principals can ensure that they have a cohort of other women for support. Women in leadership roles should extend their hands to prospective leaders. This theme has implications for all women in the field who are in or considering the principal role.

The third theme is also has implications for women principals and aspiring principals because it suggests that relational and collaborative approaches when working with others effective. This could be leveraged as leaders are assuming new roles and they can prioritize building trust and establishing relationships. This should be a part of new leader preparation programs and a coaching topic for mentors of women leaders. There are tangible strategies that can be implemented to build trust, as outlined by the women principals interviewed in this study. These include clear communication and doing what you say you are going to do. In addition it has implications for leadership structure and organization and lends itself to shared decision making, another actionable strategy which women principals can implement. These concepts – trust, communication, and shared decision making – can be leveraged even by women who are not inherently relational in leadership style. Since age, race and other intersecting identities impact the way women

lead, it is essential that they have specific ways in which to systemically incorporate collaboration as a means to being an effective principal.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include researcher bias because I am a middle school principal. In qualitative research reflexivity is critical as the researcher is literally the instrument so examining relevant biases and perspectives is of the utmost importance (Merriam, 2009). I attempted to mitigate this bias with reflexivity and journaling after every interview as well as by utilizing other women not in the field to review my coding notes and data analysis for bias. It is considered best practice in qualitative methodology to engage in reflexivity in the form of journaling and to have a peer debriefed (Merriam, 2009). These are steps that I have chosen to take as safeguards to increase trustworthiness and credibility in my study. All of the women principals interviewed are middle school principals in Denver Public Schools, which could impact the transferability of the study since the setting is common for all who were interviewed. Another limitation is the number of participants. Although I was able to glean rich and descriptive data, it would have been more powerful to have even more voices contributing to the data to enhance the study's findings. The pool was limited to begin with, with only 38 middle schools in Denver Public Schools, and only 12 of them categorized as Blue or Green. Women principals were at the helm of six of the Blue/Green schools in the 2017-2018 data set. Of those school leaders, one declined to participate in the study, leaving me with five total participants, four of them at green schools and one at a blue school. The sample was small but intentional as a highly specific population was being investigated.

The final limitation to the study is that I was unable to glean much information pertaining to why it was important to the women to serve middle school specifically. Perhaps this was because the interview questions were not tailored enough to solicit the desired responses in a middle school specific way.

Implications for Future Research

This study has exciting implications for future research. It is an asset based study focusing on what effective women middle school principals do in their practice which paves the way for future researchers to delve deeper into the solutions as to what makes effective women leaders as opposed to admiring the barriers or inhibitors to their success. Future research could also pay close attention to the role of women principals in middle schools specifically as this particular study did not glean rich findings with respect to that aspect of the research question. In order to accurately capture the significance of middle school, I would restructure the study to be case study methodology. While this is still qualitative, I think it would paint a more comprehensive picture of the role and the journey of middle school and adolescence and the impact that has on effective leadership for women middle school principals. My study would be enhanced with a longer and more in-depth approach to include case studies that incorporated field notes, teacher reflections, leader reflections on a regular basis and student input. I believe this would have more accurately fleshed out the nuances what women leaders of middle schools draw from to support students and families through a highly transitional and tumultuous time, puberty and adolescence. There is tremendous potential for future research about asset-based women's leadership and women middle school leaders. It could be applied to

principal preparation programs as thematic units upon which to focus to equip future women principals with the tools necessary to be effective in the role. In addition, it has implications for coaching and mentoring women principals to see their practice as asset based and leverage their strengths in being effective leaders to impact academic and opportunity outcomes for students. Since the participants in this study emphasized the difficulty and magnitude of the role, there is great potential to focus on how to improve morale and feelings of effectiveness by identifying strengths and assets. Hopefully this research and future findings it inspires will be able to serve two marginalized populations, women leaders and middle school students.

Conclusion

This study is important because it addresses a dearth in critical research pertaining to how women middle school principals lead effectively. There is a leadership gap in middle and high schools in which women occupy fewer principalships in spite of having the qualifications necessary to assume these positions. It is essential that society changes perspective of women leaders and sees all genders regardless of intersection of race, socio-economic status, age, sexual orientation as equally equipped to assume and succeed in these positions. For that reason, this study focused on what works and what is effective about women's leadership practices that enables them to be successful, as measured by student outcomes. Student outcomes were used to drive the selection of the women who participated in the sample so they can all be considered objectively and on some level effective. It is critical to answer the question, "What did they do to be effective as middle school principals?" in their own words.

