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Womxn's Leadership Alliance:

An Informal Co-Mentoring Network and its Potential Impact on Second-Generation Gender Bias

in Independent School Leadership

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

by

Sarah Dominique Colmaire

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This study examined the impact of an informal co-mentoring network on the female mid-level leaders in independent schools. The sample was composed of mid-level female administrators in National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) and California Association of Independent Schools (CAIS) accredited independent schools. An increased understanding of support for female administrators is needed to overcome second-generation gender bias and pursuing higher leadership roles in independent schools has implications for both NAIS and CAIS. Qualitative phenomenological research design was applied to study ways participants say an informal co-mentoring network impacts perceptions of their leadership trajectory, if an informal mentoring network addresses and overcomes second-generation gender

bias, and the processes, materials, and discussions through which mid-level female leaders in independent schools co-mentor each other in an informal co-mentoring network to overcome second-generation bias.

Once data was collected and triangulated, four themes and four findings were identified. The first theme is: Non-Linear Career Trajectory, the second is Professional Development Through Relationship Building, the third is Confidence, Support and Self-Efficacy and the fourth is Intersectional Identity. Each theme is expanded through four findings that delve more deeply into the experiences of mid-level female leaders in independent schools. The first finding suggests that each of the nine participants arrived at where they are in their career as a mid-level leader through a non-linear trajectory. These women could all name the direct impact WLA had on their career trajectory, and sharing their stories impacted participants. The second finding was that WLA is a place to develop friendships and bonds that develop over time, irrespective of distance or changing group composition, and that WLA meets participants where they are in their leadership journey. A third finding was that the confidence built in the supportive space devoid of competition leads to a sense of self-efficacy for the mid-level leaders who participated in WLA. The final finding was that to meet the needs of female leaders the intersectionality of identity needs to be explicitly addressed. The findings from this study add to the growing literature on the development and career trajectory of mid-career female education leaders, and the findings point to several recommendations for practice for independent schools seeking to improve the leadership opportunities and environments for women.

The dissertation of Sarah Dominique Colmaire is approved.

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DEDICATION

To Kathleen Tolan, who mentored me in more ways than were humanly possible. I am beyond grateful for our long history together as colleagues but more importantly as friends. Thinking about you makes my heart sing. Rest in Power.

And to Grandmother Betty who was a pioneer and ahead of her time in so many ways. You continue to inspire me. Rest in Peace.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Problem Statement

The gender leadership gap exists in all arenas of society despite evidence that women in leadership positions bring financial benefits, new perspectives, increased openness to viewpoints, and solutions and challenges to the status quo (Hill et al., 2016; Hunt et al., 2015). In the public education sector, the highest leadership position is superintendent, and women comprise approximately 27% of superintendents (American Association of School Administrators, 2020). While this number is almost five times higher than the percent of women in executive positions in Fortune 500 companies, 27% underrepresents the proportion of women teaching in public schools (72%) (Perry, 2020).

Women also continue to be outnumbered by men in top leadership positions in independent schools. The top leadership position in an independent school is the head of school, who is the head chief executive officer in the highest educational role at the school and is hired by the Board. This inequality between men and women in top leadership positions exists even though 72% of all faculty and administrators in independent schools are female (Hunt et al., 2020). This gender gap is more pronounced when looking at the different school divisions. In the 2020-2021 school year, only 32% of high school heads were female, while 34% of middle schools were led by women. The highest percentage of female heads of school was in the elementary division at 53% (National Association of Independent School [NAIS] Trendbook, 2021-2022). Advancement opportunities and support, such as mentorships, are particularly imperative for female mid-level administrators, since only 25% of female administrators

expressed interest in the headship compared to 47% of male administrators (NAIS, 2021). The number of female heads of school has risen from 31% in the 2009-2010 school year to 41% in the 2020-2021 school year (NAIS, 2021), yet this does not reflect a diverse and inclusive workforce and signals that something is getting in the way of women on the path to leadership.

When examining the existing gap in top female leadership, it is logical to look at the positions directly below the head of school as natural steppingstones to the head of school position. These positions include mid-level administrators such as assistant heads, deans, and directors. Examining these positions in relation to gender encourages the belief that qualified females could assume top leadership roles such as head of school. The leadership pipeline contains capable female school leaders who are not achieving upper levels of leadership (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010).

Well-documented barriers preclude women from top leadership positions such as the existence of the “old boys’ network.” The old boys’ attitude is the term to describe men’s historical attitudes toward women (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010) and remains despite social advances regarding women’s rights (Dubno, 1985). The “new boys’ network” emerged in the 1990s to describe men with increased exposure to women in academic and work settings. The expectation was that these men would have a more positive attitude towards women, yet studies found that this was not the case, and the “old/ new boys’ network” persists (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Everett et al., 1996; McGee, 2010).

Recent research has shifted to more subtle bias and prejudice that occur in workplace settings. The prejudice is termed “second-generation” gender bias (Ibarra et al., 2013, p. 60). This type of bias buttresses this study and is more invisible than “standard” gender bias. Second-generation gender biases are unintentional actions and attitudes that stem from cultural

assumptions, as well as social structures and practices that disadvantage women over men (Ibarra et al., 2013). Second-generation gender bias focuses on interpersonal factors such as lack of access to networks and mentors, as well as gendered notions of leadership (Groysberg & Connolly, 2013; Rhode & Ely, 2010). Second-generation gender bias also focuses on situational factors, such as the lack of objectivity in hiring and promotion practices (Elaqua et al., 2009). One of the underpinnings of second-generation gender bias is *social role theory*, which identifies social roles that men and women are socialized into (Eagly & Wood, 2016). Another reinforcement of this type of bias is *role congruity theory*, which explains socialized roles as based on prejudice and stereotypes (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The current education system reflects its founding on androcentric mental models, which emphasize masculine interests and a male point of view, and this androcentric view can be clearly seen when looking at administration positions (Shakeshaft, 1989).

Existing Gaps in the Research

The role of gender in schools is understudied (Galman & Mallozzi, 2012) and research focused on women leaders in independent schools is rare (Ostos, 2012). One reason is that independent schools are private institutions and do not have the same access to funding for large-scale research as public schools (McClay & Brown, 2000). The majority of research that exists on female leaders in independent schools focuses on those who have already achieved the headship (Bronkema, 2020; Clouser, 2018; Ostos, 2012; Pernambuco-Wise, 2011; Ratnesar, 2018). Furthermore, the accountability structure of independent schools differs from that of public schools, and this may impact which school improvement issues rise to the surface. Independent schools are primarily focused on student achievement, and they are held accountable by parents and students, and ultimately, the Board of Trustees (NAIS, n.d.); thus, an

issue like gender equity in school leadership may not be prioritized. This study fills a gap in the research through its focus on an understudied population of mid-level female independent school administrators in K-12 schools. Additionally, this study focuses on a cooperative (co-mentoring) mentorship framework, which is a friendship approach to mentoring, similar to a peer relationship. The friend-as-mentor relationship is egalitarian, in contrast to the traditional mentoring relationship which is hierarchical. (Gardiner et al., 2000). The co-mentoring framework was previously studied only in higher education and university settings (Mullens 2000, 2009). This focus was chosen based on the hypothesis that promoting egalitarian mentorship might lead to actionable steps for NAIS and CAIS schools to take in order to increase female leadership representation.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand experiences of female mid-level leaders in independent schools overcoming second-generation gender bias through engagement with an informal co-mentoring network. Gender imbalance in school leadership is a national problem, and only one third of head of school positions are held by women in NAIS schools (Chubb, 2015). A wave of retirements of heads of school (NAIS, 2021) is on the horizon, and the shortening tenure of heads of school (Hunt et al., 2020) increases the importance of giving voice to female mid-level independent school leaders. Giving voice to these women can provide insights into ways informal co-mentorship networks could ameliorate the gender imbalance in independent school leadership.

This study provides the opportunity for female mid-level leaders to offer their perspective on the possible effectiveness of an informal co-mentorship network to address and overcome second-generation bias and support their career advancement. In addition, the study provides

insight into an under-examined area of education: female mid-level leaders in independent schools. Leaders in independent schools have the least access to built-in support and professional development, and the results of this study could support the formation of self-made and informal networks, as such networks require minimal resources and may be easily replicable.

