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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN MARCOS

Women and Professional Networks: Implications for Educational Leaders and District Central  
Offices

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of  
Education

in

Educational Leadership

by

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University of California San Diego  
Professor Megan Hopkins, Chair  
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California State University, San Marcos  
Professor Brooke Soles  
Professor Patricia Stall

2020

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The Dissertation of Vanessa Arenas Lerma is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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(Chair)

University of California San Diego  
California State University, San Marcos

2020

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. To my husband, Israel, for his patience and help throughout this journey. His love and support are constant. I thank him for being my partner in life. To my parents, for always encouraging me and being there when I need them. Their love lifts me up each and every day. To my grandfather, whose hard work and sacrifice have always inspired me.

And finally, this dissertation is dedicated to my grandmother, Teresa Diaz, who is always with me. Her strength, selflessness, and love guide me in all I do. She was our matriarch and a true inspiration who always encouraged us to follow our dreams. I miss her every day.

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I am also grateful to the participants of this study. Their candidness and leadership insights have shaped my own thinking and practice. The knowledge and lessons they shared with me will stay with me forever.

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Women and Professional Networks: Implications for Educational Leaders and District Central  
Offices

by

Vanessa Arenas Lerma

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

University of California San Diego, 2020

California State University, San Marcos, 2020

Professor Megan Hopkins, Chair

Social networks in education help to facilitate collaboration and thus are important for providing professional learning opportunities. Networks are especially important for district central office leaders in that they not only contribute to professional learning and help to diffuse knowledge and resources across the organization, but they also help to advance the careers of educational leaders. Women leaders, however, often struggle with being part of these organizational networks which can negatively affect their rise in the leadership ranks of their organizations as well as how they create organizational change.

The aim of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the professional

networks of women district central office leaders and the role gender plays in these networks. The study focused on understanding how women experience networks at the district central office level and how, if at all, this impacts their leadership and career advancement.

Study findings highlight the importance of key relationships and mentors for women leaders. Women district office leaders engage in a variety of support positions and leverage relationships that they make throughout their careers as a means of professional learning, enhancing their leadership practices, and advancing their careers.

Implications for district central offices include creating specific formal and informal structures for their leaders to engage in collaborative networks and ensuring that women leaders are paired with mentors that will enhance their leadership development. Areas for further research include looking at the professional networks of male district office leaders and how their experiences compare to those of their women counterparts.

*Keywords:* district leadership networks, gender in educational leadership, women in educational administration; organizational change, career advancement in educational leadership

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The changing landscape of education continues to push teaching and learning to new heights with continued focus on improving student achievement and closing equity gaps. As much as this change can be sparked at the school level, more powerful change occurs at the organizational level via school districts or central offices. Traditionally, district central offices have been seen as primarily fiscal and administrative vehicles for federal and state initiatives (Hightower, Knapp, Marsh, & McLaughlin, 2002). However, the new wave of education has shifted the role of central offices from managerial organizations, to those that are focused on enhancing teaching and learning and ensuring student success (Honig, 2008). Thus, educational improvement is dependent on supportive, cohesive, and engaged leadership at the district central office level. Now more than ever, there is a need for central offices to work collaboratively with school leaders to support learning and growth (Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010).

Research shows that when central offices and schools do not have structures in place for communication and transfer of resources and knowledge, school outcomes can be negatively affected (Mania-Singer, 2017). Collaborative structures like formal and informal networks can be the key to productivity and growth. Creating successful schools is dependent on not just school leadership, but district and central office leadership as well. In fact, when schools and districts work together to support teaching and learning throughout the entire system, student achievement can be increased (Honig et al., 2010). District central offices, unlike at the school level, can do more to align curricular and instructional resources throughout the system thereby improving student outcomes (Daly & Finnigan, 2015).



Research of central office leaders in “boundary-spanning” roles, (roles that facilitate communication between schools, districts, and community agencies to improve student outcomes), has found that they can positively impact policy implementation throughout school districts (Honig, 2017). In order to effectively respond to changing demand and policies, district central offices must create and sustain productive partnerships with other leaders in the organization to improve the diffusion of knowledge and innovation across the system (Daly & Finnigan, 2011). Networks between and among educational leaders can serve as powerful ways for these leaders to grow in their leadership and careers.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Relationships are at the heart of organizations and form the foundation of networks which in turn provide opportunities for learning. Prior research has looked at teacher and site leaders’ networks (Daly, 2008; Daly, Moolenaar, Bolivar, & Burke, 2010; Moolenaar, 2013; Moolenaar, Slegers, & Daly, 2011; Moolenaar et al., 2012; Trotman, 2009), however, there has been very little research that has looked at networks between district central office leaders. Women central office leaders in particular have been found to face barriers in terms of networks. Research has shown that women educational leaders at the district central office level do not participate in professional networks with the frequency that men do (Ballenger, 2010; Noel-Batiste, 2008; Raskin, 2010). Recent numbers confirm that women continue to dominate the field of education but still remain on the periphery in terms of leadership positions. Studies of women leaders in education have found that many women feel excluded from leadership networks and make mention to the existence to a “good old boy network” where men connect through various means and women are shut out (Ballenger, 2010; Noel-Batiste, 2008; Raskin, 2010). Although networks exist in districts and central offices, women leaders are often left out or on the

periphery of these networks. “For women leaders, networking challenges are associated with absence of access, issues of gender bias, and challenges with life balance” (Raskin, 2010, p. 159). In one study of women educational leaders, 81% of the participants mentioned a need for increased mentoring and network opportunities (Noel-Batiste, 2008). Research about women in educational leadership networks, however, is lacking.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the professional networks of women central office administrators and how these networks enabled and/or constrained their career advancement and efforts to influence organizational change. The study also looked at how professional networks affected the participants’ professional learning, growth, and leadership practices. Unlike the extensive research on teacher networks, research on district central office leadership networks is substantially lacking. This study examined the who, what, and how of these networks and offers implications for district organizational structuring and network development. The aim of the study was also to shed light on issues of equity regarding women in district leadership roles.

### **Research Questions**

Using gender as a lens for exploring the professional networks of district central office leaders, the following research questions guided the study:

1. How do women central office leaders develop professional networks?
2. What are the characteristics of women central office leaders’ professional networks?
3. What factors enable or constrain the formation of women district leaders’ professional networks, such as formal and/or informal district structures?

4. How, if at all, do women district leaders perceive the utility of their networks for their professional learning and career advancement, as well as their efforts to engage in organizational change?

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks**

This study utilized social capital theory as a lens to frame the existing literature and analysis. Research on social networks in education was also explored to highlight the importance of the development of social capital among central office leaders. The study also used a conceptual framework that highlights how professional networks influence the areas of professional learning and growth, leadership practices, organizational change, and career advancement.

#### ***Social capital theory.***

Forming collaborative networks with others allows ideas and resources to flow among people in an organization. This is the foundation of social capital theory (Coleman, 1988). Like other forms of capital, social capital, (or the ideas, knowledge, and resources that move through an organization), is a valuable asset. How this capital is spread, both through formal and informal structures, is directly dependent on the ties that are present in the organization. One of the most fundamental principles of social capital theory centers on the idea that network ties provide direct access to resources (Nahapiet & Sumantra, 1998). Even informal social structures present in organizations can foster information transfer and the development of new ideas (Ahuja, 2000). In this way, educators and school leaders can ensure the spread of social capital by engaging in collaborative networks and establishing ties with others within their organization.

Social capital is more than just the spread and sharing of resources. At the heart of social capital theory lies the importance of relationships and connections. The relationship between and among actors, (or the people within an organization), is a basic tenant of social capital theory (Coleman, 1988). It is the relationships in an organization that allow for the transfer and sharing of information and increase the potential for change. When leaders understand the relationships present in their organizational networks, they can strategically work to build the social capital of the actors within these networks, hence creating stronger and more numerous ties across networks (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2006). The current study examined the extent to which women central office leaders have access to social capital via their networks.

### *Social networks in education.*

Taking a social network analysis approach to district networks can provide valuable information about central actors and their positions within the organization. Thus, it is essential to create opportunities for these influential actors to collaborate and connect (Daly & Finnigan, 2010). As shown through the research, leadership networks can positively influence educational leaders and their organizations (Daly, Der-Martirosian, Ong-Dean, Park, & Wishard-Guerra, 2011; Daly & Finnigan, 2015; Hite, Williams, & Baugh, 2005; Mohrman, Tenkasi, & Mohrman, 2003; Moolenaar, Daly, & Slegers, 2010; Moolenaar & Slegers, 2015). Networks help people in an organization exchange ideas and resources and foster relationships that are collaborative and supportive. These networks can help with implementing reform and change efforts. Through networks with other leaders, educational leaders can gain a shared understanding of change reform and provide formative evaluations of their efforts along the way. The network itself, through its collaborative structure and culture can support reform efforts throughout all stages of implementation (Adams & Jean-Marie, 2011). Networks throughout an organization

allow change efforts to be influenced and shaped by interactions, relationships, and social capital, thus maximizing the resources in the organization (Mohrman et al., 2003).

There is increased pressure today for schools and districts to engage in innovative practices to stimulate change, however building and sustaining the conditions for this to occur require investing in the social and relational nature of educational leadership. Focusing on the ties and networks between and among district leaders can support the development of new knowledge and innovation which can lead to improved student outcomes (Moolenaar et al., 2011).

In a field that is dominated by women, (the vast majority of teachers are women), leadership positions in schools and districts continue to be dominated by men. Why is this? As research shows, women are just as qualified as their male counterparts to hold leadership roles. In fact, women have been found to have a more collaborative leadership style than men, and have more formal preparedness, (higher levels of education), and experiential preparedness, (career paths that include more curriculum and instruction work), than men (Brunner & Kim, 2010). Moreover, women spend more time in classrooms as compared to men and are able to share more resources and insights which increase their influence over teachers (Grove & Montgomery, 1999). This can increase their social capital and make women a valuable resource in educational organizations. This is in line with research that shows that women, more often than men, exhibit qualities of transformational leadership (Bycio, Hackett, & Allen, 1995; Yammarino, Dubinsky, Comer, & Jolson, 1997). Despite this valuable leadership and expertise, however, women continue to experience bias, discrimination, and exclusion from critical professional networks that can serve to increase their professional growth and career trajectories.

This study illuminates some of the reasons behind this fact and provides important implications for school districts to rethink their collaborative structures.

### **Overview of Methods**

A phenomenological approach was used to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon of women and professional networks within the context of district central office leadership. This approach allowed for the study of individuals and focused on themes and commonalities that emerged from their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By studying a group of women central office leaders from various districts, insight into the role that gender played in their experiences was also gained.

#### ***Participants.***

For this study, ten women central office leaders from mid-size school districts across San Diego County were chosen as participants. The participants' positions ranged from directors, executive directors, and assistant superintendents.

#### ***Data collection methods and analysis.***

For this phenomenological study, two semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants to fully gain an understanding of their experiences with professional networks and how, if at all, these networks had shaped their leadership practices and/or their professional paths. Interview protocols were designed with both the study's conceptual framework and research questions in mind.

In this study, data analysis methods based on phenomenological research design were employed (Moustakas, 1994). First and second cycle coding was used to analyze codes, generate themes, and arrive at assertions based on the data.

## **Significance of the Study**

The study helps facilitate reflection and conversations about how women experience networks and support in their careers at the district central office level. This leads to a better understanding of the experiences of women and thus possibly lead to better systems and structures for these leaders to engage in networks that enhance their professional learning, growth, and advancement.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A study focused on the professional networks of women district office leaders needs a firm basis in prior empirical research. Although research on district office leaders and their involvement in professional networks is scarce, research on social capital theory and social networks in education will ground the study and illuminate its findings. This literature review begins with a discussion of the social nature of education and social capital theory. Next, the study's conceptual framework that highlights the importance of district central office leaders' professional networks to promote their professional learning, enhance their leadership practices, support organizational change, and positively affect their career advancement will be introduced.

### **Education as a Social Endeavor**

Teaching and learning are relational in nature. They are both shaped by the social context, which influences the opportunities that individuals have to interact and collaborate around a shared purpose or goal. To this end, the development and effects of collaborative structures like professional learning communities have been researched heavily in recent decades, with positive impacts revealed for teachers and students (Buisse, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003; DuFour, 2004; Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). For example, research shows that when teachers collaborate, student achievement is positively impacted (Goddard, Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, 2007; Ronfeldt, Farmer, McQueen, & Grissom, 2015).

Although much literature has focused on the benefits of collaboration on teacher practice and student outcomes, less focuses on the opportunities that educational leaders have to interact and collaborate, and to what ends. One recent study described the benefits of collaborative



structures among school principals at both the individual and organizational levels; when principals were able seek advice and share ideas with other leaders in their district, these individual learning opportunities facilitated organizational change in their schools ((Umekubo, Chrispeels, & Daly, 2015). Indeed, the professional capacity of school leaders has been found to be enhanced and strengthened through the connections they formed in collaborative networks (Leithwood & Azah, 2016). Further, when principals collaborate with others within their school organizations, they have opportunities to engage all stakeholders in processes of collaborative problem-solving, which can lead to enhanced communication and knowledge distribution across their schools (Tschannen-Moran, Uline, Woolfolk Hoy, & Mackley, 2000).

While the available literature points to the benefits of interaction and collaboration between school leaders, far less is known about the opportunities that district leaders have to share ideas and advice with one another, and to what ends. This study focuses on central office leaders' opportunities to interact and collaborate with one another, and the extent to which these interactions afford them support and guidance that helps them move their organizations forward as well as impacts their career advancement. Given the underrepresentation of women in school district central offices in the United States (American Association of School Administrators, 2016), yet their potential to enact transformational leadership in their organizations (Bycio et al., 1995; Yammarino et al., 1997), the study focused specifically on women leaders. The study was broadly framed by social capital theory and was motivated by the extant theoretical and empirical literature related to social networks, both of which are explicated further below.