This study fills a very important gap and gives voice to women leaders in the field so that their efforts and successes can be learned from and transferred to other applications. In this case, the research is important because it has implications for current and prospective women leaders and this can increase both parity and dispel perceptions that women are ineffective or ill-equipped to assume principal roles at middle schools. It is my hope that this research will assist other women in refining their leadership craft or draw them to the profession, as it is critical that effective and reflective women principals are modeling best practices in the field to show others that women can and do lead in impactful and powerful ways, every single day.

APPENDIX A
LETTER OF COOPERATION

Project Title: Gender and school leadership: A qualitative study of effective women middle school principals

Researcher: Christina Sylvester

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Bridget Kelly

Introduction:

You are being asked to take part in a research study being conducted by Christina Sylvester, doctoral student at Loyola University of Chicago, for a dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Bridget Kelly.

Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to determine the common leadership strategies that highly effective women principals share.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Sign and return this “Letter of Cooperation.” Please download this “Letter of Cooperation” onto your personal stationary. Please sign the form and return it to the researcher in the enclosed stamped, self-addressed envelope. Signing and returning this letter of cooperation will indicate your agreement to participate in this research study.
- Participate in an hour-long interview about your experiences as a woman principal. Prior to the interview, you will be asked to sign a “Consent to Participate in Research” letter. The interview will be audio taped and transcribed. The transcriber hired for this purpose has also signed a confidentiality agreement. You will select a pseudonym for yourself and your school. Throughout the interview, your responses will be checked with you for accuracy. You will have the opportunity to suggest revisions to the transcript, if necessary. Once the transcript is in a final stage, all remaining identifiers will be removed.

Risks/Benefits:

There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life.

There are many direct benefits to you from participation, including reflection and improvement in your leadership practice and suggestions for creating a positive school climate. The results of the study may be helpful to other women principals to develop their leadership practice and work more effectively with staff, thus increasing student outcomes.

Confidentiality:

- All responses will remain confidential. Each respondent will select a pseudonym by which to be referred. All data will be analyzed/coded using the identification

number. Individual names or the names of school districts will not be mentioned in the final writing.

- The audio tape recordings of the interviews and the transcripts will be kept in a secure location. Once the final writing of the research is completed, the recordings will be destroyed.

Voluntary Participation:

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not wish to be in this study, you do not have to participate. Even if you decide to participate, you may elect not to answer a specific question or to withdraw from participation in the study at any time without penalty.

Contacts and Questions:

If you have questions about this research study, please contact Christina Sylvester at csylvester@luc.edu or Dr. Bridget Kelly at btkelly1@umd.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Compliance Manager in Loyola's Office of Research Services at (773) 508-2689.

Statement of Cooperation

I, the school Principal, agree to cooperate in the research to be conducted by Christina Sylvester, a Loyola Doctoral student. Her project, entitled, *Gender and School Leadership: A qualitative study of effective women principals and how they build a positive school climate*, along with the outlined research protocols are understood.

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

APPENDIX B
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Project Title: Gender and school leadership: A qualitative study of effective women principals

Researcher: Christina Sylvester

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Bridget Kelly

Introduction:

You are being asked to take part in a research study being conducted by Christina Sylvester for a dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Bridget Kelly in the School of Education at Loyola University of Chicago.

Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to determine the common leadership traits that highly effective women principals share.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to participate in a 60-minute interview about your leadership practice, focusing on the traits that have made you effective in your role as principal. Questions will be behavioral in nature and ask you to cite real life experiences and examples. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed and will take place in a comfortable setting mutually agreed upon by the researcher and principal.

Risks/Benefits:

There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life.

There are many indirect benefits to you from participation, including reflection and improvement in your leadership practice and suggestions for creating a positive school climate. The results of the study may be helpful to other women principals to develop their leadership practice and work more effectively with staff, thus increasing student outcomes.

Confidentiality:

- All names and identities of interviewed individuals will be kept confidential. Data collected will be coded so that no actual names or schools are identified. Interviews will be confidential and real names will be withheld. None of the real school or individual names will appear on any of the research documents.
- Audiotapes of interview recordings made during the course of the research will be stored in a secure location. At the conclusion of the research, all audio files and other identifying information will be destroyed.

Voluntary Participation:

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. Even if you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.

Contacts and Questions:

If you have questions about this research study, please feel free to contact Christina Sylvester at csylvester@luc.edu or (630) 759-6340 x301 or Dr. Bridget Kelly, faculty sponsor, at btKelly1@umd.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Loyola University Office of Research Services at (773) 508-2689.

Statement of Consent:

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this research study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

APPENDIX C
CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

I, _____, have agreed to perform the duties of audiotape transcriber for a research study being conducted by Christina Sylvester, Doctoral Candidate in the School of Education at Loyola University Chicago.