Statement of Project

This study will focus on an already established informal co-mentoring network of female independent school mid-level leaders. It will investigate if an informal co-mentoring network helps address and overcome barriers that stem from second-generation bias and the impact of the network on participants perceptions of their career trajectories.

Womxn's Leadership Alliance

The network, called Womxn's Leadership Alliance, is composed of female leaders from CAIS schools. Womxn's Leadership Alliance (WLA or Alliance) was started in the 2016-2017 school year by Rachel, an attendee of the annual California Teacher Development Collective (CATDC) Women in Leadership conferences. Rachel found it inspiring to spend the day with other like-minded passionate educators, be provided with a respite from everyday routines, and an opportunity to reflect on personal growth. When the conference day ended in 2016, she did not want the energy and learning to end. Rachel partnered with another educator who attended the conference, and they decided to start their own co-mentoring group with other mid-career women education leaders.

The goal for Womxn's Leadership Alliance was to have an opportunity to continue the conversations started at the CATDC workshop. The founders of WLA wanted to create a space for women in independent schools to talk and think about leadership through facilitated conversations. These conversations were usually framed by articles, videos, books or topics in

popular culture, and the group was composed of participants who were both committed to their own growth and the growth of those in the group.

Within the first year, Alexandra joined Rachel in leading WLA, since the other original founder moved out of Los Angeles. Rachel and Alexandra were facilitators until the 2020-2021 school year, when three new people volunteered to lead WLA. The following year, 2021-2022, WLA was facilitated by one person from 2020 and three new facilitators, for a total of four facilitators.

After the first year, Rachel and Alexandra realized that meeting at coffee shops and restaurants was not something they could sustain, since logistics, such as splitting the bill, complicated the functioning of the program. They decided it needed to be simplified, and participants offered their schools to host and provide food. Sometimes it would be 30 people and sometimes it would be seven people. Even if only a few people showed up, socializing and exchanging ideas still took place. The sharing of wine and cheese (and other snacks) provided a slight yet necessary separation between Alliance and the workday. In addition, the happy hour/ cocktail party nature that was part of the original iteration remains an important element of the meetings. This includes having unstructured time at the beginning to hang out and talk, before moving on to the guided or facilitated activities. The food was sponsored by CATDC for a short time, and then either the schools hosting, or the founders provided the food and drinks. Today, the facilitators provide the food and drinks for meetings, including wine and cheese.

With the input of other members, Rachel and Alexandra created a clear mission and guidelines for the WLA. The goals and guidelines remain the same today.

Goals of WLA

The WLA is a networking, development, and affinity space for women and other underrepresented genders, and the specific goals are listed below (see Appendix N):

- Encourage individuals to gain comfort in leadership roles.
- Provide strategies and support so individuals feel empowered to pursue leadership roles.
- Create a space to talk about career challenges we face and gain support
- Hold an affinity space for female leaders who share similar struggles.
- Intentionally attend to our need for connection and relationship with other educators.

Guidelines of WLA

Informed by our mutual goals of inclusivity and creating an equitable space, the guidelines of all WLA meetings are outlined below (see Appendix N):

- 1) Come as you are
- 2) Step up and step back
- 3) What is said in Alliance stays in Alliance
- 4) Speak from the “I” perspective
- 5) Speak from your personal experiences
- 6) Speak from the heart

Since its founding, WLA has continued to be a supportive space for women and underrepresented genders in independent schools, who are interested in leadership opportunities and growth, whether in their current leadership role or in a role they aspire to hold. This research will capture the lived experiences and perceptions of participants in a co-mentoring network for mid-level female leaders and how the network intersects and contends with second-generation bias.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study were the following:

1. In what ways do participants of an informal co-mentoring network say the network is impacting their perceptions of their leadership career trajectory, if at all?
2. According to participants, how does an informal mentoring network address and overcome second-generation gender bias, if at all?
3. What are the processes, materials, and discussions through which mid-level female leaders in independent schools co-mentor each other in an informal co-mentoring network to overcome second-generation bias?

Overview of the Research Design

Site and Population

The study focused on nine mid-level female leaders in CAIS and NAIS accredited independent schools. Independent schools were chosen because independent schools are undergoing an unprecedented wave of head retirements (NAIS, 2021), and the average head tenure is decreasing (Hunt et al., 2020). In addition, independent schools are in a unique position to produce graduates who go on to hold positions in society with great influence and power (Ostos, 2012). Heads of school who are grounded in egalitarianism and equity may impact the values of graduates, since the early images of leadership that children see and experience affect how they interact with the world (Zirkel, 2002).

All participants were current or former members of “Womxn’s Leadership Alliance” (WLA), and they currently hold mid-level leadership positions or were mid-level leaders when participants in “Womxn’s Leadership Alliance.”

Research Design

This study uses qualitative design to explore and understand the experiences of mid-level leaders in independent schools through emerging questions and procedures (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The process involves the researcher interpreting and analyzing the data in order to develop themes that lead to findings. (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The qualitative design relied on phenomenological inquiry to document the lived experiences from the perspective of the participants in the informal co-mentoring network (Knaack, 1984; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Phenomenology seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of humans' everyday experiences with a phenomenon (Patton, 2014). The phenomenon can be an emotion, experience, relationship, program, organization, or culture (Patton, 2014). I studied the everyday experiences of women who are part of an all-female identifying informal co-mentoring network. This study sought to portray the essence of being a participant of this particular program, studying both their social action and how they experience their lifeworld (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Schram, 2003). Through a phenomenological study of the population, the experiences of an understudied and undervalued group were documented and highlighted. This study sought to make sense of the way female-mid level independent school leaders negotiate their own leadership preparation through informal networks and co-mentoring. A phenomenological approach gave voice to an under-studied population subjectively from their own perspective, which supports the empowerment of female administrators.

Methods

This study gathered data through recruitment protocol, interviews, documents, and observations. Interviews are central to phenomenological research since the lived experience of the participants in their own words is the foundation to this qualitative method (Creswell &

Creswell, 2018) and served as the primary data source. The interviews were semi-structured, using prior questions that I wanted to know more about (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Semi-structured interviews allowed for answers to be built upon through additional questions that more deeply explore participant's responses (Maxwell, 2013).

Formal and informal observations were conducted during Alliance meetings and informal get-togethers. I assumed the role of participant observer since my observer activities were known to the group and subordinate to my role as a participant (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Meetings on Zoom were recorded, and then transcripts of meetings were analyzed and included in the same coding process as the interviews. In addition, documents were analyzed. The documents from 2016-2022 can be found in the Womxn's Leadership Alliance Google Drive and include blog recaps, notes from meetings, presentation slides from meetings, survey feedback, meeting agendas, meeting planning notes, protocols, RSVPs, handouts, and WIX website. These data collection methods were triangulated to accurately capture the experience of female mid-level independent school leaders in informal co-mentoring leadership networks.

While interviews were the primary data source, triangulation reduced the chances that the conclusions drawn stem from biases in any one data collection method (Maxwell, 2013). The experiences of the nine women were bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essence of the phenomenon of the influence of the co-mentoring network on addressing and overcoming barriers based in second-generation gender bias (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Bracketing involves the identification of the researcher's "vested interests, personal experience, cultural factors, assumptions and hunches that could influence how he or she views the study's data" (Fisher, 2009, p. 583). Bracketing, or temporarily setting aside prejudices or assumptions, is important

when examining all forms of data due to my intimate connection to the research matter and will allow for a closer examination of consciousness itself (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data Analysis

The transcriptions of the interviews and meetings were analyzed for themes and responses which correlate to the research questions. The documents collected throughout the process were coded similarly to the transcripts and well-established leadership themes such as identity, mentorship, gendered roles, leadership, career challenges and networking, providing the starting point in the analysis. I created provisional codes, which were revised as data continued to be analyzed. In addition, I wrote analytic memos as I examined all forms of data, and this part of the process aided in the development of emerging themes.

When examining the data in regard to second-generation gender bias, I used the following theories: lenses of labyrinth, social role, and role congruity.