### **Social Capital Theory**

Social capital can be defined as the resources and knowledge that flow through relational networks (Ahuja, 2000; Coleman, 1988; Nahapiet & Sumantra, 1998). In education, networks

that facilitate access to social capital can positively impact student achievement and organizational change. Related to the former, students have been found to perform better when their teachers work in teams with strong ties as well as have strong ties with their administrators (Pil & Leana, 2009). With respect to the latter, networks rich in instructional expertise can help to enhance the diffusion of innovative ideas within and across schools (Frank, Zhao, & Borman, 2004). In schools where teachers and administrators have opportunities to share work-related advice, their school climates tend to become more innovative, which leads to enhanced reform and change efforts (Moolenaar, Slegers, & Daly, 2011).

Attention to the quality of interactions in a network is important for ensuring social capital development. Establishing clear goals and ensuring the application of new knowledge gained from interactions are critical conditions for successful networks among educators (Kuhn, 2015). Indeed, when districts strategically facilitate ties between school administrators, the transfer of resources can be enhanced (Daly & Finnigan, 2011). In general, patterns of ties in a network can either support or limit resource exchange (Daly, 2012). As Daly and Finnigan (2011) point out, by allowing ties to flourish between and among school leaders, districts can increase their social capital which can lead to organizational improvement. On the other hand, when site leaders are not given central roles in their districts' social networks and remain on the periphery, they have limited access to resources and advice.

One important component of network development is trust, as trusting relationships can facilitate resource and information exchange among district and school leaders (Daly & Finnigan, 2011). As Calabrese (2006) notes, relationships centered on common outcomes, dialogue, and collaboration can lead to a transformative learning culture where information and resources are shared and valued within and between schools. It is thus imperative that

educational leaders have opportunities to develop trusting relationships that support both their organizational and personal growth. This study examined these opportunities for women central office leaders using social networks as an analytical lens.

**Conceptual Framework: Networks, Learning, Leadership, Organizational Change, and Career Advancement**

To highlight the importance of professional networks among district central office leaders, the following conceptual framework was used to illustrate how professional networks can contribute to educational leaders’ professional learning and growth. As shown through the conceptual framework below, professional networks can help central office leaders, (especially women), by providing professional learning and growth which in turn can lead to enhanced leadership practices. The benefits of this are two-fold, enhancing their skills to enact organizational change as well as move forward in their careers.

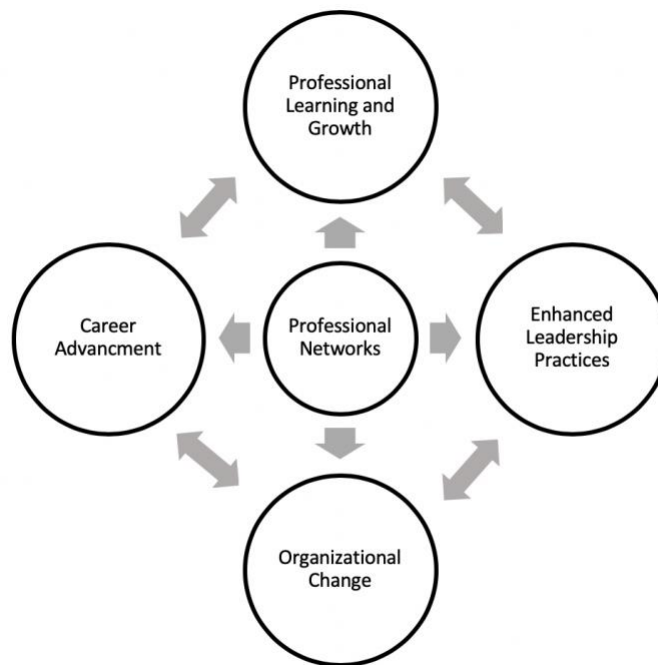


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

The following sections will explore the ways that networks can impact and enhance professional learning, leadership practices, and influence organizational change as well as career advancement.

### ***Social networks in education.***

Leadership is relational, and at its core, involves managing the multiple relationships that are present in an organization. Social network analysis offers a systemic approach to identifying and understanding the connections and ties that exist in schools and educational systems (Daly, Moolenaar, Bolivar, & Burke, 2010). In the social network perspective, value is placed on the ties that exist among people in an organization, as these ties facilitate access to social capital (Ahuja, 2000; Balkundi & Harrison, 2006; Balkundi & Kilduff, 2006; Venkataramani, Green, & Schleicher, 2010). Research suggests that even indirect ties can enhance network benefits and cultivate innovation within an organization, thus highlighting the power of social ties and relationships (Ahuja, 2000). Furthermore, social network analysis can help identify strong and weak ties in an organization. Whereas strong ties are effective at spreading richer and more detailed information between people and groups, weak ties enable the diffusion of more varied information among a wider variety of actors (Tenkasi & Chesmore, 2003). Strong ties have been found to have more influence on organizational change, and weak ties are important for controlling how change efforts are rolled out.

Overall, a social network perspective can help to shed light on the flow of resources within organizations and provide data to inform practice. It can serve as a powerful tool for investigating the quantity and quality of connections among individuals within and between organizations (Pitts & Spillane, 2009). The extant literature on social networks in education is

reviewed below, with an emphasis on findings relevant to educational leaders and the factors shaping network development.

**Leader networks.** Though the study focused on district central office leaders, much of the prior scholarship has focused on teachers' and school principals' social networks (Daly, 2008; Daly, Moolenaar, Bolivar, & Burke, 2010; Moolenaar, 2013; Moolenaar, Slegers, & Daly, 2011; Moolenaar et al., 2012; Trotman, 2009), and highlights the important role networks play in improving instruction and student learning. Network research focused on teachers shows that, when they are involved in networks with dense ties, they are able to take a more active role in shared decision-making in their schools leading to innovation across the organization (Moolenaar et al., 2011).

As with teachers, research has shown that the social networks that principals engage in can strengthen their leadership capacity, confidence, and overall performance. Principals' leadership roles in their schools can allow them to not only access resources in their school and district networks, but also can influence the flow and exchange of these resources (Moolenaar & Slegers, 2015). Research suggests that principals play a central role in the ties that exist within their organizations because of their leadership status (Venkataramani et al., 2010). Specifically, if school principals can influence the ties and networks in their organizations, then they can play a critical role in impacting teacher development and in turn, student outcomes.

School principals can be involved in multiple networks that serve different purposes, such as facilitating innovation, sharing resources, and offering social/emotional support (Hite et al., 2005). Importantly, these specialized ties and connections can support principals' professional learning and growth. Understanding the purposes of their multiple networks can help inform principals' decision-making and enhance their change efforts. Indeed, school

leaders' engagement in networks as been associated with transformational leadership practices (Bono & Anderson, 2005; Daly, Der-Martirosian, Ong-Dean, Park, & Wishard-Guerra, 2011; Moolenaar, Daly, & Slegers, 2010; Moolenaar & Slegers, 2015). Principals who are seen as transformational leaders, or leaders who create a clear and inspirational vision for their organizations, are more likely to be sought for advice and information, thus allowing them to play a more central part in their school's social network. Additionally, principals who are more connected to their teachers have been found to establish a school climate that is more collaborative and innovative (Moolenaar et al., 2010).

On a more individual level, peer networks can help principals develop their own leadership and learning. Principals' peer leadership networks can allow for the exchange of ideas and advice in a supportive environment (Hoppe & Reinelt, 2010). Having a network of peers to collaborate and share ideas with can help school leaders work through the ever-increasing demands of the job and extinguish feelings of isolation that are so common among principals, especially novices (Spillane & Lee, 2014). Engaging in networks with other leaders can not only enhance principals' school leadership capacity, but it can also foster network leadership (Leithwood & Azah, 2016). Participation in leadership networks can provide principals with the professional learning and growth that they need to be successful, which can impact leadership at their school sites, as well as in the district as a whole, leading to systems-wide change. As such, ensuring that educational leaders have opportunities to collaborate and connect, and are involved in a variety of networks, can yield positive results for school districts (Daly & Finnigan, 2010). Though the extant research suggests positive effects of social networks for school leaders, less is known about district leaders' social networks. In the next section, the factors that may shape district leaders' networks are explored.

### *Organizational and individual factors shaping networks.*

To better understand the factors shaping district leaders' networks, this section presents an overview of organizational and individual differences in networks, with a focus on gender.

**Organizational factors.** One way that central offices can facilitate social networks is by providing formal organizational structures in which leaders have structured opportunities to collaborate. Research has shown that placing administrators in cohort groups made of site and district administrators can enhance social capital development by supporting the professional learning and growth of the organization's leaders and enhancing the school district's collective efficacy (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000; Daly, 2008; Umekubo, Chrispeels, & Daly, 2015). The cohort structure can also lead to the development of informal ties that support leadership practices, teacher development, and student achievement. When evaluating structures such as this, Hopkins and Woulfin (2015) argue that "any examination of educational infrastructure requires attention to both (1) the structures and tools that policy-makers use to implement large-scale reforms (e.g., standards, curricula, professional development), and (2) how these structures and tools are taken up and reshaped by leaders and teachers in their particular local contexts" (p. 372). In essence, collaboration structures present within districts can be examined for how leaders within them shape their implementation. Moreover, examining formal school district structures as they relate to social networks can shed light on their influence on both leadership and teaching practices within the system as a whole (Hopkins, Spillane, Jakopovic, & Heaton, 2013).

Mentorship structures have also been found to enhance educational leaders' development and professional growth (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Grogan & Crow, 2004). Mentorship

can develop through both formal structures and informal mechanisms, and can provide leaders with professional development “that involves the social construction of professional-practice expectations through mentoring, peer sharing and critique, and systematic induction” (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004, p. 471). Mentoring can also be an effective way of socializing novice leaders to the specific skills and knowledge needed in their roles.

**Gender.** Research has shown that women often experience exclusion when it comes to leadership networks (Ballenger, 2010; Noel-Batiste, 2008; Raskin, 2010). Gender bias and stereotypes have been attributed to this exclusion from leadership networks. Research by Noel-Batiste (2008) found that the vast majority of women felt that they are still perceived by stereotyped roles. According to Ely, Ibarra, Kolb, Ely, and Kolb (2018), “organizational hierarchies in which men predominate, along with practices that equate leadership with behaviors believed to be more common or appropriate in men, powerfully if unwittingly communicate that women are ill-suited for leadership roles” (p. 475).

Differences in leadership styles indeed differ between women and men. Women leaders have been found to engage in more supportive, facilitative, and collaborative leadership as compared to men, who utilize a more top-down approach to leading (Grove & Montgomery, 1999). Valentine and Godkin (2000) found that a supervisor’s gender did influence the way their subordinates perceived their leadership and thus, noted that gender is indeed a factor that influences others’ view of a leader. However, Pounder and Coleman (2002) suggest that the argument of whether men or women make better leaders is missing the point. They contend that our current changing educational landscape “demands leaders that have the flexibility to range



over an array of leadership qualities that have been labeled masculine and feminine” (Pounder & Coleman, 2002, p. 128).

Despite positive attributes that many women leaders possess, they continue to be shut out of leadership networks, lack the mentoring opportunities to develop their skills, and continue to face traditional gender stereotypes.

**Race and ethnicity.** Women, especially Latina women, lack mentoring opportunities and relationships in their careers (Méndez-Morse, 2004). Although usually having more years of experience than their male counterparts, women leaders experience limited recruitment and opportunities for supported career advancement. According to Méndez-Morse (2004), “because mentoring traditionally has been centered as practiced by males and Whites, the consideration of race or ethnicity, along with gender, can lead to reassessing the importance of mentors to career advancement” (p. 562). The exclusion of women from mentoring and career advancement opportunities, whether formal or informal, may have negative implications for their network development, and thus for their individual and organizational growth and change as well as their career advancement.

***Organizational change.***

As shown through the aforementioned research, leadership networks can positively influence educational leaders and their organizations. Networks help school leaders exchange ideas and resources and foster relationships that are collaborative and supportive. These networks can help with implementing school-wide reforms and change efforts. Research has shown (Adams & Jean-Marie, 2011), that networks with other leaders allow school principals to gain a shared understanding of change reform and provide formative evaluations of their efforts

along the way. The network itself, through its collaborative structure and culture can support reform efforts throughout all stages of implementation (Adams & Jean-Marie, 2011).

The power that social networks have in implementing or inhibiting reform efforts is significant. Leaders have a particularly important role to play in these efforts. Research has shown that school principals are central in their school networks and can broker the resources and exchanges in their organizations (Daly, Moolenaar, Bolivar, & Burke, 2010; Spillane & Kim, 2012). School principals can control and restrict flows of information within their school networks which can then lead to greater spread of innovation and organizational change (Frank, Penuel, & Krause, 2014). Thus, by acknowledging and understanding the importance of site principals, school districts and central offices can work to develop their social capital by shaping the leadership networks that are formed throughout the organization.

To enact school-wide change, school districts need to take a close look at the networks that exist and that are supported throughout the district and system as a whole. Rather than seeing school improvement as a site responsibility, school districts must instead take a collective and systems-view of organizational change to positively affect student achievement. When principals choose to interact and collaborate with other school leaders from across their districts, they can help move new ideas and resources across the system and therefore contribute to the spread of innovative change efforts. School districts could use information from social network analysis to put in place structures for their leaders to collaborate and exchange resources, and thus focus on the power of connections among those in their organization. When school districts make an effort to increase the ties between school principals and other district leaders, the organization's capacity for change can be enhanced and strengthened (Daly & Finnigan, 2011).

Relationships are the heart of school organizations and form the foundation of networks that lead to individual and organizational learning. By applying social network theory and analysis to educational networks, we can better understand the kinds of ties that exist in these networks and that are needed in our schools and districts. Applying social network analysis to the professional networks central office leaders are a part of can shed light on how resources flow within an organization and thus illuminate important considerations for enacting organizational change.

School districts can enhance the leadership capacity of their leaders by supporting the development of leadership networks that provide these leaders with the resources and support they need to enact change throughout the organization. These networks can also strengthen the collective social capital by increasing the organizational learning of the district itself and help to sustain systems-wide change. District central offices must then thoughtfully and purposefully create structures for both formal and informal networks and ties to develop between their leaders (Daly & Finnigan, 2011; Finnigan, Daly, & Che, 2013; Umekubo et al., 2015).