I understand the nature of this work will involve sensitive and confidential information about the interview subjects. By signing this agreement, I agree to keep all transcript information confidential and in a secure place when in my possession.

Furthermore, the information in my possession will not be shared verbally or visually with anyone except the researcher. Christina Sylvester will provide the interviews for me to transcribe from her study. Transcriptions and audiotapes will be kept in a locked portfolio, provided by the researcher, while in my possession. I agree to the confidentiality terms of this agreement.

Signature of Audiotape Transcriber: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____

APPENDIX D
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interviews will be 60 minutes in length and audio recorded. The participant may decline to answer any questions without fear of penalty. They will be professionally transcribed and stored in a secure location. The following interview protocol will be used:

- 1) Please describe your career journey in becoming a school Principal.
 - a. What is a story you remember about preparing to become a principal? What feelings come to mind as you remember this story?
 - b. Who was influential in your preparation? How so?
 - c. What did you have to navigate or overcome as you prepared to be a principal? What assisted you in getting prepared?
- 2) What fundamental principles or beliefs shape your leadership practice?
 - a. What story can you share about a specific belief or principle that shaped your work?
 - b. Who was a part of you developing your beliefs about leadership? In what ways?
 - c. How do your beliefs show up in your work with staff? Teachers? Students? Parents? Others?
- 3) Are there any challenges you can share of being a woman Principal?
 - a. Is there a time you can share where your being a woman made a difference at work? What happened? How did it feel? What did you do?
 - b. What is one success story you can share that relates to you being a woman principal? Who was involved? What seemed to help?
- 4) What things do you point to or look at as evidence of a positive school climate?

- a. How did you come up with those as markers of positive school climate? Is there a time when you were particularly proud of the climate at your school? What did it look like? What went into creating that climate?
 - b. What are specific strategies you employ in order to maintain, or strive to maintain, a positive school climate?
- 5) What resources have helped you to achieve success in working with all staff?
- a. Students? Examples you can share?
 - b. Parents? Is there a time where you felt relationships were strong with parents at the school?
 - c. How about a story from a time when there were successful partnerships or connections to community members?
 - d. What made these successful? How did you approach these interactions?
Relationships?
- 6) Can you tell me about a time when you experienced negative interactions or relationships with teachers?
- a. Office staff? Parents? Students? Community members?
 - b. What steps have you taken to overcome staff negativity, including low morale?
 - c. What strategies have you tried to resolve conflicts with office staff? Parents? Students? Community members? Is there a particular story that highlights resolved conflicts?
- 7) Could you describe a challenge you faced in your tenure as a school principal and how you overcame it?

- a. What was the core challenge?
 - b. How did it make you feel?
 - c. What strategy did you use to manage the challenge?
- 8) What advice would you share with a woman educator who is contemplating moving into a principal position?
- a. What advice has been helpful to you? Who offered it? In what context?
 - b. What is some advice you have given others who want to be principals?
 - c. What advice have you been given about effective leadership? Was it helpful? Ring true in your experience? How so?
- 9) Can you recall a time you interacted with a staff member in a specific way because of gender? What happened? How did it make you feel? What did you do as a result of the interaction?
- a. Have you ever changed your approach based on whether you are working with a man, woman or trans* gender staff member?
 - b. What about a time someone interacted with you in a way that you perceived to be about your gender, sex or another aspect of your identity? What happened? How did it make you feel? Did it impact your leadership?
- 10) Is there a final story you can share about a time you experienced success as a principal?
- a. What did I not ask about that you thought would come up?
 - b. What do you think has contributed the most to your success as a principal? How so? When did this happen? How did it impact your leadership?

c. What is the next goal or achievement you have set for your career?

Thank you so much for your time and sharing your stories and experiences with me.

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VITA

Christina Sylvester spent her childhood in the Chicagoland area before moving to Los Angeles where she attended middle and high school. She graduated from Northwestern University in 2006 with a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish and went on to earn a Master of Education from Loyola University Chicago from 2008-2010. During this time she was honored as an award winner in the essay competition, “Expanding Knowledge in the Service of Global Community” in which she detailed her experiences living and learning abroad in Belgium and Argentina. In 2010 she earned the Fulbright-Hays Program grant to conduct curricular research in Mexico.

Christina Sylvester is currently a Middle School Principal in the Denver Public Schools. She lives in Denver, Colorado.

DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

The Dissertation submitted by Christina Sylvester has been read and approved by the following committee:

Bridget Kelly, Ph.D., Director
Associate Professor, College of Education
University of Maryland

Eileen Edejer, Ph.D.
Clinical Assistant Professor, School of Education
Loyola University Chicago

Keith Wood, Ed.D.
Principal, Brooks Middle School
Bolingbrook, IL