Study Significance

This research contributes to the body of knowledge related to women in educational leadership. More narrowly, it focuses on the pipeline to leadership for women within the independent school setting. There is a need for an increase in female heads of school, and the informal leadership network/ mentorship model can be replicated by other groups of female mid-level independent school leaders. This has the potential to serve a wider range of female mid-level leaders who would also benefit from participating in an informal leadership network to support their career advancement, as well as address and overcome second-generation bias. Leadership opportunities improve with an understanding of how to support women in overcoming second-generation gender bias (Burkman, 2011). This study makes

recommendations for the implementation of all female/ female identifying informal leadership co-mentoring networks that CAIS or NAIS can build on and replicate.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

This study sought to understand the impact of an informal co-mentoring network on the participants' perceptions of their leadership career trajectory, as well as addressing and overcoming second-generation gender bias. All participants are mid-level female administrators in independent schools, or they were at the time they participated in Womxn's Leadership Alliance (WLA or Alliance). The literature review begins by presenting the general benefits of female leadership in organization and then the specific benefits in educational settings. Next, the lack of female leadership and barriers to advancement are examined. The review presents the barriers as part of a leadership labyrinth women must navigate. These barriers are rooted in second-generation gender bias, having a foundation in social role theory and role-congruity theory. Social role theory and role-congruity theory explain cultural assumptions that undergird the leadership labyrinth, organizational structures and practices that benefit men over women. Afterwards, several keys to the leadership labyrinth and overcoming second-generation gender bias are addressed, including leader identity, exposure to female role models and leaders, and the benefits of co-mentoring and networking.

The second part of the review examines the gender gap in K-12 leadership in both public and independent schools. Keys to the leadership labyrinth are specifically examined in independent schools. The review culminates in exploring the impact of informal co-mentoring networks on addressing second-generation gender bias and impacting the leadership trajectory of female mid-level administrators in independent schools.

Current Research on Female Leadership

Benefits of Female Leadership

The current state of female leadership represents an example of persisting barriers to advancement and reflects an evolution in leadership roles and organizational practices (Adler, 1999). Increased effectiveness and synergy that signals innovation and progressive change is needed to meet the current needs of successful leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2003). Eagly and Carli (2003) rely on high-quality meta-analytic reviews to determine that female leaders are particularly effective under modern conditions. Women are more likely than men to lead in ways shown that are considered successful for current leadership needs. For instance, women tend to exhibit effective leadership qualities associated with transformational leadership and the contingent reward component of transformational leadership, while men tend to exhibit ineffective styles of leadership with passive management by exception and laissez-faire attitudes (Eagly and Carli, 2003).

Women in top leadership positions benefit their institutions, despite being underrepresented (Hill et al., 2016; Hunt et al., 2015). Deszö and Ross (2012) found that women in top management positions improve organizational performance and motivate women in middle management. This finding derived from examining 15 years of panel data on the top management teams of S&P 500 firms. The researchers found female representation in top positions correlated with an increase in \$45 million in firm value. This data is supported by the findings of the Credit Suisse Research Institute (2014) that discovered companies with one or more women on the board achieved higher average returns on equity and stronger average growth.

In addition to financial advantages, women in top leadership positions bring new perspectives, increased openness to different viewpoints, and new challenges to the status quo (Hill et al., 2016; Hunt et al., 2015). The longitudinal study of Parker et al. (2016) found that experiences involving diversity correlate with a positive impact on moral development. The researchers analyzed data from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education from the 2006- 2010 cohort and found diversity courses positively influence students' moral development during their time in college. In addition, diversity coursework supports psychological well-being, civic engagement, bias reduction, and social action (Parker et al., 2016). Gender diversity in the highest levels of organizations also increases innovation and reputation of the organization, both of which have a positive impact on the firm's performance (Dowling, 2006; Mahon, 2002; Miller & Triana, 2009).

Benefits of Female Leadership in Education

Diversity in educational leadership through equitable gender and racial representation is important as well. Educational leaders have a wide-ranging impact on student achievement in school, as well as the overall school community (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). Diversity in education leadership supports a wider vision of education, encourages more inclusive opinions and thoughts, and shapes the mental models of students (Feibelman & Haakmat, 2010).

Leaders have a measurable impact on both student achievement and school success (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). In the 2000's, at least five reviews of empirical research investigated the indirect and indirect impact of school leadership on student outcomes (Bell et al., 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Witziers et al., 2003). This research indicates that leadership not only plays a significant role in student achievement, but the only factor more significant to student achievement is teaching (Leithwood et al., 2004). In fact, the

total effects, both direct and indirect, of leaders on student learning accounted for about one quarter of the total school effects (Leithwood et al., 2004).

The examples of leadership that students see in schools influence how they see the world and the paradigms they use to understand their experiences in the future (Zirkel, 2003). Currently, the diversity of the national population is far from being mirrored in the representation of race, ethnicity and gender in independent schools. For instance, there are large gaps between the race and ethnicity of teachers, heads of school and students. In the 2017-2018 school year there were 82% white teachers compared to 18% teachers of color, 92% white heads of school compared to 8% heads of color, and 65% white students compared to 35% students of color (Blackwell & Torres, 2019a). These gaps are reflected in gender as well. Females outnumber males as teachers (68% to 32%) and students (51% to 49%). However, an area where males outnumber females is headships (65% to 36%) (Blackwell & Torres, 2019b). Once the demographics of independent school teachers and leaders reflect more inclusivity and mirror the race and gender of students, students will experience increased success in school (Zirkel, 2002; Howard, 2010; Northern, 2022). Students need to see themselves reflected in their school, both in gender and race, instead of feeling like an outsider or othered.

When students feel a sense of belonging and are motivated, their academic achievement and persistence increase. As Lazowski and Hulleman (2016) state, “Not only do motivated students learn more, they persist longer, produce higher quality work, and score higher on standardized achievement tests, particularly if they are motivated by relatively intrinsic, as compared with extrinsic, reasons” (p.604). Robbins et al. (2004) performed a meta-analysis of 109 studies and controlled for prior measures of performance and academic ability. They found that measures of student motivation were predictors of both academic performance and

persistence in college. Casillas et al. (2012) found that the motivation of the almost 4,700 students in middle school had as much impact on their overall GPA as the actual grades they received.

School leaders are key to this sense of student belonging. They foster the productive school culture which enables healthy and successful teacher student relationships, as well as support of the instructional strategies that address student need for competence and autonomy, which in turn increases a sense of belonging (Osterman, 2010). The school leaders' impact trickles down from the big picture vision of the principal to the academic achievement of the students. Female students need to see themselves reflected in their leadership and male students need to see females as leaders as well. Exposure to female leaders lessens stereotyping and leads to a more positive view of women in leadership for both males and females, dissolving the socialized leadership-equals-male stereotype (Dasgupta & Asgari, 2004).

Lack of Female Organizational Leadership

There is evidence of a variety of benefits that women in top leadership positions bring to organizations, yet there remains a dearth of female leaders in all arenas. For instance, in 2021 women held only 26% of seats in Congress and 27.3% seats in the U.S. House of Representatives (Pew Research Center, 2018). In 2021, females accounted for only six percent of the Chief Executive Officers and 30% of the Board of Directors of companies on the *Fortune 500* list (Catalyst, 2021). This gender disparity is prevalent in education as well, where 14.4% of superintendents are female, even though according to the U.S. Department of Education 72% of all K-12 educators are female (Glass, 2020). There is a strong connection between organizational success as a result of female leadership in top leadership positions in both business and

education, so the question arises as to why there are so few females in top leadership roles in various industries.

Conceptual Framework: Moving Beyond the Glass Ceiling Metaphor

A multitude of research investigates the barriers that females encounter in a variety of corporate and not-for-profit leadership roles (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ibarra, 1997; Ibarra et al., 2010). These barriers were termed the “glass ceiling” and became part of the general lexicon in part due to a 1986 *Wall Street Journal* article by Carol Hymowitz and Timothy Shellhardy. In that article, Hymowitz and Shellhardy referenced barriers faced by females in middle management which were due to “corporate tradition and prejudice” as opposed to obvious discrimination (Zimmer, 2015, p. 1). The glass ceiling put a name to the androcentric culture and understanding of leadership that leads to gender bias, stereotypes, and prejudice in the workplace, preventing the upward trajectory of female leaders (Powell & Butterfield, 1994; Reynolds, 1999; Oakley, 2000; Ragins et al., 1998; Bass & Avolio, 1994).