### ***Career advancement.***

Research on network behaviors has found that behaviors such as increasing internal visibility and engaging in professional activities positively influence career success outcomes (Hecht & Allen, 2009). For example, engaging in highly visible work assignments or participation in network structures such as task forces and committees can give district central office leaders opportunities to showcase their skills and prove their capabilities thus helping their career advancement. However, Hecht & Allen (2009) found that involvement in network behavior was more beneficial for men rather than women. In the case of increasing internal visibility, it was found to be more significantly related to the number of promotions and

compensation for men than that of women. This points to prior research that has shown that women struggle with acceptance into professional networks (Ballenger, 2010; Noel-Batiste, 2008). Furthermore, research has also found that men use their network activities more effectively than women and are more likely to seek out important people to network with thus aiding their career advancement efforts (Singh, Kumra, & Vinnicombe, 2002; van Emmerik, Euwema, Geschiere, & Schouten, 2006).

### **Summary**

The number of women in educational leadership positions at the district central office level is disproportionate with the number of women in teaching positions. Research on social networks in education shows a positive correlation with leadership enhancement and professional learning and can thus lead to career advancement. This phenomenological study looked at the professional networks of women district office leaders in order to shed light on factors that improve the skills and career trajectories of these important leaders and thus, aims to provide districts with valuable implications for ensuring that structures for support and development are created for their leaders.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the methodology used to describe the experiences of women district central office leaders. Included in the chapter will be the research questions and overview of phenomenological research. In addition, the research design of the study will be described as will participants, data collection, and data analysis methods.

### **Research Questions**

Using gender as a lens for exploring the professional networks of women district leaders, the following research questions guided the study:

1. How do women central office leaders develop professional networks?
2. What are the characteristics of women central office leaders' professional networks?
3. What factors enable or constrain the formation of women district leaders' professional networks, such as formal and/or informal district structures?
4. How, if at all, do women district leaders perceive the utility of their networks for their professional learning and career advancement, as well as their efforts to engage in organizational change?

### **Research Design**

The study used a phenomenological research design. Phenomenology focuses on telling a story and in this case, the story of several women leaders' common and shared experiences can provide insight to school districts about the systems and structures that are in place for their leaders. Phenomenology is rooted in philosophy, and as such, has certain philosophical

assumptions that are based on the fact that this approach relies heavily on the study of the lived experiences of persons and the descriptions of the essence of these experiences rather than explanations (Moustakas, 1994).

van Manen (2014) elaborated on this research approach to include the interpretation of the participants' lived experiences on the part of the researcher. He highlighted the importance of reflecting on essential themes that emerge from the participants and interpreting these themes as they relate to the phenomenon. According to van Manen (2007), "phenomenology formatively informs, reforms, transforms, performs, and performs the relation between being and practice" (p. 26). In this way, the study intended to uncover women leaders' experiences and shed light on district practices that can result in change.

The study followed Moustakas' (1994) systematic approach to phenomenological research which includes identifying a phenomenon to study, collecting data from individuals who have experienced this phenomenon by using in-depth interviews, generating themes and descriptions from these interviews that capture the essence of the phenomenon, and interpretation of these themes to present an understanding of the phenomenon.

In a field dominated by women, leadership roles in the field, especially at the district central office level, continue to be dominated by men. Exploring the reasons behind this issue lends itself well to qualitative research design where participants in the study can be empowered to share their stories and give insight about their lived experience with gender and leadership. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), "we conduct qualitative research because we want to understand the contexts or settings in which participants in a study address a problem or issue" (p. 45). A phenomenological approach was used to explore the lived experiences of women district office leaders and their paths to leadership. Their leadership experiences and career paths

were used to explore the phenomenon of women leaders' professional networks as a way to understand gender inequities.

## **Participants**

For this study, ten women central office leaders were selected ranging in position from directors, executive directors, and assistant superintendents. While there has been an abundance of research on women and the superintendency, (Ballenger, 2010; Brunner & Kim, 2010; Brunner & Grogan, 2005; Brunner, 2000; Grogan, 2005; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011), research on mid-level district office positions has been relatively unexplored. Because of the variability in leadership structures between small and large districts, women leaders for this study were chosen from mid-size districts (20,000-30,000 students) in San Diego County. This allowed for more consistency in leadership structures within their respective districts. These mid-size districts all had multiple leadership positions at the central office level (e.g., directors, executive directors, and assistant superintendents) which allowed for more interactions among leaders in the district. This helped to provide a common base for looking at the professional networks of the women in the study.

My positionality as the researcher, (being an administrator in a San Diego County school district elementary school) helped with participant selection because of my connections with many district central office administrators from across the county. After contacting women central office leaders in my own professional network, snowball sampling was employed (Noy, 2008), to identify other possible participants. That is, several of the participants were able to suggest other possible participant candidates. District website and department lists were also used to identify participants for the study.

In total, 14 women district office leaders received an email participation request describing the study. From this, 10 participants responded and showed interest in the study. As mentioned above, participants were all from San Diego County school districts and included two Hispanic/Latina women and one African American woman to give me the opportunity to explore how gender affects networks among these women with a secondary focus on race.

It is significant to note that during the participant selection process, finding women of color in district leadership roles in San Diego county proved to be challenging. Overall, the women were selected from four mid-size districts across San Diego county. Looking at these districts as a whole, it is important to note that women made up approximately 67% of mid-level district office leadership. This number is indeed higher than what prior research has shown about women in leadership positions at the central office level. Again, the lack of women of color in these positions was stark as they made up only about 10% of these leadership roles. Although the number of women in district leadership positions in the county seemed comparable to men in these positions, women of color were scarce and thus added to the urgency of the study.

Participant profiles were created using demographic information gathered as well as professional years of experience described in their interviews. These profiles describe each participant and allowed me to highlight any common qualities and experiences across participants (Alverson, Lindstrom, & Hirano, 2015). The following is a profile of each of the participants:



Table 1. Participant profiles.

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Current Role</b>	<b>Years in Education</b>	<b>Race</b>
<i>Carol</i>	Assistant Superintendent	30+	White
<i>Cindy</i>	Assistant Superintendent	30+	White
<i>Lauren</i>	Executive Director	20+	White
<i>Julie</i>	Executive Director	20+	White
<i>Heather</i>	Executive Director	30+	White
<i>Monica</i>	Executive Director	20+	Latina
<i>Ana</i>	Director	20+	Latina
<i>Amy</i>	Director	30+	White
<i>Jackie</i>	Director	20+	African American
<i>Marie</i>	Director	20+	White

### **Data Collection**

After obtaining informed consent, I collected data through two face-to-face interviews with participants over a three-month time period. Interviews were approximately 30 to 60 minutes in length and included questions and follow-up questions that focused on the participants' experience with professional networks as it pertained to their leadership skills and career paths.

Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) described interviews as “attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of their lived world” (p. 3). The interviews conducted in the study gave women educational leaders the opportunity to share their experiences with leadership and career advancement as it pertained to their gender and allowed me to gain an understanding of this and the implications this could have on district-level structures for professional networks.

Participants were asked broad and open-ended questions that allowed them to describe their experience with the phenomenon being studied (Moustakas, 1994). In alignment with the study's conceptual framework, the following major topics were addressed in the interview protocols: (a) professional learning and growth, (b) leadership practices, (c) organizational change, and (d) career advancement. The study's conceptual framework was used as a way to explore professional networks.

The first interview focused on each participant's journey within education and leadership with hopes of understanding each participant's leadership abilities and skills. Hearing each participant's career path story allowed me to better understand each woman as an educational leader and their experiences employing their leadership skills in their various organizations, as well as help to develop rapport. During the first round of interviews, the constructs of professional learning and organizational change were also addressed. Examples of questions that were asked during the first interview as well as the conceptual framework constructs that they relate to are illustrated in the table below.

Table 2. Interview questions and conceptual framework constructs.

Conceptual Framework Construct	Interview Question
<p><i>Career Advancement</i></p> <p><i>Professional Learning and Growth</i></p>	<p>Walk me through the career path you've taken thus far.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What leadership roles have you held?</li> <li>• What brought you to your current role?</li> <li>• What challenges, if any, have you faced to advancing your career? What has facilitated your advancement?</li> </ul>
<p><i>Professional Learning and Growth</i></p> <p><i>Enhanced Leadership Practices</i></p> <p><i>Organizational Change</i></p>	<p>What opportunities, as an educational leader, have you had to engage in professional learning and growth?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What was the most impactful learning experience you've had as a leader?</li> <li>• How, if at all, have these opportunities influenced your leadership skills and practices?</li> <li>• How has your school district supported these opportunities?</li> </ul>
<p><i>Organizational Change</i></p> <p><i>Enhanced Leadership Practices</i></p>	<p>Describe your experience/involvement with enacting organizational change. Provide a specific example if possible.</p>

The second round of interviews focused on the relationships and networks of each participant with the intention of better understanding the ways each had shaped their career paths and leadership. During the second interview, I not only focused on how participants had

experienced networks in their careers, but also the kinds of networks they had engaged in and how these had enhanced both their leadership skills and careers. This round of interviews addressed the conceptual framework constructs of networks and career advancement. During this interview, I created a network chart with each participant to identify the participant's different networks and illustrate any overlap. Table 3 shows a sample of the chart that was created with each participant.

Table 3. Participant network chart.

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Career Network</b>	<b>Professional Learning Network</b>	<b>Personal Network</b>

The following questions were asked during the second interview to help guide the development of the network chart above:

- Which person/persons have been most influential in guiding your career path?
  - For each person named:
    - How do you know this person? (Elicit background information, such as their job title, position, race/ethnicity, gender, etc.)
    - How have they influenced your career choices/path?
- To whom do you currently collaborate with/seek out for professional learning and growth?
  - For each person named:
    - How do you know this person? (Elicit background information, such as their job title and position, race/ethnicity, gender, etc.)
    - How often do you turn to this person?

- Why do you collaborate with this person for professional learning?
- To whom do you currently collaborate with/seek out in your current leadership role?
  - For each person named:
    - How do you know this person? (Elicit background information, such as their job title and position, race/ethnicity, gender, etc.)
    - How often do you turn to this person?
    - Why do you seek this person out?
- How, if at all, have personal relationships outside of your professional networks supported you in your career journey?

During the interview process, I made personal contact with all participants and traveled to a mutually agreed upon interview location. All interviews were recorded, stored on a password protected computer, and transcribed verbatim with the intent to capture the essence of each participant's lived experience.

### **Data Analysis**

All interviews were transcribed and listened to by me to ensure accuracy. Hand-coding was used as a means to interpret the interview data. According to Saldaña (2016), “just as a title represents and captures a book, film, or poem’s primary content and essence, so does a code represent and capture a datum’s primary content and essence” (p. 4). To capture the “essence” of the dataset, both first- and second-cycle coding were employed to capture themes from the participants’ interviews. This process of cyclical process of coding allowed for a thorough and deep analysis of the data and helped to draw out “significant statements” that provided an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

During the first cycle of coding, I identified broad themes that emerged from the participants' experiences in order to begin exploring commonalities. In this cycle of coding, codes were organized in a table by participant and interview as a way to begin sorting and categorizing common codes. Recurring, common codes were then placed into a matrix by participant to allow me to count the number of times codes occurred in the data and look for trends. Codes were then placed in categories to allow me to gain a broader perspective of the phenomenon and allow for themeing of the data. In these categories, themes emerged from the broad codes. The figure below shows an example of how the broad code of "relationships" was used to highlight the themes that emerged which later helped me develop assertions based on the data during my second cycle of coding. The example below shows how I organized codes and themes based on the broad code of "relationships". I used a backwards mapping approach when organizing the codes in order to help categorize and classify the data. For example, throughout the interviews, "strong women" and "motherly figures" were reoccurring codes that were noted. I then was able to put these in the broader category of "mentorship by others", then "mentorship", and finally in the broad category of "relationships". Representing and mapping the data in this way allowed me to get a broader perspective when connecting ideas and themes.

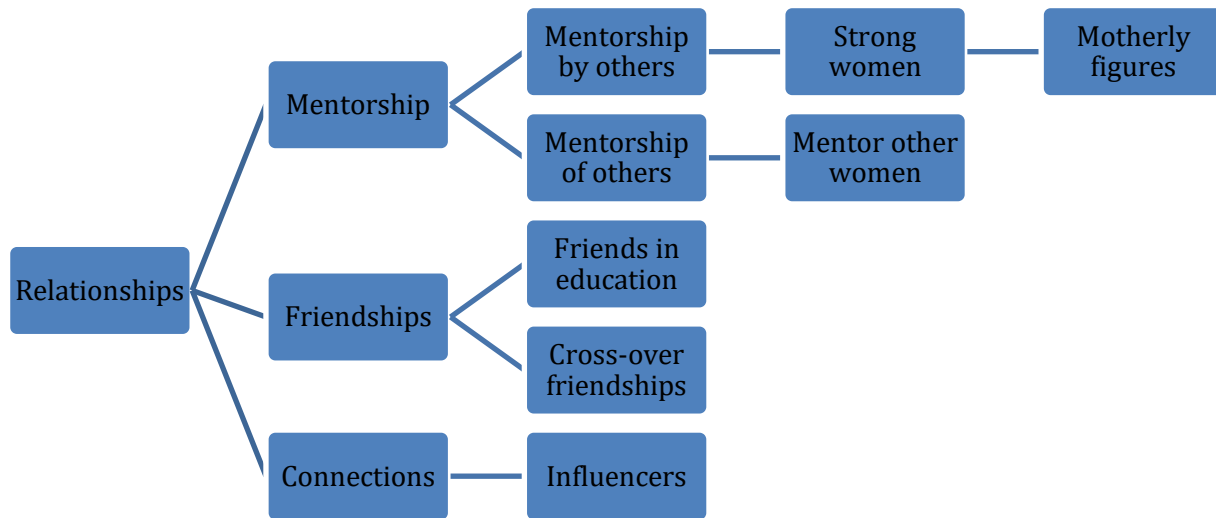


Figure 2. Code and theme categories.