The glass ceiling metaphor suggests that there is a single, fixed barrier that prevents the ascension of female leaders. This is inaccurate, since there are multiple barriers women encounter on the path of upward mobility, and there is not one static obstacle (the glass ceiling) that prevents advancement. Some theorists name the barriers a maze, with a series of dead ends and no final destination and others as a labyrinth with a journey that unfolds (McDonagh & Paris, 2012).

The Leadership Labyrinth

Eagly and Carli (2007) named these barriers a labyrinth, which is a more accurate metaphor for the multitude of obstacles women encounter along the indirect, complex, and discontinuous paths in the pursuit of top leadership positions. The authors observe, “Passage

through a labyrinth requires persistence, awareness of one's progress, and a careful analysis of the puzzles that lie ahead” (Eagly & Cali, 2007, p. 62). To navigate the labyrinth, women must make their way through doors (barriers) using “keys” to unlock them and get to the core of the labyrinth (top leadership positions) (Pernambuco-Wise, 2014).

Female leaders in independent schools face multiple doors (barriers) as they make their way through the “leadership labyrinth,” and as they pass through each ring of the labyrinth, the leader grows in wisdom, mastery and stability (McDonough & Paris, 2012). The barriers they face (see Figure 1) are unique to being female and include both interpersonal factors such as lack of access to mentors and exposure to female leaders (Groysberg & Connolly, Rhode & Ely, 2010) as well as situational factors such as lack of objectivity in promotion and hiring practices (Elacqua, Beehr, Hansen & Webster, 2009). Consistently being confronted with twists and turns requires that women work harder than their male counterparts and demonstrate tenacity in the face of the obstacles (Greguldez, Diehl & Kreutzer, 2019).

Figure 1

Maze of Career Obstacles (McDonagh & Paris, 2012)



Historically, situational barriers have been the primary focus of research and generally center on organizational situations that are more easily identified as based in prejudice and stereotypes (Elacqua et al., 2009). An example of situational barriers includes gender stereotypes and biased evaluations (Heilman, 2001; Fiske, 1998; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; McGee, 2010; Sanchez & Thornton, 2010). For instance, Lyness and Heilman (2006) found that women managers must receive higher performance ratings than their male counterparts to be promoted.

Second-Generation Gender Bias

Recent research has shifted to more subtle bias and prejudice that occur in workplace settings which is termed “second-generation gender bias” (Ibarra et al., 2013). This type of bias, which underpins this study, is more often invisible than overt gender bias. The barriers stem from such phenomena as cultural assumptions and organizational structures and practices that benefit men over women. Second-generation gender bias focuses on interpersonal factors such as lack of access to networks development opportunities through formal and informal mentoring relationships (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Bowles & McGinn, 2005), gender differences such as women being judged unfairly when they lead in a traditionally male leadership style (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Eagly et al., 2003; Bowles & McGinn, 2005), and underinvestment in social capital for women (Elacqua et al., 2009; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ragins et al., 1998). For example, the pressure of parenting and high-level careers leaves women without much time to build professional networks and socialize with colleagues, both of which are essential social capital for movement up in a profession (Eagly & Carli, 2007). This is compounded by the fact that men are more likely than women to have influential contacts, another essential element of social capital (Ragins et al., 1998). A woman's path through the labyrinth is layered.

Second-generation gender bias has foundations in social role theory and the roles that men and women are socialized into (Eagly & Wood, 2016). For example, *relational morality* is a socialized condition that prevents women from letting themselves be committed to situations, in this case networks, in ways that they feel they cannot equally return (Greguldez et al, 2019). Another example is *gendered modesty* which describes how women underestimate their self-worth and value in professional settings and situations (Greguldez et al., 2019). This is compounded by the research which demonstrates that women often feel inauthentic when participating in leadership activities that benefit their personal advancement (Ely et al., 2011).

Social Role Theory

Gender roles are a set of norms with common ideas about behavior expectations considered acceptable for each sex (Eagly & Wood, 1991). Eagly et al. (2003) explain that gender roles and leadership roles are defined by an individual's social position and gender, based on accepted beliefs about the characteristics of men and women. Social role theory postulates that there are two types of expectations from gender roles: descriptive and prescriptive (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Descriptive and prescriptive expectations are based on gender stereotypes that overgeneralize and reduce perceptions of what each gender is expected to do and how they behave; in this case, men are considered agentic, and women are seen as communal (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001). Agentic roles are assertive and independent, while communal roles are friendly, unselfish, and focused on others (Eagly & Wood, 1991; Eckes & Trautner, 2000). Social role theory states that these stereotypes then affect the division of labor and gender hierarchy in society (Eckes & Trautner, 2000). As it relates to this study, top executive jobs are thought to require primarily agentic qualities of toughness and aggressiveness,

and therefore women have less leadership ability for top positions than men (Eagly & Karau, 2002.)

Role Congruity Theory

This incongruity between gender norms and leadership norms is the foundation of role congruity theory (Catalyst, 2007; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Heilman, 2001). Role congruity theory posits that prescriptive and descriptive expectation stereotypes propagate two forms of prejudice against women (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The primary prejudice comes from using a masculine framework to look at the role of leader. When a masculine framework is applied to the gendered perception of women, women are seen as unfit for leadership roles. Heilman & Caleo (2018) describe this as a “lack of fit model” (p.726), which postulates that discrimination against women in the workplace is due to the assumption that attributes women are thought to embody are incongruent with the masculine characteristics necessary for success in leadership positions.

The second prejudice against women is that when women do occupy the role of leader, they are judged negatively because they are acting in ways that are not congruent with their gender (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This creates a double indemnity, or “double bind,” where women are neither fulfilling the expectation of their gender nor the leadership position (Ibarra et al., 2013, p. 8). For instance, if women leaders show any behaviors that are agentic and traditionally associated with male leaders such as *dominance*, the female leaders are transgressing their gender role expectations and, thereby, evaluated negatively (Ritter & Yoder, 2004). This is particularly true for women of color who are the least likely to be promoted and wait longer for a promotion than their white counterparts (Bailes & Guthery, 2020).

The Gender Gap in K-12 School Leadership

These barriers for leadership advancement also face women in the K-12 setting. Second-generation gender bias falsely images only men as exhibiting the qualities needed for successful school leadership (Grogan, 2000). School leadership is associated with socially constructed masculine traits such as competitiveness, authoritarianism and problem-solving (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010; Burton & Weiner, 2006; Skrla, 1999). Search committees, hiring boards and those in position to promote school leaders continue to perpetuate the belief that an authoritarian leadership style associated with men is a more effective managerial style for superintendents, heads and CEOs than the communal style associated with women (Burton & Weiner, 2016; Eagly & Wood, 2016; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011).

Gender Inequality in Public School Leadership: Superintendent

In 1992, the Census Bureau named the public school superintendency the most male-dominated executive position in the United States (Glass, 1992), and other research brought to light the superintendency as the most gender-imbalanced occupation in the United States (Skrla, 2000; Skrla, 2010). In 2020, women accounted for 76% of public school teachers, yet only 27% of superintendents were women (Perry, 2020). These numbers are a nearly double from 2000 when the American Association of School Administrators Study (2000) detailed that 72% of public school teachers were women and 14% of superintendents were women (Glass et al., 2000), yet the gender imbalance remains.

The barriers that women face on the path to the superintendency are rooted in the same second-generation gender bias as other females in the leadership labyrinth. Women follow a less direct route to superintendency than men, starting in elementary school administration (48.3%) or working in district offices (57.4%) (Brunner & Kim, 2010). Meanwhile, men's career path

usually leads them immediately from being a secondary school principal to superintendent (Brunner & Kim, 2010). In addition, women spend almost double the amount of time in the classroom than men; 40% of men spent five or fewer years in the classroom before moving into administration, while 41% of women spent 11 or more years teaching before assuming leadership positions (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Glass et al., 2000; Shakeshaft, 1989). When applying for the position, the social and cultural norms that favor male-centered leadership as the most desirable create a discriminatory interview process as female candidates for superintendency face greater levels of scrutiny (Muñoz et al., 2014). This is compounded by the fact that female leaders are less likely to advocate for themselves, while simultaneously more likely to be criticized by their subordinates (Feibelman & Haakmat, 2010).