In the second cycle of coding, the study’s conceptual framework was used as a way to organize and synthesize the data and provide further theme development. This was done as a way to illustrate how each participant’s journey and story correlated to the study’s conceptual framework and the constructs of professional learning and growth, enhanced leadership practices, organizational change, and career advancement. This process of organizing themes by the study’s conceptual framework allowed me to get a sense of the role that each of the constructs played in the participants’ career journey and it also helped me notice patterns and broad themes across all participants. Table 4 shows an example of how themes were categorized by the study’s conceptual framework constructs and by participant.

Table 4. Participant conceptual framework matrix.

	<b>Professional Learning &amp; Growth</b>	<b>Enhanced Leadership Practices</b>	<b>Organizational Change</b>	<b>Career Advancement</b>
<b>Carol</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning from others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Achiever</li> <li>• Hard worker</li> <li>• Dedication</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• People skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Doing what's right for kids</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unintentional career path</li> <li>• Longevity</li> <li>• Recruitment/encouragement from colleagues/administrators</li> <li>• Multiple support positions</li> </ul>
<b>Cindy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning from others</li> <li>• Desire to learn and grow as a professional</li> <li>• Learn through experience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Love people</li> <li>• Hard worker</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Empathy</li> <li>• All about the kids</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working as a team</li> <li>• Listening</li> <li>• Team effort</li> <li>• Courageous leadership</li> <li>• Building relationships and trust</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unintentional career path</li> <li>• Longevity</li> <li>• Recruitment/encouragement from colleagues/administrators</li> <li>• Multiple support positions</li> <li>• Mentorship</li> </ul>

Categorizing the themes by the study's conceptual framework constructs helped me arrive at assertions based on the data and the constructs. Seeing the themes across constructs and participants allowed me to visually make broader connections and assertions. I then created a table that listed the common themes by construct and then developed my assertions for each construct. Table 5 illustrates this process.



Table 5. Conceptual framework constructs, themes, and assertions.

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Assertions</b>
<i>Professional Learning and Growth</i>	<p>Learning from others            Learning through experience            Seeking opportunities for growth</p>	<p><i>Women leaders learn from and collaborate with others to enhance their professional learning and growth.</i></p> <p><i>Women leaders often learn through experience and longevity in their roles.</i></p>
<i>Enhanced Leadership Practices</i>	<p>Relationships and people skills            Collaboration            Openness and knowing your purpose</p>	<p><i>Women leaders focus on relationship-building and have enhanced “people skills”.</i></p> <p><i>Women leaders engage in collaborative leadership.</i></p> <p><i>Women leaders are driven by their passion and purpose in their work.</i></p>
<i>Organizational Change</i>	<p>Relationships            Strengths-based</p>	<p><i>Women leaders leverage relationships when planning for and enacting organizational change.</i></p> <p><i>Women leaders take a strengths-based approach to organizational change.</i></p>
<i>Career Advancement</i>	<p>Unintentional career path            Longevity            Encouragement and recruitment from others            Mentorship</p>	<p><i>Women in district leadership positions often follow an unintentional career path.</i></p> <p><i>Women leaders spend more time in classroom, coaching, and other support positions before attaining district leadership positions.</i></p> <p><i>Women leaders are often recruited and encouraged by colleagues and/or other administrators.</i></p> <p><i>Mentorship and connections with specific people help develop women’s leadership skills and career paths.</i></p>

Engaging in both first and second cycle coding helped me to thoroughly explore the data and make connections across participants, themes, and constructs. The first cycle allowed me to code and arrive at themes, which in the second cycle of coding fostered the development of my assertions.

## **Validity**

A number of validation strategies were used in this study. First, I focused on establishing a rapport with the participants. Some participants were persons that I had formed professional relationships with and came from districts in which I had a cultural understanding of. This validation strategy is what Creswell and Poth (2018) refer to as “prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field” (p. 262).

Another validation strategy that was employed was clarifying researcher bias and engaging in reflexivity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I am a woman and a school administrator with aspirations of possibly becoming a district-level leader in the future and therefore interested in the comments of the participants and outcome of the study. It was important to the integrity of the study that I engage in reflexivity (Creswell & Poth, 2018) so that my biases and values would not skew the interpretations of data.

## **Limitations**

One limitation of the study is the fact that only women leaders from mid-size districts were interviewed. They had all either stayed in the same district for their career or had changed from similar size districts. Being of a certain size meant that the districts that these women were from all had similar mid-level leadership positions in existence in their district central offices. The availability of these positions could have had an impact on their career paths and

advancement. Similarly, women leaders in smaller or larger districts may face differences in career advancement and career path trajectory due to the kinds of positions, (or lack of), that are available in their respective districts.

Another limitation to the study is that only women leaders were interviewed and thus, the career experiences of male district office leaders were not included. By studying male leaders as well, gender differences and inequities could be further highlighted and compared.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to explore the professional networks of women central office leaders and how, if at all, these networks influenced their professional learning, leadership practices, organizational change efforts, and career advancement. The study also aimed to shed light on issues of gender equity in district leadership roles. This chapter stated the study's research questions and provided an overview of phenomenological research. The research design of the study was described as well as the data collection methods. The process of data analysis was also described along with validity and study limitations. The study's conceptual framework was used throughout the process of data analysis to explore the role that professional networks played in the participants' journey.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this chapter is to share the findings that emerged during this phenomenological study of women district office leaders and their experiences with networks throughout their career paths. This research study was designed to provide insight as to how professional networks impact women leaders' professional learning and growth, leadership practices, organizational change efforts, and career advancement.

Using gender as a lens for exploring the professional networks of women district leaders, the following research questions guided the study:

1. How do women central office leaders develop professional networks?
2. What are the characteristics of women central office leaders' professional networks?
3. What factors enable or constrain the formation of women district leaders' professional networks, such as formal and/or informal district structures?
4. How, if at all, do women district leaders perceive the utility of their networks for their professional learning and career advancement, as well as their efforts to engage in organizational change?

The findings are organized by the constructs of the study's conceptual framework. Challenges faced by the women throughout their career paths are also discussed as well as a summary of themes as they relate to the study's research questions. Themes that emerged from the interview data were categorized according to the constructs of the conceptual framework and analyzed accordingly, as it provided the conceptual base for the study. The findings are described in the following sections.

## **Conceptual Framework Construct 1: Professional Learning and Growth**

In the area of professional learning and growth, all participants exhibited a strong desire to learn and grow professionally throughout their careers. The themes that emerged in this construct were that of learning from others, learning through experience, and seeking opportunities for growth. Through these themes, the following assertions were made:

1. Women leaders learn from and collaborate with others to enhance their professional learning and growth.
2. Women leaders often learn through experience and longevity in their roles.

### ***Learning from others.***

The idea of learning from others was mentioned by nearly all participants. Throughout their careers, the women mentioned how a great deal of their learning occurred through collaboration and observing other leaders and colleagues. Learning from other leaders was instrumental for these women. As Carol, (an Assistant Superintendent), stated,

The real learning started when I became a [vice principal] ...and I learned from my colleagues. I had three other assistant principals I worked with, all men and one was sort of...the lead VP even though there wasn't a title...I would go into his office a lot. 'Okay, what do I do now? Here's the situation.' Always running situation scenarios by him...I think there was an expectation that you learned from your team and I think that's pretty much still the case.

Throughout her career, Carol collaborated with others to enhance her own skills and improve her practice. This was a strong theme across all the women leaders.

For many of the participants, there were specific people who they learned from that served as mentors for their learning and leadership development. Ana, (a district Director), stated, "I always say I became [her]. I became Jenny today. I was doing those dialogues

because she would walk classrooms with me and we would step out of the room and she'd be like, 'What did you see?' I'm like, you go first. Because I didn't, I didn't know really well how to do that. And so, she taught me how to do that through those conversations." For Ana, the idea of "becoming" other people illustrated her reliance on mentors to guide her learning and growth.

Similarly, for Assistant Superintendent Cindy, it was "Kelly" and "Frank" that helped her learn early in her leadership career. She stated, "Kelly...the way she put systems in place, I learned from her, and the way she really dealt with the team of administrators, my colleagues, and me. Frank...he just continued to just give me opportunities, and the way he treated people. Kelly was more about the way she worked with teams. Frank was more about the way he treated individuals." Cindy, like many of the other participants, had specific people that she attributed her learning to.

When learning from others, all the women interviewed mentioned repeatedly how collaboration with others was vital in their learning and crucial to their success in past and current roles. This collaboration came in the form of both professional networks that had been established along their careers as well as friendship and personal networks.

### ***Professional networks.***

In terms of professional networks, some of the participants mentioned district structures that had been in place for collaboration to occur. As Carol described,

I work directly with the principals. We meet, we have an organizational meeting monthly that's Principals' Council, and I found that was just more nuts and bolts, there's not time to get into any deeper discussions. So, I started meetings ... and that includes like the Superintendent's Cabinet and some key directors. I started meeting monthly with just principals and then invited the Superintendent to sit with us. And that's where we do a lot of direction setting because I can't move

forward without my principals onboard. And then they give me input that really helps shape what we end up doing.

These networks seemed to work because of the spirit of collaboration and trust that existed among members. As Executive Director Lauren put it,

And just kind of focusing on just those things like trust, respect, collaboration... [the superintendent] created structures for principals to be supportive of one another and created a [professional development] structure for our principals that were driven on their needs. I saw a group of principals. They genuinely cared about each other and so I think that was sort of pervasive throughout the district.

Working together and collaborating afforded many of these women opportunities to learn and grow professionally and provided support for their work which was beneficial for all involved. Cindy stated, "I worked with two other women... and we did all the professional development K-12 for the district. And so, we had to learn things...the three of us working together, I learned from them. And I hope they learned from me." Throughout both interviews, Cindy alluded to the idea of "learning from each other" which seemed to really shape who she was as a leader.

For Executive Director Heather, a professional network she was a part of as a principal led to her leadership development and sparked a different way of thinking about her work and future. She stated,

...all the things that they taught us about an Instructional Leadership Team started with the Ball Foundation. Then, learning about creating a vision and a mission, and over-communicating that, and just so much great learning. That's where it all started. So, when you talk about networks and leaders, that helped me to think about really branching out because that was one of my first networks, and so that helped me see how else I might be effective.

The networks that Heather had engaged in throughout her career were directly related to her learning and thus, enhanced her skills as a leader and moved her along in her career.

Two of the participants, Executive Directors Julie and Lauren, had leadership roles in special education in their respective districts and both mentioned feeling that special education is a more isolating department and often overlooked. Both women discussed having to seek out their own learning experiences. As Julie stated, “I think any opportunities that are out there are things that I have sought out...They’ve [the district] never told me no, but that’s about it. If I don’t go out and look for it, it doesn’t happen.” Both Julie and Lauren expressed feelings of separation from other district departments. For this reason, establishing professional networks outside their districts was essential in promoting their learning and growth.

In terms of the composition of their professional networks, all the women in the study collaborated with and formed ties with both male and female colleagues and leaders. However, many of the women, as described in the following section, seemed to establish more friendships and personal ties with other women. Moreover, as discussed later, mentoring relationships with other women played a significant role in the women’s leadership practices and career journeys.

#### *Friendship and personal networks.*

For many of the women, professional networks evolved into personal and friendship networks as their relationships deepened. A few of the women described how they began to plan more informal meetups with their colleagues which also had a direct effect on their learning and growth. As Carol described, “We were co-principals. We’d run things by each other. Then, we started a lunch group. It was me, Gail, and Lucy, who was our student support director, at the time. We were the only three women in Principals’ Council. It was more social, just relaxed with each other. Then, we added another principal.”

Likewise, Cindy described how her professional network evolved into a more personally supportive group. She stated, “There was a time that some of the other assistant superintendents



and I would meet for breakfast. And we found that more informative than our more formal meetings because we could just talk about what are you doing about this? What are you doing about that?"

Julie described how these professional networks “crossover” and become friendship networks. She stated,

I have a really good group of girlfriends, who are also fellow educators. I don't know about you, but I find my friend group are the people that I have worked with over the years. I have another friend who's an Assistant Principal and another friend who's a special ed teacher. And the three of us meet at least once a month, and we complain about work. We complain about boyfriends or husbands, kind of do all that stuff. And then, I think they crossover...[we] have become friends because of our personal network, or our career network, but they kind of overlap. And a lot of my friends are that way.

For Lauren, work relationships developed into friendships as well. She described, “You know it's kind of funny that I think I tend to be a worker by nature, so it's kind of ironic that most of my friends are actually the same people I work with. And they've all been 20-year plus relationships, so I think that's kind of important too.”

For Ana, her friendships helped to develop her leadership throughout her career and allowed her to share ideas and get feedback. She described one of her friendships,

Elizabeth and I became assistant principals together. Our husbands had similar jobs, our backgrounds were similar, and we created this relationship where we would take trips down to Orange County, Palm Springs, and we would literally sharpen each other, personally and professionally, about being women and leadership, and being moms, and being wives. We have been friends since 2005, and we still stay in touch, just connecting where we are in our careers and where we are in families. It's kind of like a mentorship coaching, but also just sharpening each other, as being females in leadership.

For many of the women, these friendship networks played an equally important role as their professional networks in enhancing their leadership, learning, and careers. Moreover, it

seemed that these friendship networks consisted of significant relationships with people, and specifically with other women, that really shaped who these women were as leaders.

### ***Learning through experience.***

The idea of learning over time and through experiences was certainly evident across all participants. Many of the women had spent a number of years teaching and also held various support positions throughout their careers that offered them an array of opportunities, circumstances, and scenarios to learn from. As Carol put it, "...I remember finding my voice as a principal, as a leader too, to step up and it was after having gone through several cases, but with a teacher to step up and say, 'It's wrong. You can't do that. It's not right for kids.' And having the confidence to say that and I only gained that through experience."

For Director Amy, experience allowed her to "watch others". She stated, "I think it's experiences. I think it's watching the results of others. I think one of the things as a leader, I think I watch a lot. I take in a lot and I watch what works and what doesn't."

Years of experience in various roles helped to develop these women as leaders. It is important to note that all of the women interviewed had been in education over 20 years. Many of them had spent at least 7-10 years as classroom teachers and then in support roles such as instructional coaching and curriculum specialists. Time and experiences led to enhanced leadership practices and offered them other leadership roles in which to grow.