Gender Inequality in Independent School Leadership: Head of School

Similar to the superintendency in public schools, the head of school is the top administrative role in independent schools. In independent schools the head of school is hired by a Board of Directors to oversee the academic and business affairs of running the school (Dolin, 2020). While the head of school leads on a smaller scale than a superintendent in public schools, it is the closest equivalent. Independent schools have their own unique and individual organizational structures. However, no matter what the structure, the head of school is the top decision-maker, and all aspects of the head's job are centered on the mission of the school (Madsen, 2003). The mission of each school is embedded in the culture of the school (Madsen, 2003). Since all stakeholders are driven by the school mission, this results in a culture impacted by the head of school that has deeply embedded traditions and values that have evolved over time (Peterson & Deal, 1998).

When examining women in independent school leadership, one must also examine the cultural context of independent schools (Feibelman, 2013), as it reflects social role theory and actively encourages and supports gender stereotypes and signals male-centered leadership as the norm (Shakeshaft, 1989; Skrla, 2003; Tallerico & Blount, 2004). While independent schools serve roughly 580,000 of the nation's students (NAIS, 2020), this group is traditionally composed of elite families whose students are being prepared to live in a world that is made up of similar elite people (Persell & Cookson, 1985). The families who send their students to independent schools wanted an alternative to traditional public schools that might better reflect the norms of a privileged, white, wealthy society whose power structure maintains constructs of gender bias, specific gender roles, and patriarchy (Persell & Cookson, 1985; Powell, 1996). Private schools continue to remain segregated by income and an *Education Next* report found that the number of middle-income students who attended private schools dropped by half while high-income students has remained steady. Additionally, high-income student enrollment has made a shift from religious schools to nonsectarian schools over the last 50 years (Murnane et al., 2018). Due to this cultural context and the maintenance of societal norms in independent schools, examinations of challenges woman face in leadership advancement should be grounded in social role and role congruity theories, as was my study.

The gender distribution of top-level leadership positions in independent schools reflects this gender bias. Only 28.8% of the heads of NAIS schools were female in 1997, 31% in 2010 and then the number jumped to 41% in 2021 (Hunt et al., 2020; NAIS, 2021). However, this is not reflective of the teaching force since 41% is far below the 68% of female teachers in K-12 (NAIS, 2020, 2021). On the other side of the gender coin, the percentage of male heads of school (59%) is nearly double the percentage of male teachers (32%) (NAIS, 2020, 2021). In fact,

women continue to be outnumbered by men in top leadership positions, particularly in independent schools with middle and upper schools. In the 2016-2017 school year, 66% of all California Association of Independent Schools (CAIS) member schools had male heads and when removing single-sex schools from the equation the number rose to 74% (Clouser, 2018 p. 18). While data has not been consistently gathered by CAIS over the years, these percentages give a picture of the gender imbalance in school headship that most closely aligns with my sample population.

When examining the existing gap in top female leadership, it is logical to look to positions directly below the head of school that would be considered natural steppingstones to the head of school position. These positions include mid-level administrators such as assistant heads, deans, and directors. When those positions are examined in relation to gender, the numbers encourage the belief that qualified women could assume such top leadership roles such as head of school. In the 2018-2019 school year, 55% of Associate Heads, 59% of Assistant Heads, 43% of Upper School Heads, 55% of Middle School Heads, 83% of Lower School Heads, 79% of Directors of Development, 79% of Directors of Admissions and 67% of Directors of Diversity were female (Blackwell & Torres, 2019b). This trend continued in the 2020-2021 school year where most administrators (69%) in independent schools are female (NAIS, 2021). The leadership pipeline contains female leaders who are capable school leaders, yet they are not making it to the upper levels of leadership (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010). There is also a difference between male and female application patterns for headship positions. Male candidates tend to apply for three or more positions, while women tend to apply for only one position (NAIS, 2017). The data supports that men often became finalists for three positions (24% vs 9%), while women were more likely to be finalists for a single position (56% vs 36%) (NAIS,

2017). Additionally, men are more likely than women to work with a search firm when applying for a headship (88% vs 73%) (NAIS, 2017, p.5). Advancement opportunities and support are particularly imperative for female mid-level administrators, since only 25% of female administrators expressed interest in the headship compared to 47% of male administrators (NAIS, 2021 p.23).

Navigating the Leadership Labyrinth in Independent Schools

There are various barriers that female mid-level administrators in independent schools encounter in the leadership labyrinth that contribute to the fact that men are four times more likely to serve in the most powerful positions in education (Robinson et al., 2017). The barriers are similar to the women in all arenas (business, government, public schools, etc.) and stem from second-generation gender bias rooted in social role theory and role congruity theory. These barriers include, but are not limited to, such factors as the reluctance of search committees to hire non-traditional candidates, lack of confidence, old boy's network, and the reluctance of women to take risks and apply for positions if they do not feel they have the requisite skills (Burton & Weber, 2016; Derrington & Sherrat, 2009; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2001; Hoff & Mitchell, 2008; McGee, 2010; Thomson, 2016).

While female leaders do not all pass through the same doors and encounter the same barriers in the leadership labyrinth, there are some common master keys used either singly or in combination that support women's passage through the leadership labyrinth (Pernambuco-Wise, 2014). These keys include the development of leadership identity, exposure to female role models and leaders, and access to mentoring and networks (Baumgarten & Schneider, 2010; Blake-Beard, 2001; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Dasgupta and Asgari, 2004; Debebe & Reinert, 2012; Elsseser & Lever, 2011; Ibarra et al., 2013; Ragins et al., 2000).

Key to the Labyrinth: Leadership Identity

One way women become leaders is by internalizing a leadership identity, which is an iterative process (Ibarra et al., 2013). Three areas which researchers believe cause women to question their own abilities as educational leaders are lack of confidence, lack of aspirations, and lack of risk-taking (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010). Many women doubt their leadership abilities (Seibert et al., 2016), which often comes from lacking a sense of self-efficacy (Isaac et al., 2012). Leadership self-efficacy, or the belief that an individual has the ability to succeed in a leadership position (Isaac et al., 2012), is grounded in the self-efficacy work of Bandura (1993, 1994, 1997).

Perceived self-efficacy belief is rooted in social cognitive theory which revolves around human agency. Those who believe in their own efficacy find ways to demonstrate control over their situations, no matter what limitations their environment imposes on them (Bandura, 1993). Social cognitive theory assumes that human agency is influenced by the strength of efficacy beliefs. The higher the sense of efficacy, the more likely a person is to approach their goals with effort, creativity, and persistence. Therefore, they are more likely to attain their goals. Conversely, the lower an individual's sense of personal efficacy, the more likely they feel that persistence and effort are futile. They demonstrate less sustained effort when presented with adverse situations, basically guaranteeing failure (Goddard & Skrla, 2006).

The self-doubt that women feel, which leads to a decreased sense of self-efficacy, often stems from social role theory and the cultural expectations they have internalized since childhood. From early in childhood, girls tend to play down their achievements while boys are taught to be confident (Schunk & Meece, 2006). In two studies of women in college, Koenig et al. (2011) and Keohane et al. (2011) found that a feeling of self-efficacy lessens as women get

older. This data is compounded by the results from a study on people in independent schools who expressed interest in the headship. Scott (1997) found that the greatest obstacle for women attaining the head of school position was self-doubt, while men reported the greatest obstacle was a lack of a postgraduate degree. Appearing confident is connected to hiring and promotions for applicants (Smith, 2013), and decreased self-efficacy and self-doubt inhibit women from applying for positions and being hired in top leadership positions.

Leadership Identity: What Mentorship Can Offer

The identity that a female leader develops is integral to her success in a leadership role, particularly in the face of the double bind that exists in second-generation gender bias. The existence of double bind, where women are neither fulfilling the expectation of their gender nor the leadership position (Ibarra et al., 2013), disrupts the process of leadership development for women, particularly the chances that those around her will endorse her as a leader when she does not fit the current mold of top-level leaders (Ibarra et al., 2013). Leadership identity is developed at three levels: personal, relational, and collective (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) and can be viewed as an iterative process of relational construction (Debebe & Reinert, 2012). Lack of confidence, lack of aspirations, and lack of risk-taking are three areas that researchers believe cause women to question their own abilities as educational leaders (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010). For instance, a meta-analysis conducted by Paustian-Underdahl et al. (2014) found that when leadership effectiveness was considered from the vantage of all leadership contexts, men and women were rated as equally effective. However, when only examining self-ratings, women rate themselves significantly less effective than men rate themselves. To combat this, leadership identity can be fostered through encouragement, mentoring, and awareness of increased capabilities with

additional responsibilities (Debebe & Reinert, 2012). Research points to mentoring as a key to such identity formation.