### **Conceptual Framework Construct 2: Enhanced Leadership Practices**

As illustrated in the previous section, collaboration and networks provided these women leaders with professional learning opportunities that contributed to their growth as leaders. The themes in this section include relationships and people skills, collaboration, and openness and

knowing your purpose. These themes, or qualities of leadership, enhanced the participants' leadership practices. The following assertions were made based on the emergent themes:

1. Women leaders focus on relationship-building and have enhanced “people skills”.
2. Women leaders engage in collaborative leadership.
3. Women leaders are driven by their passion and purpose in their work.

***Relationships and people skills.***

The most significant theme among all participant interviews was the focus on and importance of relationships. This was the most common leadership quality among all the women. All participants spoke about their leadership being focused on relationships and connections with others. In response to the question, “What do you consider your strengths as a leader to be?” Executive Director Monica stated,

I think that from the onset, my strength has always been the ability to connect with people. The ability to be open to people. I think that I'm always first super open and trusting. That hasn't always worked out for me in every way because then I learn and I have learned and as I've shared in the story, that there are many times that people just don't like you, and they don't want you, for whatever the reason. And so, it's that... when there is a relationship and it's reciprocal, it's almost like... when I know your heart is open, I'm just going to pour right into that. That's just going to be a constant flow of heart to heart. But when I feel it closed, I won't even try. There are some people that I won't be that way with. I won't try. And so, I'm fortunate that at any moment the people who showed openness to me were people that had the power to pull me up.

She further elaborated how relationships with others always “influences” her in some way. She stated, “I mean, everyone that I work with I tend to have very close relationships with ...And everybody that I interact with is in some way an influencer. In a positive way.” Relationships with others is at the core of who Monica is as a person and thus, had a significant impact on the way she viewed those who encouraged and mentored her along the way. She connected with

them on a deeper level, which in turn, enhanced her own leadership and influenced her career development.

For Marie, (a district Director), building relationships with others was also foundational to her leadership. She stated, “I pride myself on being able to build those relationships because those relationships are going to be the things that carry you through.”

Ana also attributed her leadership skills to the relationships she had built with key people throughout her career. She described, “All of those relationships walk with me every day in my leadership because I don't believe I'm a natural leader...I think I've been developed, through these amazing relationships that I've had. I like people and I like supporting people.”

It was clear through all the interviews with the women that relationships and connecting with others was how they had all developed their leadership skills.

### ***Collaboration.***

Collaboration with others was another top theme across all participants. All the women mentioned how collaboration with others helped them develop in all the areas of the study's conceptual framework: professional learning and growth, enhanced leadership practices, organizational change, and career advancement. This collaboration, for many, was directly tied to the networks, both professional and personal that they had developed throughout their careers.

For Ana, collaboration is vital to the functioning of her department team. She stated,

...One of the things that is such a gift is when we come together, there's really a team mentality that I'm open to suggestions, open to ideas. And so, there's an even playing field when I meet with my team where it's really collaborative in nature and it's not really top down and everyone feels safe sharing ideas or pushing back on ideas and suggestions. So, it's a very collaborative team, which I think everyone, I feel from their comments, they really enjoy working here because it's a very approachable environment.

The idea of collaborative leadership was important to all the women in the study. In their various roles, they led with a sense of teamwork and valued all members of their team. Moreover, many of the women mentioned the idea of leading from “behind” and “alongside” their colleagues which again, illustrated their collaborative leadership styles.

***Openness, passion, and knowing your purpose.***

The willingness to be open, vulnerable, and stand in their truth, allowed many of these women to lead successfully. Knowing thyself and your purpose has been paramount to many of these women. Jackie described her first day as a school principal,

At my first faculty meeting, most of the people knew me because I had been there as an [assistant principal], but I really wanted to tell my story and explained to them how my story really was. It is the moral compass to why I am the way I am, and it is the drum I beat. Everything, every decision that I make going forward as the leader of this school is about this.

For Heather, her purpose has always been her guiding light. She stated,

I think I know who I am and what's important to me and what I stand for, and it's all about, for me, what's good for kids. I want people to do things, kids too, but the people that I work with, my teachers and colleagues, not because of compliance but because it's good for kids, for doing things for the right reasons. I am passionate, and knowing who I am. I truly believe that the things that I say and do, I think I model and truly believe. So, I teach by example.

The participants in the study all shared a strong sense of who they were as leaders which directly related back to always doing what is best for students. They all exhibited passion in their roles and felt that their work was centered on a greater purpose- changing outcomes for kids.

**Conceptual Framework Construct 3: Organizational Change**

In terms of organizational change, all the women I interviewed discussed experiences with helping to initiate change efforts within their organizations. In this construct, the themes of

relationships and taking a strengths-based approach were prominent among the women and led to the following assertions:

1. Women leaders leverage relationships when planning for and enacting organizational change.
2. Women leaders take a strengths-based approach to organizational change.

***Relationships.***

As in other areas, the importance of building relationships with others was stressed and in fact, their ability to build meaningful relationships with colleagues allowed many of the women to enact change within their organizations. Monica described her experience of being placed at a school that had been through some turmoil,

I think at that point it was about relationships and people because they were ready to have a leader who led from the heart. And one who was softer, sort of, in their approach to how we get things done. And my style as I was growing as a leader at the time, what I was starting to learn was that I felt more confident and comfortable in a leadership role. When I could be, not necessarily like an inspirational type of leader, but find the good in each person and give each person the leeway to say, ‘You know what, you are so good at that, just do it. Let me get out of your way and you just do what you need to do for kids.’

For Monica, as with many of the women interviewed, the strong connections they made with their colleagues allowed them to successfully enact changes within their organizations. All the participants mentioned the power of leveraging relationships in order to engage in change efforts with more support and “buy-in” from others.

***Strengths-based.***

Several of the women discussed taking a strengths-based approach in their leadership roles. Building relationships with their colleagues allowed them to get to know the strengths within their organizations and thus helped the women leverage these in their change efforts.

Monica's focus on people and relationships allowed her to put systems in place that led to success. She discussed the power of leveraging strengths to move her organization along,

I leveraged some of my key teachers on staff that were great. I had brought in a couple from [another school] that I knew and so kind of really started building my own foundation of people that I knew I could trust instructionally who were good people, who wanted to do the right thing for kids and use them as sort of a leveraging point.

Likewise, getting to know people's strengths has been a constant component of Julie's leadership style and has helped her navigate change efforts and productivity with her teams. She stated,

...One of my favorite tools, that has come into my life that I use today, is the Strengths Finder. I have everyone on my team do it...and we make a chart, and we all know each other's top five...I don't think you can relate to people if you don't have good handle on who you are, or how people perceive you. Strengths and weaknesses... I don't think, as women, we're taught to celebrate our strengths. So, I'm really big with my team, and we go back to Strengths Finders on a regular basis. So, from a leadership standpoint, that to me is the most powerful.

For Jackie, looking for the good and strengths in others are a natural part of who she is as a person and leader. She stated, "I think I'm good with people. I think I read people well, I listen to people, and I have a genuine curiosity about them. I want to find what is that good in you because I think you have it. I want to find it and I want to bring it out. I'm willing to take the time to do that."

For Amy, organizational change has happened through a process of building relationships and knowing how to communicate with others, as well as understanding strengths that are brought to a team. She described,

It comes down to how well do we communicate and as a leader, the thing that I have watched, and certainly over 30 years in this district, those who are most successful, they've got this golden ticket on how to communicate. Those who struggle the most, it's not necessarily because they don't know something very

well, but because they don't know how to communicate and collaborate with people. And so the better we can be, we talk about our interdependent system, the better we can be at being interdependent and realizing that I don't have everything, you don't have everything, you don't have everything, but maybe you've got something I need and that will help us be a better rounded team so that we can get out there and offer our best support. And so, I think that that's really important to really be aware of, be cognizant of who you're working with and how they receive information the best and giving people time.

Looking for the strengths in others and using these to promote change and growth in their teams was a common theme among the women leaders. Being collaborative leaders, the women in the study really valued what others had to offer and they worked to promote these strengths in their colleagues.

#### **Conceptual Framework Construct 4: Career Advancement**

In terms of career advancement, all the women interviewed talked about how they never expected to be where they were in terms of their leadership positions. In this construct, the following themes were prevalent: unintentional career path, longevity, encouragement and recruitment from others, and mentorship. The following assertions were made based on these themes:

1. Women in district leadership positions often follow an unintentional career path.
2. Women leaders spend more time in classroom, coaching, and other support positions before attaining district leadership positions.
3. Women leaders are often recruited and encouraged by colleagues and/or other administrators.
4. Mentorship and connections with specific people help develop women's leadership skills and career paths.

#### ***Unintentional career path.***



For most of the women interviewed, being a teacher was the only thing they knew they wanted in terms of their career. Heather stated,

First, I got my master's degree in curriculum and instruction, and then ... I was so young, I'm the oldest of three sisters, and I think my personality is just, 'Okay, now what do I do? Then, what do I do?' I never really had a career path, but I was going to be a teacher and then move along. I was going to be a teacher. That's really all I knew, that I wanted to teach.

Likewise, Julie stated, "...this was never my dream, never during my dreams, like, I never saw myself... You know, I'm a small-town girl. I'm the first person in my family to go to college. So, the idea that I'd be living in California as this big title. There're still days, I go, 'How did I get here?'"

For the vast majority of the women interviewed, their leadership roles were never intentionally planned, but rather, they were given opportunities by others or "stepped into" roles. Lauren stated, "It's kind of funny, I don't apply for many jobs, but I step into them... The ironic thing is, and I'm telling you it's true, I think 95% of them have been the women that I have worked with that have kind of motivated me just to keep going forward."

Similarly, Amy described,

So interestingly enough, I probably would not have necessarily pursued moving up. I was offered the opportunity and perhaps did not see the skills that others saw that I would be able to contribute to the organization. So, it was because I was offered the opportunity to explore it, that I really moved into the role and then as I started to do the work really felt the need to support. And again, so that's how I became a [reading coach]. And then I became a [reading coordinator]. Same thing. I was offered the opportunity to take it to the next level.

Monica described her career path experience,

It's an interesting dynamic I think when you think about how people move from one thing to the next. It isn't always that, 'I'm ready for that and this is where I want to be.' And so it's just really is like you're on this super-fast moving train and you just get on and you stop and you get off when somebody kicks you off

the train and says, 'Here, you're going to stop here and you're going to get off. I don't know how long you're going to be here but when the train comes by again, I'm going to pull you back on.'

It was clear through all the interviews that the women in the study never thought they would hold their leadership roles. None of the women were driven by aspirations of climbing the career ladder. On the contrary, many of them had to be “pushed” to seek out leadership roles. It was evident that the women had arrived at different leadership positions because of their skills, collaboration with others, and connections they had made along the way.

***Longevity.***

All ten of the women that were interviewed had spent a minimum of 20 years in education. Many of them had spent several years as teachers or counselors before moving on to other support positions. These support positions included teacher coaching and curriculum and instruction specialist positions. Their longevity in the field and various support positions had allowed them to build relationships and connections with key people who influenced their career paths. Table 6 shows the various roles each participant had in their careers.

Table 6. Participant career paths.

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Current Position</b>	<b>Career Path Positions</b>
<i>Carol</i>	Assistant Superintendent	1. Teacher 2. Curriculum Specialist 3. Assistant Principal 4. Principal 5. Assistant Superintendent
<i>Cindy</i>	Assistant Superintendent	1. Teacher 2. Literacy Specialist 3. Teacher Coach 4. Curriculum Specialist 5. Assistant Principal 6. Director 7. Assistant Superintendent
<i>Lauren</i>	Executive Director	1. School Psychologist 2. Program Specialist 3. Director 4. Executive Director
<i>Julie</i>	Executive Director	1. Teacher 2. Teacher Coach 3. School Counselor 4. District Counselor 5. Program Specialist 6. Director 7. Coordinator (County) 8. Executive Director
<i>Heather</i>	Executive Director	1. Teacher 2. Mentor Teacher 2. Coordinator 3. Staff Developer 4. Assistant Principal 5. Principal 6. Executive Director
<i>Monica</i>	Executive Director	1. Teacher 2. Assistant Principal 3. Principal 4. Director 5. Executive Director
<i>Ana</i>	Director	1. Teacher 2. Assistant Principal 3. Principal 4. Coordinator 5. Director
<i>Amy</i>	Director	1. Teacher 2. Teacher Coach 3. Coordinator 4. Director
<i>Jackie</i>	Director	1. Teacher 2. Teacher Coach 3. Assistant Principal 4. Principal 5. Director
<i>Marie</i>	Director	1. Teacher 2. Union Leadership Positions 3. Director

***Recruitment and encouragement from others.***

For many of the women, their leadership roles have been attributed to key people that they worked with along the way and the way that these people supported their leadership development. In many cases, these key “influencers” were other women colleagues and leaders. Monica described a principal that saw something in her. She stated, “During that third year, I had a principal who said, ‘I need some help writing the title one plan.’... And so, I think from that, I was able to show a skill in leadership or at least a, not desire but fortitude to be a leader. So, she gave me more leadership opportunities at the site as a teacher.” This allowed Monica to step outside the classroom and broaden her perspective of education and also gave her the opportunity to enhance her skills as an educator.

Amy had similar experiences with people that moved her along her career path. She stated, “I have been very blessed by a lot of people who have reached out to offer me opportunities along the way that really are responsible for me being here today. I really am very thankful for that.”

For others, their reputation and leadership qualities in some of their previous roles helped move them along. This was true for Carol. She described how she first got an administrative position,

She knew me through her husband because he was an Assistant Superintendent in our district and he saw my work in the curriculum department and he saw me interact, like present things to principals at Principals Council and he told her about my work and the fact that I had my admin credential. He actually knew my partner who was a man better than he knew me, but he threw my name out and then she called me and said, ‘Hey, I hear you’re good.’...So it kind of starts you down a path that you weren’t planning to go down.

This also highlights again, the unintentional career paths of many of the women and the power that specific people had on steering their career trajectories.