Leadership Identity: Safe Spaces and Informal Networks

Another way to support the leadership identity for women leaders is through the creation of “identity workspaces” where similarly positioned women can support each other’s learning and growth (Ibarra et al., 2013, p. 7). These safe “identity workspaces” can take a multitude of forms including a supportive group of peers, where women in similar positions emotionally support each other’s learning. Identity workspaces promote talking openly, taking risks, and most importantly, making connections. When these connections, “are grounded in candid assessments of the cultural, organizational, and individual factors shaping them, women can construct coherent narratives about who they are and who they want to become” (p.8). Women need to self-identify as a leader to demonstrate motivation needed to strive towards higher leadership positions (Guillén et al., 2015).

Women are more willing to talk openly and take risks when they feel they will not be judged, and this is a necessary precursor to identifying common experiences to learn from other women (Ibarra et al., 2013). The research of Seibert et al. (2016) found that leadership self-efficacy and a leader’s network mediate job challenges related to leadership effectiveness and promotability. These connections and common experiences are important for women leaders in independent schools who often work in siloed environments.

Keys to the Labyrinth: Exposure to Female Role Models and Leaders

There is a dearth of role models for women leaders, and this creates a two-pronged problem. In addition to an absence of role models aspiring female leaders can emulate and learn from, the lack of role models may suggest that women who are in higher-level positions are a

liability and not someone to emulate (Ibarra et al., 2013). The bias against women being a boss can be seen in the study by Elsseser and Lever (2011) where a subgroup of the participants reported that they preferred a male (37%) over a female boss (19% preferred female). The positive impact exposure to female exemplars can make to the perception of women as leaders speaks to the power of indirect socialization (Rios et al., 2010). A study by Rios et al. (2010) made several statistically significant conclusions about the impact of a gender-inclusive curriculum on changed attitudes regarding women in leadership, when juxtaposed with female students in traditional curriculum sections.

Exposure to female role models and leaders decreases stereotyping and increases positive views of female leaders, which has a powerful and direct impact on women's subconscious beliefs about women leaders. Dasgupta and Asgari (2004) conducted two studies, one laboratory experiment and one year-long study, and determined that the implicit male-as-leader stereotype was diminished when female college students were exposed to female leaders in a variety of social contexts, such as course instructors. While some academic environments produced an increase in stereotyped views of women leaders, this was never the case at the women's college they studied. Importantly, the stereotyped views of women leaders in certain academic environments (e.g., classes in male-dominated disciplines) were mediated by the sex of the instructor if the instructor was female. This study supports the social role theory that gender stereotypes of women in care-taking roles with communal behavior and men in authoritative roles with agentic behavior are learned and maintained by people's observations (Dasgupta & Asgari, 2004; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Wood, 1991). When people observe roles men and women occupy start to shift, stereotypes change (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000; Eagly & Steffen, 1984), and the research of Dasgupta and Asgari (2004) suggest that shifts within a local

environment in short amounts of time can have a substantial influence on changing stereotypes. This research supports the importance of exposure to female role models and leaders.

Keys to the Labyrinth: Mentoring and Networking

The exposure of female role models and leaders is supported by mentorship and networking. Research has found that mentors and mentoring programs support career advancement for women (Elkin, 2006). The benefits of mentoring include job promotion, increased income and career satisfaction and more successful socialization, yet mentoring alone does not guarantee women of success (Baumgarten & Schneider, 2010; Blake-Beard, 2001; Ragins, Cotton & Miller, 2000). When women have mentors who provide support as well as access to a professional network, women experience more success in leadership advancement (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). Both formal and informal networks are an important resource and play out differently for men and women. Women have weaker networks than men due to differences in organizational roles and career prospects, coupled with the fact that people usually desire to form mentorships with the same gender (Turban et al., 2002) and there are fewer women in top leadership positions (Ibarra et al., 2013).

Tolar (2012) investigated the mentoring experiences of high-achieving women and found that mentoring was critical to their leadership advancement. Mentors can provide the professional and personal encouragement needed to advance and is critical to female leadership development (Young & McLeod, 2001). Research shows that everyone benefits from the mentoring relationship- the protégé, mentor and organization (Sosik, Lee & Bouquillon, 2005). In fact, mentoring relates to “managerial and career success, the process of developing leaders as opposed to managers, and early socialization and later succession issues” (Burke & McKeen, 1990, p. 317).

Lack of Mentoring and Networking Opportunities

Another one of the major barriers that affects all women, no matter what the workplace, is being left out of mentoring and networking opportunities, both of which are necessary for being promoted (Elacqua et al., 2009). The meta-analysis of Allen et al. (2004) reviewed and synthesized empirical research about the benefits of mentoring and found both objective (e.g., compensation) and subjective (e.g., career satisfaction) benefits of mentoring. Yet, women who aspire to leadership positions in education are not mentored with the same regularity as men who have similar aspirations (Ibarra et al., 2010; Gardiner et al., 2000; Noe, 1988; Searby & Tripses, 2006; Sherman et al., 2008). The School Superintendents Association (AASA) study found that two thirds of superintendents were mentored by other superintendents, and 78% of those superintendents had mentored others (Brunner & Bjork, 2001). However, if the top leadership positions are held primarily by men and a small number of women who promote male-leadership norms, then women are at a disadvantage for finding a mentor, possibly not connecting with any mentorship that is given (Gardiner et al., 2000). This leaves women out of the benefits of mentoring including job promotion, increased income and career satisfaction, and more successful socialization (Blake-Beard, 2001; Baumgarten & Schneider, 2010). An absence of interpersonal capital, through a lack of mentorships and networks, keeps in place elements of the labyrinth that prevent the relationship and identity building necessary for career advancement and leadership development (Rhode & Ely, 2010).

The detrimental effect of a lack of mentorship and network is particularly apparent in the independent school landscape. The androcentric atmosphere in independent schools leaves little space for network and mentor opportunities that support female leadership advancement. For instance, women usually prefer same sex mentorships, yet the small number of women heads of

school provide aspiring leaders with a dearth of mentorship options. Thus, cross-gender dyads are often established, perpetuating a male-dominated leadership structure (Turban et al., 2002). When structured as such, these mentoring relationships reinforce normalized male leadership already existent in independent school cultures (Skrla, 2003).

Formal, district-based mentoring programs and networks have far-reaching benefits for mentees such as increased sharing, support, feedback and opportunities for reflection and personal and professional growth (Ehrich et al., 2004). In independent schools, formal mentoring and networking programs are far and few between. A few examples of such programs have been set up for independent school leaders through such organizations as NAIS, CAIS, Independent School Management (ISM) and the Heads Network. However, these networking and mentor opportunities narrow when focusing on the opportunities for independent school leaders who are not yet heads of schools, and they narrow considerably when focusing on the career advancement of female mid-level leaders. As these opportunities are time-bound and scarce, this limits opportunities for informal networking and mentoring. This is a major setback for female mid-level leaders since informal mentoring has been found to be more effective than formal mentoring in providing support for role modeling, psychosocial support, organizational commitment, and career involvement (Sosik et al., 2005).

Informal Mentoring

Sosik et al. (2005) examined both formal and informal mentoring networks and found that informal mentoring outweighed formal mentoring in many areas. The researchers studied a sample of 88 participants (34 from high tech-companies and 54 from K-12 schools) who did not differ in demographics or study variables. The benefits of informal mentoring included psychosocial support due to the high level of social intensity and the voluntary nature of

friendship; in independent schools, mentored protégées reported higher levels of role modeling and organizational commitment than their formally mentored counterparts (Sosik et al, 2005).