Monica had a similar experience with people who encouraged her along the way and attributes her different leadership roles to recruitment and connections with key influencers in her professional life. She described her experience,

...It kind of felt like it was a moving train that I couldn't get off. You get to those points where...you don't question when somebody says, you do it, you don't say no because you worry about that like career suicide kind of thing...Here's a rollercoaster, you got to just do what you're told and this is about you just doing what is asked of you, when your superintendent says do it you do it... So, all along the path, there was someone else who said, 'Go do this,' or 'Go learn that', or 'You can do it', and I never thought that I could or that I would. It wasn't in my plan.

Throughout both interviews with Monica, she frequently mentioned how she felt like she didn't have a choice in many of her career decisions and really attributed her leadership development to others who had encouraged her along her path, but also to those she looked up to and saw as "influencers", which further illustrates the power of connections and mentors for many of these women.

Encouragement from others played a significant role in Ana's career path as well. She described how she received this encouragement early on in her teaching career. She stated, "It's been one of the most impactful things that someone saw the potential in me and would allow me to take my prep to sit with them and to start, you know, acting the role, playing the role."

Recruitment by others helped move her along her leadership journey. She stated,

All of those [leadership positions] were other people asking me to move and, which is really overwhelming at times because all I ever wanted to be was the principal and I don't know what it means to be outside of that. It's always been very overwhelming, very humbling. Because you know, when your dreams are furthered along than what you dreamt, it's, it's a lot. It's overwhelming.

Like Monica, Ana discussed the “overwhelming” feeling of not intending to be where she was. She expressed immense gratitude and appreciation for the encouragement and recruitment of significant people in her life that directly influenced where she was in her leadership journey.

### ***Mentorship.***

Not only did many of these women have people that encouraged them and recruited them for positions throughout their careers, but several mentioned specific people who served as mentors and role models for them in their leadership journeys. One of Jackie’s superintendents served as a mentor for her and she described him as “seeing something” in her. She stated,

...he was the one who pushed me more in my leadership. He's the one who encouraged me to get my doctorate. He placed me in specific programs. He placed me in my first principal position, he placed me in my second principal position. So, he really was an influencer and he was the one who said to me, ‘You're going to be a superintendent.’ And so, I said, ‘Okay.’

Similarly, Monica had a superintendent who also saw something in her as well. She described,

He became such an incredible mentor to me. He started saying things to me like, ‘You're going to be a superintendent Monica, and you're Latina and that's really important and it's my job to make sure that you're going to be on your way before I leave.’ And at the time you're just thinking like, ‘No, I don't want to be a superintendent because I love what I'm doing, and I don't want to do anything other than this. I am in heaven’... But he just always believed in me. And I never understood really why. Like okay, why me?

This mentor served as powerful influencer in her career and opened doors for her that she never thought to open for herself. Monica, like many of the other participants, was also mentored by other women leaders. She described a significant relationship with a woman mentor,

I bonded with her in so many ways, because she was sort of like a motherly figure to me. She was Latina and she was the first Latina boss that I had ever had. And so, in some ways, I saw in her who I wanted to be for the first time. I want to be

strong like her. And I want to be respected like her. And I want to learn from her. And even outside of work. She became a friend.... Yeah, so she became part of that personal network too.

Ana was another leader who attributed her leadership to her mentors. She believes strongly about the role mentorship plays in one's life. She stated, "I have a lot of mentors. I have a lot of coaches, personal as well as professional. I always seek to be around people that have done it well and choose to be under their guidance. And, I'm very coachable. I welcome it." As was the case for many of the women, their mentors, (many of whom were other women), often were part of both their professional and friendship networks because of the significant relationships they had developed with them.

For the study's women of color, mentorship by other strong women leaders of color helped to shape the leaders they became and the trajectory of their career paths. It is significant to note that the participants all had mentors who they "looked up to" and admired in some way. This was especially true for the women of color who seemed to see in their mentors the kind of leader they aspired to be. It is also important to note that for many of the participants, "influencers" were people with whom the women had established strong ties. Furthermore, these "influencers" also had strong ties and connections with others in positions that could influence and impact the participants' leadership and careers.

### **Challenges Faced**

Despite the encouragement and mentorship experienced by many of the women, they faced different challenges along their career paths including gender differences, motherhood and family commitments, and (for the women of color) race and ethnicity.

## *Gender differences.*

Some of the women described experiencing challenges associated with their gender and feeling as if male leaders had advantages over women. Julie described her experience,

There is an old boys' club network out here. It's still out there. I'm not feeling it so much right now, but when I was first in the [director] role, you know, the Superintendent was male, [Human Resources] was male, [Chief Business Officer] was male, and here I am, and they're like, 'You're spending too much money.' And I just always feel a little intimidated. Men have no problems just saying what they think. And when we say it, we're whiny, or we're complaining, or we're, you know, that time of month... There were probably times I didn't speak my mind because I wasn't comfortable with that. I was probably...intimidated. I have been sexually harassed.

For Monica, although never experiencing specific instances of gender discrimination or sexual harassment, gender differences in leadership is something that she feels affects women leaders in their careers. She stated,

Interesting that you're studying women because I think what I've learned is that women are not, I don't feel are as embraced as easily as men. Not that I was discriminating at all against men... I think that happens and unfortunately I think that even some women, like I think that if you were to ask principals who they think a good superintendent would be, I think they would tell you that it should be a man. And maybe they haven't necessarily unpacked that or where that comes from, but I think that people still tend to be more comfortable with a male leading them... That women are still not strong enough or aren't charismatic enough or don't relate to others enough. And maybe that's because in our field we work with so many women. The ratio, it's ridiculous. And so maybe that's, I don't know where that comes from. But it's sad that other women I think would prefer a male too.

Because of the gender inequity in leadership roles, she shared how she is strategic about mentoring and recruiting other women leaders. She stated,

I know I'm not the only person that [the superintendent] asks so knowing that the superintendent is asking I was always intentional about making sure that the



people that I was advocating for, they were good people and good leaders. But it was intentional that they are women, that I know are amazing and can do it.

Although not all the women interviewed felt that they had experienced gender discrimination or felt strongly about gender differences in educational leadership, for Monica and Julie, gender definitely shaped many of their experiences as well as their beliefs about educational leadership positions. Their experiences made them all the more passionate about their work and creating equitable opportunities for other women leaders.

### ***Motherhood/commitments.***

All the women who participated in the study are mothers. For some, this posed a challenge in their careers due to the demands of their leadership roles. Carol stated, “You know it’s difficult for a young mom to be...especially at high school to be an administrator because you’re up a lot at night. So, you know school starts at 7:00 in the morning and then you’ve got the school day and then you’ve got to come back for wrestling supervisions and football supervision. And the sports banquets and the performing arts. It’s really hard.”

For Heather, intentionally not seeking principal positions was directly related to her motherhood commitments. She stated, “As an assistant principal, I was biding my time on purpose. Because I knew as a principal, it would be like having another child, so I knew that I needed to wait till [my] kids were a little bit older.”

After having her first baby, Monica decided to actually step back from her assistant principal role. She described,

I went through the pregnancy, delivered the baby early. And right when she was born, I felt like the right thing to do was to say to the principal that I'm not the right person for this job right now. I just felt really guilty and I knew that having this baby early, she was going to be a time taker and I didn't want to compromise that leadership position any more than I already had.

Later in her career, Monica described not taking a leadership position at the County Office of Education because of her family. She had arrived at her various leadership positions because of people recruiting her or pushing her take on different roles. But in this case, she described how she put family first and turned down a position,

For the first time I didn't just say, 'Okay, I'm in.' I said, 'Thank you and let me think about that.' And because my kids right now are my priority, I have teenagers and so they're all just at a stage where the level of attention that I have for them and the availability that I need to give them right now was a priority. For the first time ever, I made my kids a priority... So, I said no. And that was hard because that was another opportunity to grow and to do something different.

For all of the women in the study, in terms of career advancement, motherhood commitments were taken into consideration along their journey and having to make choices for not just themselves but the good of their family was something they had to deal with as they shifted into different leadership roles. In fact, for most of the women, moving into leadership positions did not come until later in their lives when their children were older. It is important to note that although many of the women of the study chose to seek leadership roles later in their careers due to motherhood commitments, none of them felt that motherhood had negatively impacted the attainment of their various leadership positions.

### ***Race and ethnicity.***

Three of the women in the study were women of color. They each described their experiences with being the “minority” at the district leadership level. Jackie stated,

I think my challenges have probably also been what has helped my advancement. For pretty much every job that I've had, I have been the only African American female in my role. When I became the assistant principal, there were no other African Americans, period, so I was the only African American female. When I looked around in the district, there were women, but there were no other African American people, period, in areas of leadership. When you are an only, there are

things that come with being an only. I think in my role as principal, it was very interesting. I think people of color understand the veiled ways that people speak.

For Ana, although she feels that being Latina has helped in her leadership roles, it has also attributed to her feeling of not fully being seen or heard. She described,

I think one of the things that's very emotional is my work has always been, whether it's a principal or a teacher or a director, it's always around my people. Working in the lowest, lowest gang infested schools or lowest performing schools or English learners. There's always been that. So, I know I got in by being a Latina, being bilingual, that helped me get in the door. But I've also felt I've had to justify my existence as well because I've always said I didn't want to get the position because of my name or the color of my skin. I wanted to get it because I've earned it. And there is that conversation amongst Latinos. We always got to work harder to justify that we didn't just get it because we're bilingual or we're brown and we didn't make the quota kind of thing.

She also discussed the issues that being Latina has made her think about,

I think, for me, I didn't realize as much the cultural lens until I got higher up. You're just intimidating. They just get intimidated by you. I'm like, 'Why? What about me is intimidating? Because I'm not mean, and I'm not rude.' ...I mean, I don't know if it would be different if the person was white, and they weren't female...I often wonder, if I was a man doing the same job, or if I was a white man, if I was a Latino man doing the job, would I still have the same issues?

Monica, also a Latina leader, struggled with feeling “invisible” since her childhood growing up in a mostly White community. She described what this was like, “...This whole essence as me as a learner as a little girl being invisible. I was invisible to my teachers. I was not worth anything to them. I was brown. I was not white. All of my teachers were white. And it was... none of them cared or even really knew me.” In her current leadership role, she sometimes continues to feel “unworthy”. She stated,

That I'm one of the only ones and that, I don't know, it's still like, even in that room when there's conversation, we're quiet. You know what I mean? Me and the other two or maybe three, we don't talk as much as the others do. I don't know what that is.... So, I still think we have a lot to do just in terms of that racial sort

of feeling of inequity. Maybe it's just me, I don't feel yet worthy to play at that level as a white woman does or that I already know that there's a difference. And so, I'll keep it to myself, 'I'm going to learn from you, I'll surpass you like, watch out, I'm going to learn from you and gain from you.' But I'm not going to share because I don't feel like it's going to be heard in the same regard as others.

All three of the women described how being “the only” heightened their sense of inequities in educational leadership. For Monica and Ana, it was apparent that being “the only” added to feelings of unworthiness and being invisible.

### **Research Questions and Summary of Findings**

Interviews of the ten study participants yielded significant themes in relation to the study's conceptual framework as described in the preceding sections. These themes also connected with and addressed the study's four research questions as shown in the table below and will be explored more in the proceeding chapter.

The themes offer descriptive information in the form of direct quotes from the narrative interviews conducted with each participant. Overall, it was clear that relationships and connections with others (especially certain key influencers and mentors) played a significant role in shaping the leaders these women had become as well as guided them throughout their career paths. While not dense and elaborate, the professional “networks” of these women consisted of a few important people that they built strong relationships with both professionally and personally.

Table 7. Summary of research questions and related themes.

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Themes</b>
<i>How do women central office leaders develop professional networks?</i>	Longevity Support positions Mentorship Encouragement from others Recruitment
<i>What are the characteristics of women central office leaders' professional networks?</i>	Collaboration Mentorship Professional learning
<i>What factors enable or constrain the formation of women district leaders' professional networks, such as formal and/or informal district structures?</i>	Mentorship Influencers Gender differences Race and ethnicity
<i>How, if at all, do women district leaders perceive the utility of their networks for their professional learning and career advancement, as well as their efforts to engage in organizational change?</i>	Collaboration Building relationships Strengths-based Knowing your purpose

The role of mentorship was also significant, and for many of the women, afforded them many leadership opportunities. The lived experiences of these women leaders revolved almost entirely around the connections they had made with people throughout their careers and for many, continue to shape their current leadership practices.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

### **Purpose of Study**

Research has shown that strong, cohesive, and collaborative district central offices can help to support schools and have a positive effect on student achievement (Daly & Finnigan, 2015; Honig et al., 2010). District central office leaders that engage in professional networks can help spread resources, ideas, innovation, and support across the organization. Participation in networks can thus allow district central office leaders to enact change efforts effectively.

Although women have dominated the education field, they still remain relatively scarce in district central offices. Research continues to show that women at the district central office level do not participate in networks with the same frequency as their male counterparts and in fact, often feel excluded from these networks (Ballenger, 2010; Noel-Batiste, 2008; Raskin, 2010).

The purpose of this study was to explore the professional networks of women central office leaders and how, if at all, these networks influenced their professional learning, leadership practices, organizational change efforts, and career advancement. The study also aimed to shed light on issues of gender equity in district leadership roles. Specifically, the following research questions were addressed in the study:

1. How do women central office leaders develop professional networks?
2. What are the characteristics of women central office leaders' professional networks?
3. What factors enable or constrain the formation of women district leaders' professional networks, such as formal and/or informal district structures?
4. How, if at all, do women district leaders perceive the utility of their networks for their professional learning and career advancement, as well as their efforts to engage in organizational change?

This chapter reviews a summary of findings from the study and uses empirical research and other literature previously cited in Chapter 2 as well as additional literature as a means of interpreting these findings through the above stated research questions. Limitations of the study will be discussed as well as implications and recommendations for school districts. Recommendations for future research are also offered.

### Summary of Findings

The following conceptual framework guided the study.

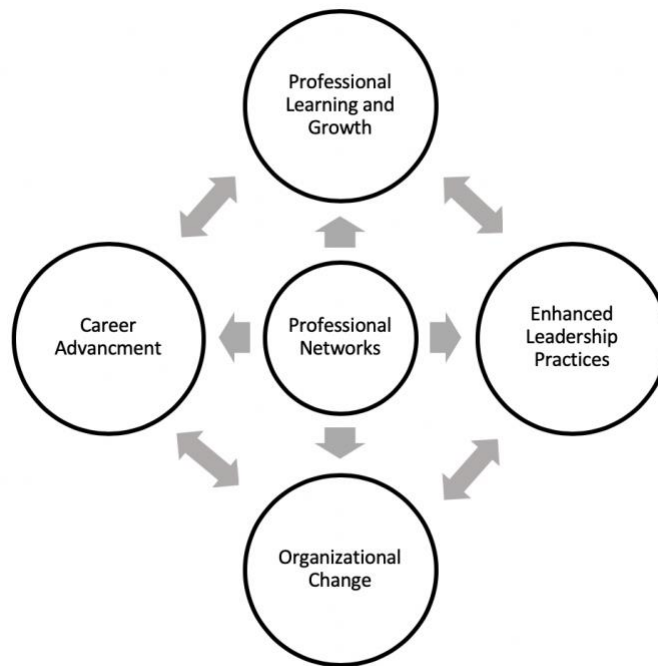


Figure 3. Conceptual framework.

Interviews with the study’s participants yielded common themes that aligned with the constructs of the conceptual framework. These themes are shown below.

Table 8. Conceptual framework constructs and related themes.

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Themes</b>
<i>Professional Learning and Growth</i>	Learning from others Learning through experience Seeking opportunities for growth
<i>Enhanced Leadership Practices</i>	Relationships and people skills Collaboration Openness and knowing your purpose
<i>Organizational Change</i>	Relationships Strengths-based
<i>Career Advancement</i>	Unintentional career path Longevity Encouragement and recruitment from others Mentorship

The role that relationships and connections had on the women of the study was significant. All the women described key influencers and mentors that had helped shape their leadership practices and helped to support their learning and career advancement. Narrative interview data revealed that the women’s professional networks, although not dense, did influence the women in their leadership roles and career paths. Furthermore, the role that specific “influencers” and mentors had on the women really impacted their leadership. In terms of leadership growth and career advancement, their longevity in the field and experience in various support roles seemed to better prepare them for the leadership positions they held.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

Findings from the study were interpreted using the study’s research questions. The table below shows the participant themes as they relate to the study’s research questions and conceptual framework constructs. In contrast to how the assertions were linked to the study’s conceptual framework in Chapter 4, the research questions serve as the focal point of this



chapter. Assertions were remapped to specifically attend to the study’s research questions and will be discussed in the subsequent sections.

Table 9. Summary of research questions, constructs, themes, and assertions.

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Constructs</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Assertions</b>
<b><i>1. How do women central office leaders develop professional networks?</i></b>	Professional learning and growth  Career Advancement	Longevity Support positions Mentorship Encouragement from others Recruitment	<i>Women leaders often learn through experience and longevity in their roles.</i>  <i>Women leaders spend more time in classroom, coaching, and other support positions before attaining district leadership positions.</i>  <i>Mentorship and connections with specific people help develop women’s leadership skills and career paths.</i>  <i>Women leaders are often recruited and encouraged by colleagues and/or other administrators</i>
<b><i>2. What are the characteristics of women central office leaders’ professional networks?</i></b>	Enhanced leadership practices  Professional learning and growth	Collaboration Professional learning Mentorship	<i>Women leaders learn from and collaborate with others to enhance their professional learning and growth.</i>  <i>Women leaders focus on relationship-building and have</i>

Table 9. Summary of research questions, constructs, themes, and assertions, continued.

Research Question	Constructs	Themes	Assertions
			<p><i>enhanced “people skills”.</i></p> <p><i>Women leaders are driven by their passion and purpose in their work.</i></p> <p><i>Mentorship and connections with specific people help develop women’s leadership skills and career paths.</i></p>
<p><b>3. What factors enable or constrain the formation of women district leaders’ professional networks such as formal and/or informal district structures?</b></p>	<p>Professional learning and growth</p> <p>Career advancement</p>	<p>Mentorship</p> <p>Influencers</p> <p>Gender differences</p> <p>Race and ethnicity</p>	<p><i>Women leaders are often recruited and encouraged by colleagues and/or other administrators.</i></p> <p><i>Mentorship and connections with specific people help develop women’s leadership skills and career paths.</i></p> <p><i>Women leaders spend more time in classroom, coaching, and other support positions before attaining district leadership positions.</i></p> <p><i>Women of color experience feelings of exclusion and isolation from being the “only”.</i></p>

Table 9. Summary of research questions, constructs, themes, and assertions, continued.

Research Question	Constructs	Themes	Assertions
			<p><i>Gender biases still exist in educational leadership.</i></p> <p><i>Motherhood commitments can delay career advancement.</i></p>
<p><b>4. How, if at all, do women district leaders perceive the utility of their networks for their professional learning and career advancement, as well as their efforts to engage in organizational change?</b></p>	<p>Professional learning and growth</p> <p>Enhanced leadership practices</p> <p>Organizational change</p> <p>Career advancement</p>	<p>Collaboration</p> <p>Building relationships</p> <p>Strengths-based</p> <p>Knowing your purpose</p>	<p><i>Women leaders leverage relationships when planning for and enacting organizational change.</i></p> <p><i>Women leaders take a strengths-based approach to organizational change.</i></p> <p><i>Women leaders focus on relationship-building and have enhanced “people skills”.</i></p> <p><i>Women leaders engage in collaborative leadership.</i></p> <p><i>Women leaders are driven by their passion and purpose in their work.</i></p>

***Research question one: How do women central office leaders develop professional networks?***

What was most noteworthy in the study was the power that relationships had for each of the women. It was through relationships with key “influencers” and mentors that the women experienced leadership growth and in turn developed relationships with others. Rather than developing extensive networks of professional connections, the women relied heavily on individual connections and relationships they had formed throughout their careers. These relationships developed as a result of their longevity, their experience in various support positions, and mentorship from others. Additionally, these relationships and connections with others led to their recruitment and encouragement from colleagues and other leaders to take on other leadership roles. It is also significant to note that for the majority of the participants, these strong ties and connections were formed with other women who served as “influencers” and mentors.

All the women in the study had spent more than 20 years in various educational roles which led to their expertise in many areas as well as contributed to the relationships that they had formed with influential people. Research has shown that most women educational leaders spend more time as classroom teachers and in curriculum and instruction roles leading to their expertise in the field (Brunner & Grogan, 2005). Moreover, women leaders know the importance of building learning communities with others in efforts to share their knowledge and ideas with others (Grogan, 2005). The present phenomenological study suggests that even though it is not an empirical finding, women leaders develop connections with others through their varied roles and longevity in an effort to continue learning and growing professionally. This in turn enhances their leadership capacity and helps to further their career advancement.

***Research question two: What are the characteristics of women central office leaders' professional networks?***

What was clear from the interviews was that all the women in the study relied on collaboration with others throughout their careers and had certain key people in their careers from whom they sought advice, support, learning, and encouragement. While the women in the study did not have dense professional networks, their strong ties with key influencers, most of whom were other women, helped them in their leadership roles. It has been shown that ties with others lead to enhanced social capital and the diffusion of knowledge and innovation within and across an organization (Moolenaar et al., 2011). Additionally, team networks with strong ties, and leaders that are central in the connections of their team have been shown to have greater productivity (Balkundi & Harrison, 2006).

In terms of the types of ties that impacted the women in the study, all the participants had been influenced by the affective ties they had established with other colleagues and leaders. In contrast to instrumental ties and networks that focus on the exchange of technical knowledge and resources, expressive social networks focus on affective ties and revolve around personal connections based on trust and support (Finnigan et al., 2013; Ibarra, 1993; Moolenaar et al., 2011).

For the women in the study, these affective ties proved to be foundational to their leadership development and career journeys as they provided the emotional support and friendship necessary to allow them to flourish. Research has shown that these expressive relationships tend to be stronger and take longer to develop than instrumental relationships due to the trust involved (Ibarra, 1993). The findings of this study suggest that the expressive

relationships that the women engaged in not only provided emotional support, but also enhanced their professional learning, leadership practices, and career advancement.

These elements are important to a discussion of professional networks related to the current phenomenological study. Many of the women in the study made mention to the fact that collaboration with others helped their professional learning and growth but also enhanced their productivity in their roles. According to Grogan (2005), “women have been socialized into administrative positions associated with curriculum and instruction, and women have been encouraged to build communities of support for themselves from earlier times of being isolated and on the margins of leadership” (p. 25). From most interviews, it was clear that the women studied thrived in collaborative team structures. The women in the study relied on their ‘networks’ heavily for their own professional learning and growth. This is consistent with research that has shown that women educational leaders have a love of learning and see leadership opportunities as ways to enhance this learning (Grogan, 2005).

***Research question three: What factors enable or constrain the formation of women district leaders’ professional networks, such as formal and/or informal district structures?***

Factors that influenced the formation of the participants’ professional networks included mentorship, gender differences, and race and ethnicity.

First, the impact of mentorship cannot be ignored as it is a theme that came up throughout the interviews and data analysis process. All the women in the study had been mentored by other leaders, many of whom were women, and had attributed these relationships to their leadership abilities and positions. This is consistent with the extant research on women educational leaders. For example, Brunner & Kim (2010) found that women engage in mentorship more often than

their male counterparts. Research from a 2007 study show that about 60 percent of women district office administrators have mentors (Brunner & Kim, 2010). Moreover, mentors have been found to be a vital tool for overcoming barriers and providing career advancement advice for women leaders (Lane-Washington & Wilson-Jones, 2010). What was clear from the interviews was that all the women in the study benefitted from some sort of mentoring relationship with others. This has powerful implications for school districts in that mentorship structures can help to support its leaders and prove to be especially beneficial for women. In her discussion of school superintendents, Grogan (2005) notes that few women leaders receive the necessary mentoring that enhance their career trajectories and this is especially true for women of color. For the women of color of this study, mentorship played a significant role in their leadership development and journey. Moreover, the women of color in the study looked up to and were shaped by other strong women of color in leadership roles.

Factors that constrained the formation of the participants' professional networks included the experience of gender and racial bias. Although most study participants felt gender bias did not play a role in their careers path, gender differences were still experienced by some of the women. As one of the women stated, "I don't feel that [women] are embraced as easily as men...I think that people still tend to be more comfortable with a male leading them." This is unfortunately still true in today's educational leadership landscape. "Women can achieve leadership positions but only by carefully traversing complex paths as they confront issues associated with child care needs, racism, sexism, and discrimination on the basis of identity" (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010, p. 172).

For the women of color in the study, they had another level of bias to contend with as they were very often the "only" in their respective roles. Although the women of color in the

study did not feel that their race and ethnicity had negatively impacted their careers in any way, they all were very aware of the lack of other women leaders of color in leadership roles. Unlike White women, who can focus more on gender discrimination, women of color must consider what aspects of their identities are responsible for the reactions of others. Understanding the effects of gender, race, and the intersection of multiple identities can help us better understand the challenges that women leaders face, especially women of color (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Furthermore, it is again significant to note that women of color make up a small percentage of women in district leadership roles. Finding participants of color for this study proved to be a challenge as they made up only about 10% of leadership in the districts used in the study. This is in stark contrast with the fact that women in general made up 63% of leaders in the districts studied. The inequities of those who hold leadership positions at the district level are clear.

***Research question four: How, if at all, do women district leaders perceive the utility of their networks for their professional learning and career advancement, as well as their efforts to engage in organizational change?***

All the women in the study stressed the impact that collaboration had on their professional learning and growth as well as change efforts. Again, all the women in the study attributed their leadership and learning to the networks they had established with others. They were also very aware of who they were as leaders and mentioned their focus on building relationships with others and taking a strengths-based approach when working with their teams. These qualities enabled them to navigate organizational change efforts successfully.

Although none of the women of the study described themselves as transformational leaders, their reliance on networks to fuel their learning and change efforts can indeed be seen as



such. In fact, the characteristics of transformational leadership, (focused on collaboration, building relationships, and working together for a common purpose) are in line with the leadership styles of many women leaders (Trinidad & Normore, 2005). Furthermore, unlike leadership styles of men that consist of “command” and “control”, women leaders exhibit leadership qualities that are more “facilitative” and “collaborative” (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). It was evident throughout the interviews that the women of the study perceived their networks to be beneficial for their learning and leadership practices which directly impacted the way they enacted change within their organizations.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of the study was the fact that only women leaders from mid-size school districts participated in the study. Although choosing women from these districts was purposefully planned to ensure that these districts had specific middle-management positions, districts of other sizes could have different leadership positions existent at the central office level and yield different career advancement trajectories for women leaders.

Another limitation of the study was that only women district central office leaders were asked to participate. The professional networks of male leaders were not examined and therefore could not be compared to those of the women in the study.

Additionally, my positionality as an educational leader could be seen as a limitation especially because of the fact that some of the women participants were my colleagues. For this reason, and for the integrity of the study, I engaged in reflexivity (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to ensure that my biases, values, and personal connections did not interfere with the study.

The small sample size of this study is another limitation. Only ten women district office leaders from across San Diego county were interviewed to study a very broad phenomenon.

These women all had very interesting stories to tell in regard to their leadership journeys, through which many themes and commonalities were apparent, however, a larger sample size could have offered more themes and led to some more assertions about women and district office leadership.

Additionally, the questions explored in this study, specifically during participant interviews focused more on strong and stable ties that each participant had, which yielded results geared toward very specific networks- expressive or affective networks. Rather than exploring all the different ties that participants had established and had been influenced by, this study focused on the key relationships that had impacted the participants' leadership and career paths. The study explored these key relationships and focused more on how these small "networks" of strong ties shaped the participants' careers.

### **Implications for District Central Offices and Social Justice**

This study provided an opportunity to understand the lived experiences of women district central office leaders and provides some important implications for leaders and school districts including the purposeful development of formal and informal networks and opportunities for collaboration, creating mentorship opportunities for women leaders, the strategic recruitment and development of women of color to leadership roles, and implications for leadership preparation programs for educational leaders.

For both women and men, participation in formal and informal networks has been found to lead to more career satisfaction (van Emmerik et al., 2006). In their study of school principals, Duncan & Stock (2010) found that both informal and formal social networks are advantageous for leadership support and development. Increasing both formal and informal socialization opportunities can help district leaders develop and enhance their leadership

practices and positively impact their career advancement (Trinidad & Normore, 2005). Creating structured socialization opportunities for leaders in a district to engage in collaboration, resource sharing, and shared leadership can lead to an enhanced district climate and denser social networks within the organization. Research has shown that denser networks have been perceived to have a positive effect on an organization's innovative climate and denser work-related advice networks are characteristic of a culture of shared decision-making (Moolenaar et al., 2011).

At the same time, district central offices need to consider the structures that are and are not in place for engaging its leaders in collaboration and support. As Grogan (2005) states, "power resides in the system structures and practices that have gone unquestioned for too long" (p. 26). For example, women historically have not been given access to the informal networks established by men (Brunner & Kim, 2010). For example, the current study illustrates the significant role that expressive networks and ties have for women in leadership. Districts that think about ways to foster these strong connections amongst their leaders can enhance the social capital within their organizations as well as provide leaders with connections that are grounded in trust, emotional support, and encouragement. As expressive ties typically take longer to form, districts should look at creating opportunities for mentorship and collaboration at all levels in their organizations knowing that for many, strong relationships that are formed early in women's educational career could have lasting positive effects. As was shown in the current study, the expressive ties that influenced the participants had been developed over time and throughout their time in various support positions. Encouraging educational leaders to work collaboratively with people at all levels of the organizational system can help foster these strong ties. Central offices that begin to reflect on their structures can develop more equitable structures for women leaders which has direct implications for social justice.

Furthermore, ensuring that mentorship opportunities are available to women leaders can help to promote their leadership development. Research has shown that mentorship for women leaders is beneficial in many ways (Brunner & Kim, 2010; Growe & Montgomery, 1999; Méndez-Morse, 2004; Sampson & Davenport, 2010; van Emmerik, Euwema, Geschiere, & Schouten, 2006). Districts can consider how their leaders are paired with mentors and ensure that formal mentoring structures are in place. Again, ensuring that mentorship opportunities are offered early on in their educational careers can help develop the strong ties that have been proven to be beneficial for women leaders. This can not only help women leaders flourish, but women leaders of color as well. Research of Latina educational leaders has shown that they often seek role models and mentors from varied sources and are typically based on function of the relationship rather than gender and ethnicity (Méndez-Morse, 2004). As was the case for the women of color in the study, mentorship from other women of color could be a powerful way of developing these women leaders in districts. Again, district structures that provide women leaders with access to quality mentoring opportunities can enhance its leaders and the social capital within the organization.

Additionally, district central offices should do more to actively recruit women of color into their leadership ranks. Along with mentorship and creating network opportunities at various levels of the system, actively developing the leadership skills of women educators early on can help ensure more women step into leadership roles at the district level. This would require all leaders in the district, beginning with school administrators, to take an active role in building capacity from within and developing its educators early on.

Results of this phenomenological study have implications for leadership preparation programs as well. Brunner and Kim (2010) suggest that leadership preparation programs

develop coursework that highlight gender differences to illuminate the inequities present in organizations. This can not only help leaders be cognizant of inequities, but also help them work to purposefully combat them and seek out opportunities to engage in professional networks that will work to enhance their leadership and the equitable practices within their organizations. Furthermore, leadership preparation programs can also actively provide mentorship opportunities for women and especially women of color in order to enhance their leadership development and ensure that these important leaders are represented at the highest levels in their educational organizations.

### **Areas for Future Research**

One area for future research should include an examination of the professional networks of male district office leaders. Research into the role professional networks play in these leaders' careers can shed more light on gender differences within central office leadership roles. Additionally, learning about the characteristics of male leaders' networks as compared to those of women can illuminate issues of equity and lead to more informed district practices.

Future research can also take a deeper dive into the social networks of district central office leaders and look more closely at how network density and ties enhance or constrain these leaders' practices and organizational change efforts. Moreover, it would be interesting to explore how network density affects career advancement at the district central office level.

Another area for future research should examine different district support systems that are in place for leaders. Looking closely at both formal and informal structures that can be used to facilitate leaders' growth can lead to better practices within educational leadership settings. In this vein, future research should also focus on the phenomenon of mentorship for educational

leaders since its positive impact has been shown through the extant literature as well as through the current study. The importance of mentorship relationships for leaders cannot be ignored.

Finally, although this study focused on cisgender women district office leaders, and found that they faced challenges in regard to gender and race, future research should explore the effects of leaders' multiple identities. Gender, race, sexual orientation, and ethnicity are all aspects of identity that should be explored in educational leaders' career experiences. Research that examines multiple aspects of identity that elicit bias and stereotypes should be examined (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

## **Conclusion**

This phenomenological study included interviews with inspiring and thoughtful women educational leaders. The interviewees were inspiring because of their passion, sense of purpose, and their unyielding desire to learn and grow in their practice. All the women in the study had a clear sense of the power of relationships and their effect on their own learning, leadership, and careers. What is more, the social capital that was gained by the women through their connections with others was immeasurable. One major lesson from the study was the fact that professional networks, though small for the women in the study, provided the women with the skills needed to serve in their leadership roles, enact change within their organizations, and move along in their careers. Through mentoring relationships with others, professional networks, and personal networks, the women in this study found success through collaboration.

While the study highlights the importance of network opportunities for women, it also sheds light on inequities experienced by some of the women in regard to gender and race. School districts need to do a better job of actively recruiting, encouraging, and supporting the development of its women leaders since their knowledge, skills, and leadership practices can

enhance the organization as a whole. It is imperative that we make an effort to strengthen the leadership opportunities for women leaders so that school districts are representative of all educators. “In the interests of the next generation of young women not only in the United States but in many other countries, the daughters, nieces and cousins of the men who remain in control of educational leadership we must make this concerted effort, men and women together, white and of color around the globe” (Grogan, 2005).

## APPENDIX A: PARTICIPATION EMAIL

### **E-Mail Invitation to Participate**

Dear (NAME),

I, Vanessa Lerma am a graduate student in the Joint Doctoral Program (JDP) in Educational Leadership with UC San Diego and Cal State San Marcos, and also a school principal in the Chula Vista Elementary School District who is conducting a research study to find out more about the professional networks of women district office leaders. Specifically, the purpose of this study is: to examine the professional networks of district office administrators and specifically at how women experience networking in these organizations. Unlike the extensive research on teacher networks, research on district leadership networks is substantially lacking. This study will examine the who, what, and how of these networks and offer implications for district organizational structuring. The aim of the study will also be to shed light on issues of equity regarding women in district leadership roles.

You are being contacted because you are in a district leadership role. Hence, I want to ask if you would be willing to participate in two individual interviews to last approximately 60 minutes. You may choose to have the interviews take place at a location near you and schedule a time convenient to you. During the interviews you will be asked to describe your experience obtaining your district leadership position and describe any structures that helped/hindered your career advancement. With your permission, the interview will be audio taped and transcribed.

Your confidentiality will be respected throughout this process. Pseudonyms for your district of employment will be used to minimize the risk of identification. You will be given the opportunity to review the transcribed interview and eliminate any comments or references you feel may be identifiable or have negative connotations. Your responses will not be linked to your name or address.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. I look forward to hearing from you and hope that you will choose to participate in the study. I hope to begin interviews for the study in spring of 2019, so I welcome your response to this letter by February 1, 2019. Please let me know if you have any questions. I can be reached at the phone or e-mail address below.

Sincerely,

Vanessa Lerma  
Doctoral Student  
UC San Diego and CSU San Marcos  
[vlerma@ncsd.edu](mailto:vlerma@ncsd.edu)



## APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT

### **Informed Consent for Participants**

Vanessa Lerma, under the supervision of Dr. Megan Hopkins, Assistant Professor, Education Studies, UC San Diego, is conducting a study to investigate the learned experiences of women district office leaders. You have been asked to participate in this study because you are an individual in district leadership in a school district. Hence, your permission is requested to participate in this study. It is expected that there will be approximately 10 participants in this study.

The purpose of this study is to answer the following research questions:

1. How do women district leaders develop professional networks?
2. What are the characteristics of women district leaders' professional networks?
3. What factors enable or constrain the formation of women district leaders' professional networks, such as formal and/or informal district structures?
4. How, if at all, do women district leaders perceive the utility of their networks for their professional learning and career advancement, as well as their efforts to engage in organizational change?

If you agree to be in this study, the following will occur: as a qualitative phenomenological study, interview data will be collected. The interviews will be individual and consist of two in-person conversations of approximately 60 minutes in length related to your experience as a district office administrator.

There are minimal risks to participating in this study. Interviews will be recorded, and notes will be taken by the researcher, creating the potential for a breach of confidentiality. There may be additional risks of discomfort, fatigue, stress or boredom. The risks will be minimized through keeping the interview to no longer than 60 minutes. If, however, you wish to terminate the interview, this can be done at any time and with no repercussions.

There may be a potential for a loss of confidentiality. However, to minimize risks to confidentiality, all notes and data files will be kept private, only to be used for analysis purposes. Those notes will be maintained in a locked home office file or on a secured computer hard drive. Pseudonyms for participants and their district institutions will be used to minimize risk of identification. Research records will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. Research records may be reviewed by the UCSD Institution Review Board (IRB). We may need to report information about known or reasonably suspected incidents of abuse or neglect of a child, dependent adult or elder including physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse or neglect. If any investigator has or is given such information, he or she may report such information to the appropriate authorities.

Because this is a research study, there may also be some unknown risks that are currently unforeseeable. You will be informed of any significant new findings.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and may be withdrawn by you at any time. There are no consequences if you decide not to participate. The alternatives to participation in this study are to choose not to participate.

Although your participation in this research study may be of little benefit to you, beyond personal reflection on your experiences, the data gathered in this study has the potential to benefit other women leaders and district central offices.

Participation in research is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw or refuse to answer specific questions in an interview at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. If you decide that you no longer wish to continue in this study, you will be required to either call or email the researcher.

The PI may remove you from the study without your consent if the PI feels it is in your best interest or the best interest of the study. You may also be withdrawn from the study if you do not follow the instructions given you by the study personnel.

There is no compensation for your time and travel. As a participant you will be responsible for any transportation and parking costs, and such costs will not be reimbursed.

If you are injured as a direct result of participation in this research, the University of California will provide any medical care you need to treat those injuries. The university will not provide any other form of compensation to you if you are injured. You may call the Human Research Protections Office at (858) 657-5100 for more information about this or to inquire about your rights as a research subject or to report research-related problems.

Vanessa Lerma has explained this study to you and answered your questions. If you have other questions or research-related problems, you may reach the principal investigator, Vanessa Lerma at [vlerma@ucsd.edu](mailto:vlerma@ucsd.edu) or Dr. Megan Hopkins, Committee Chair, at [mbhopkins@ucsd.edu](mailto:mbhopkins@ucsd.edu).

You may call the Human Research Protections Program Office at (858) 657-5100 to inquire about your rights as a research subject or to report research-related problems.

You have received a copy of this consent document.

You agree to participate.

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Subject's Signature

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Date

## APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL ONE

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL ONE

Interview Protocol 1

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of Interviewee:

Introduction to the interview: The purpose of this study is to examine the professional networks of district central office administrators and specifically at how women experience networking in these organizations. I am interviewing you as well as nine other individuals in order to understand better the phenomenon of women in district-level leadership roles. The location of the study and all participants will be made anonymous in the writing of the report and all data collected, including this interview, will be maintained in a locked file and in password protected computer files. This interview will take approximately 60 minutes. You will have an opportunity to review all the information gathered through this review to assess if the information has been noted correctly.

[Have the interviewee read and sign the consent form]

[Turn on and test recording device]

Proceed with questions:

- Walk me through the career path you've taken thus far.
  - What leadership roles have you held?
  - What brought you to your current role?
  - What challenges, if any, have you faced to advancing your career? What has facilitated your advancement?

- What opportunities, as an educational leader, have you had to engage in professional learning and growth?
  - What was the most impactful learning experience you've had as a leader?
  - How if at all, have these opportunities influenced your leadership skills and practices?
  - How has your school district supported these opportunities?
- Describe your experience/involvement with enacting organizational change. Provide a specific example, if possible.

Thank you for your participation in this interview.

## APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL TWO

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL TWO

Interview Protocol 2

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of Interviewee:

Introduction to the interview: The purpose of this study is to examine the professional networks of district central office administrators and specifically at how women experience networking in these organizations. I am interviewing you as well as nine other individuals in order to understand better the phenomenon of women in district-level leadership roles. The location of the study and all participants will be made anonymous in the writing of the report and all data collected, including this interview, will be maintained in a locked file and in password protected computer files. This interview will take approximately 60 minutes. You will have an opportunity to review all the information gathered through this review to assess if the information has been noted correctly.

[Have the interviewee read and sign the consent form]

[Turn on and test recording device]

Proceed with questions:

- Which person/persons have been most influential in guiding your career path?
  - For each person named:
    - How do you know this person? (Elicit background information, such as their job title, position, race/ethnicity, gender, etc.)
    - How have they influenced your career choices/path?
- To whom do you currently collaborate with/seek out for professional learning and growth?

- For each person named:
  - How do you know this person? (Elicit background information, such as their job title and position, race/ethnicity, gender, etc.)
  - How often do you turn to this person?
  - Why do you collaborate with this person for professional learning?
- To whom do you currently collaborate with/seek out in your current leadership role?
  - For each person named:
    - How do you know this person? (Elicit background information, such as their job title and position, race/ethnicity, gender, etc.)
    - How often do you turn to this person?
    - Why do you seek this person out?
- How, if at all, have personal relationships outside of your professional networks supported you in your career journey?
- **Participant Artifact:** Researcher will use the information from the questions to create the participant's circles that represent her career advancement network, professional learning network, as well as personal/friendship network and have the participant make any connections across the circles.

Thank you for your participation in this interview.

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