Given the siloed nature of work in independent schools, informal mentoring may be the most effective mentoring for female leaders. Informal mentoring incorporates friendship, collaboration, and problem-based collegiality (Sosik et al, 2005), which supports leadership growth, particularly in the face of few opportunities for formal mentorship networks. Sosik et al. (2005) found that the optimal way to achieve successful informal mentoring relationships is through open-ended conversations that are not bound by time restrictions, have flexible commitments, include non-standardized monitoring processes and more closely mirror peer relationships. Being in a peer relationship increases the chances that the person providing support might demonstrate an understanding of the person beyond simply career concerns (Burke & McKeen, 1990). Research indicates that peer networks benefit women at similar levels. Irby and Brown (1998) report benefits for women include

- a) discovering a new way of looking at a problem, b) benefitting from one another's failures and successes, c) serving as resources to help one another form new professional relationships, d) providing professional contacts to offer and receive support, and e) meeting other dynamic women in a wide range of management positions" (as cited in Searby & Tripses, 2006, p.33-34).

Co-Mentoring Networks

Collaborative mentorships take the idea of informal mentoring one step further. Mullen's (2000, 2009) research deconstructs the traditional notion of a hierarchical relationship between mentor and mentee. Traditional mentorship is defined as a relationship between two people in which a more experienced person or knowledgeable person guides or supports someone who is

less experienced or knowledgeable (Bona et al., 1995). Traditional mentoring, which most often takes place in independent schools, involves status and elements of power. Mullen (2000, 2009) looks to academic settings in universities and colleges to guide her models of progressive mentoring. She studied the mentoring practices of professors, practitioners and graduate students and states co-mentoring is collaborative, placing value on diversity and promoting the formation of new “synergistic relationships and organizational structures” (Mullen, 2000, p.4). Mullen (2000) conducted research in college and university settings and found that new possibilities arise with both human relationships and broader institutional change because of networks using the co-mentoring model. Mullen studied a Partnership Support Group (PSG) at the Florida State University School as they co-mentored each other to joint publication. Participants indicated that the communication and synergy between the co-mentoring groups of school and university lead to positive and substantial changes in their actions and thinking. For instance, as the co-mentoring network worked on jointly publishing articles and books, one co-mentoring relationship realized that they needed a tool that had not yet been invented: either a two-person keyboard or a way for two keyboards to be plugged into the same machine. Another example of the benefit of co-mentoring networks can be seen in the questionnaire responses of the study participants who unanimously indicated the benefits they experienced went beyond publishing to an increased ability to rethink and solve problems in their classrooms.

Co-mentoring also has the potential to positively impact the process of socialization that is required in any leadership role, and in particular the socialization that is a key to mid-level administrators. Participants collaborate to produce something that is useful and beautiful to everyone participating (Bona et al., 1995). This co-collaboration is heightened through self-directed support systems. In fact, co-mentoring is closer to peer relationships, which has an

advantage. Being mentored by someone in your organization can create a sense of competition while being in a peer relationship increases the chances that the person providing support might demonstrate an understanding of the person beyond simply career concerns (Burke & McKeen, 1990). Women benefit from being mentored by other women who can serve as role models, and female-female combinations (nine percent) are significantly less than male-male combinations (72%) (Burke & McKeen, 1990).

Collaborative mentoring in networks (group contexts) are on the rise and provide an alternative to the dyadic nature of traditional mentoring (Mullen, 2005). Co-mentoring compliments informal mentoring networks through its focus on psychosocial support and leadership growth. It is important that women are exposed to alternate models of leadership than the androcentric one currently enacted in most independent schools. When role congruity is achieved, women feel they are competent and qualified and more ready to delve into the headship's potential for influence and impact (Brokema, 2020).

Conclusion

Attempts to understand the intersections of gender and leadership could potentially help ensure that female mid-level educational leaders have a more equal chance of achieving the headship positions. Additionally, by embracing diverse leadership, schools have access to an increased talent pool, and increased diversity has been correlated to increased success of students, teachers, and overall organizational success (Northouse, 2019). This literature review provides an overview of female leadership advancement, with a focus on K-12 educational leadership in independent schools. The review highlights barriers to advancement for women and keys to the attainment of the highest leadership position - the head of school - in independent schools. Female leadership in independent schools is an under researched topic. This study

provides a more robust understanding of the experiences of mid-level female administrators in independent schools and delineates the benefits of participation in an informal co-mentoring network that helps counter second-generation gender bias and supports career advancement for women. This understanding will inform independent schools and their supporting organizations (e.g., NAIS, CAIS, The Women's Heads Network, CATDC and ISM) with ways to encourage and equip female mid-level administrators on the career path.

Chapter 3: Methods

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to capture the lived experiences and perceptions of participants in a co-mentoring network for mid-level female leaders, and how the network intersects with second-generation bias. Through a qualitative study using the phenomenological approach, the common meaning of the participants around second-generation bias was documented. Through a phenomenological study of the population of female mid-level leaders in independent schools, I documented and highlighted the experiences of an understudied and undervalued group. In addition, I made sense of the way female-mid level independent school leaders negotiate their own leadership preparation through informal networks/ mentoring.

Research Questions

1. In what ways do participants of an informal co-mentoring network say the network is impacting their perceptions of their leadership career trajectory, if at all?
2. According to participants, how does an informal mentoring network address and overcome second-generation gender bias, if at all?
3. What are the processes, materials, and discussions through which mid-level female leaders in independent schools co-mentor each other in an informal co-mentoring network to overcome second-generation bias?

Research Design and Rationale

This study employed qualitative design to examine the experiences of female mid-level leaders in independent schools who are currently in, or have been in, an informal co-mentoring network. One reason this study used qualitative research is due to the inductive nature of qualitative research to explain a theory or the failure of a theory (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state, qualitative research aims to understand how participants “interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p.6). In this case, the study aimed to understand female mid-level leaders’ experiences around a co-mentoring network and its intersection with confronting second-generation bias. The data that emerged from the lived experiences of the participants are a fundamental component of the subjectivity in qualitative research (Creswell, 2018).

The qualitative methods in this study are based on the principles of a phenomenological research approach, whose purpose is to, “explore, describe and analyze the meaning of individual lived experience” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 190). The phenomenon that is the focus of the study can be an emotion, relationship, program, organization, or culture (Patton, 2015). Phenomenological methods are rooted in interpretative research- the most common type of qualitative research. Interpretative research and constructivism are terms often used interchangeably and assume reality is socially constructed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Phenomenology captures the moment of the now, “or to say this differently, phenomenology tries to show how our words, concepts, and theories always shape (distort) and give structure to our experiences as we live them” (Adams & Van Manen, 2008, p. 617). A phenomenologist portrays the essence of an experience as described by the participants through the study of people’s conscious experience of the world that they live in; or in this case being a participant of a particular program (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this study, phenomenology is used as a framework for evaluating a program, through capturing the essence of participants’ experiences.

The experiences of an understudied and undervalued group were documented and highlighted through a phenomenological study of the population. This study sought to make

sense of the way female-mid level independent school leaders negotiate their own leadership preparation through informal networks and co-mentoring. A phenomenological approach gave voice to an under-studied population subjectively from their own perspective, which supports the empowerment of female administrators.

This study would not have been well supported using quantitative methods. Quantitative methods assume a level of objectivity, which was not a goal of this study (Fowler, 2009). For instance, a quantitative study would have limited the exploratory nature of this study, looking instead for prescribed answers. This would have put parameters around the participants' responses, which was contrary to the purpose of this study. Instead, this qualitative study looked to have female leaders closely examine themselves and each other from their own perspectives. Quantitative researchers use the lens of variables and examine the relationship between these variables, looking for a statistical relationship (Maxwell, 2013). This approach simplifies the complexity of interactions in a way that would have been reductive for this study. The in-depth experiences of the participants would not have been fully or accurately captured through quantitative method since they made meaning through involvement in this study (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, while the information from a quantitative study might be generalized to a greater population, that was not the purpose of this study (Fowler, 2009).

Population

The study focused on nine mid-level female leaders in independent schools in California, whose schools are members of the California Association of Independent Schools (CAIS). All participants were either current or former members of the “Womxn’s Leadership Alliance” (WLA). The participants either currently held mid-level leadership positions or equivalent positions when they were participants in the WLA.

Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling, in which the participants were chosen intentionally to provide information that was relevant to the aim of this study. Purposeful selection enabled two goals for my research: 1) to select individuals that were needed to test the theories for this particular study, and 2) to select participants that would yield productive relationships and help answer the research questions (Maxwell, 2013). I originally planned to use the rosters of “Womxn’s Leadership Alliance” from the years 2016-2018, 2020-2021, and 2021-2022 and send a short survey to those who appeared to fit the criteria of being a mid-level female leader based on their self-reported identification. However, I ended up reaching out directly to the women who I felt I made strong interpersonal connections with through the meetings and social gatherings during the 2021-22 school year. This type of convenience sampling became more attractive as the pandemic persisted and the pressures mounted on school leaders with return to in-person schooling and the challenges that ensued (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

I sent the pre-identified participants an email to request an interview. Some of the participants I spoke to in person before sending the email (Appendix A), and others I reached out to without connecting in person first (Appendix B). Attached and referenced in each email was the Interview Consent Form/ Welcome Letter (Appendix C). The Interview Consent Form/ Welcome Letter included such elements as “Why is this study being done?, What will happen if I take part in this research study? And What are my rights if I take part in this study?”. These elements were also included in the Observation Consent Form (Appendix I),

Once the date, time and location were set for the interview, I sent a Pre-Interview Email with a Questionnaire (Appendix D). The questionnaire was a way to gather information about the participants before the interview and have some talking points if needed (Appendix E). I followed two interview protocols, one for the founders of WLA (Appendix F) and one for the

rest of the participants (Appendix G). Immediately after the interview, I sent participants a thank you email (Appendix H). Within a few weeks of the interview, I emailed participants asking for their preferred pseudonym for themselves as well as the group name (Appendix J).

After analyzing the data and many revisions of Chapter 4, I realized I needed to conduct a follow up interview and get more information on the specific timing WLA entered participants' career trajectory. I also used this opportunity to make sure I wrote the section about them accurately (Appendix K). In addition, there was one participant who had shared some valuable information off the record, so I reached out to her to see if she would talk more about the topic on the record (Appendix L).

During observations I distributed the Observation Consent Form (Appendix I) to all attendees at meetings. Additionally, during the opening introductions of the meeting I explained my study and that I would be taking notes which would be anonymous. I also suggested that participants could look at my notes at any point during the meeting- which some participants took me up on.

Participants

The nine participants interviewed chose the following pseudonyms: Alexandra, Alice, Gladys, Leila, Mirabelle, Rachel, Rochelle, Samantha, and Soo. All participants were involved with the WLA during the 2021-2022 school year. Eight participants were involved in the 2020-2021 school year, and seven of the participants were involved in both the 2019-2020 and 2018-2019 school years. Over half of the participants were part of WLA in the 2017-2018 school year. The participants were chosen to give a longitudinal perspective from long-term participants, as well as a more recent perspective from newer participants.

All participants identified as female, and the majority were between the ages of 40-44. Two women were in the 45-50 range, one was in the 25-29 range, and one participant preferred not to say. In self-identifying their ethnicity, four participants identified as white, three as Black or African American and two as Asian or Pacific Islander. The participants were currently mid-level leaders in independent schools, except for one participant. She was a mid-level leader when she originally joined WLA and advanced to headship in the 2021-2022 school year.

Some of the participants worked their whole career in independent schools, while others began their career in charter or public schools and then switched to independent schools. The years of experience in education ranged from four to 25 years. Their current titles were directors, deans, specialist, and head of school. Eight of the nine participants who are still currently in mid-level leadership positions had from one to three previous mid-level positions before their current position. Eight out of the nine had previous leadership positions. The minimum number of previous leadership positions was one and the maximum was 12.

Site

The group was formed out of the CATDC women's group, and the participants were all female mid-level leaders in the Greater Los Angeles Area. During the study some members of WLA moved from the LA area to another part of Southern California, yet they participated in the group meetings on Zoom.

All data collection occurred in a natural setting where I gathered information as participants talked to the participants, and I observed them acting and behaving in their own, familiar context. One premise of the research was that female leaders often exist in androcentric spaces and environments. Therefore, observing and interacting with the participants in their own created space, such as a meeting room at their school or their office, provided a level of comfort for the

participants to help them make meaning of their context, a key to qualitative research (Maxwell, 2013). I was willing to travel to the school sites of each individual participant to conduct the interviews. However, participants were given the option of meeting over Zoom.

Data Collection Methods

This study used multiple data collection methods to triangulate data - collecting data from a range of individuals and using a variety of methods (Appendix M). Triangulation reduces the possibility of coincidental associations and confirms (or denies) the generality of the developing explanations (Maxwell, 2013). This study gathered data through interviews, observations, and documentation review of the meetings from the past 5 years which are located in the Womxn's Leadership Alliance Google Drive.

Interviews

The primary data collection method in this phenomenological study was interviewing. Phenomenology is less concerned with the factual status of whether something actually occurred (Van Manen, 2018); rather, the ideas and opinions of those experiencing the phenomenon (ex: informal mentoring and second-generation gender bias) are of primary importance in phenomenological studies (Patton, 2015). I gathered and explored these ideas and opinions through semi-structured participant interviews. Further, I examined and explored my own experiences with the phenomenon being studied through a process called "epoche," which is done prior to the interview process in phenomenological methods. The epoche requires that all the understanding, judgment, and knowledge of the researcher are set aside or "bracketed" so that consciousness itself can be studied (Moustakas, 1994).

In one-to-one settings either over Zoom or another location chosen by the participant, I conducted 60-90 minute interviews with the nine participants. Each participant was either a

founder, facilitator, and/or participant in the WLA. I used a semi structured interview protocol (Appendix F) to understand the participants perceptions of an informal mentoring network to impact second-generation bias and career trajectories. The interview questions were aligned with the research questions, and my pre-designed interview protocol included open-ended questions to allow for latitude in participants' answers. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded.

I also conducted a brief follow up interview with each participant to review my transcriptions and initial analysis of their first interviews.

Observations

I used both "complete participant" and "participant as observer" observation stances (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This was possible because I am currently both a participant and facilitator of Womxn's Leadership Alliance. As a phenomenological study, the observation did not follow traditional models of research observation where the goal is to be objective and detached (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Instead, this study followed feminist, postmodern and critical researchers who postulate that the presence of anyone or anything will have an effect on the research environment (Roach, 2014). I observed three planning meetings, three regular meetings, and three informal get-togethers.

When I was a complete participant, I subjugated my observer role and fully immersed myself in the activity. When on Zoom, I recorded observations during the activity in an unobtrusive manner. When I was a participant as an observer, I recorded observations about the activities afterwards through voice memos and notes. My role as observer was known to the group, and that role was secondary to my role as participant (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The challenge was to balance participation as an insider while attempting to understand the phenomenon to be able to convey it to an outsider (Patton, 2015).

Document Collection

The documents I gathered around the informal co-mentoring network were the secondary mode of data collection. The documents chosen were based on usefulness and relevance to the research (Flick, 2018). One of the benefits of examining documents as data is the presence of the researcher does not impact the data collection, unlike with interviewing and observation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Documents were gathered from the “Alliance Google Folder” from 2016 to 2021, and the documents I analyzed included the following: Networking and Growth Form; blog entries; notes and agendas from meetings and planning sessions; presentation slides from meetings; padlet exercises; Wix website pages; surveys and survey feedback; protocols found in the Google slides and agendas; and RSVPs to the meetings.

Data Analysis Methods

Phenomenological analysis works to distill the basic essence or structure of a particular phenomenon, in this case the women’s experience in a co-mentoring network. There are several techniques that are specific to the phenomenological method such as epoche, bracketing, phenomenological reduction, horizontalization and imaginative variation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Interviews

I recorded the sessions and interviews with two sources, either via Zoom, voice memos on an iPhone or a handheld recorder. I submitted the recordings to Otterai.com for transcriptions. Once I received the transcripts, I reviewed them for accuracy and made necessary revisions and edits. The texts of the transcripts were then uploaded to Dedoose.com, a coding software that aided my data analysis. The transcriptions of the interviews were analyzed for themes and

responses which correlated to the research questions. I used “open coding,” which entails examining the data and developing the coding categories (Maxwell, 2013).

I looked for both organizational categories and substantive categories based on the themes of the research questions. Categories included role modeling, psychosocial support, organizational commitment, career involvement, friendship, collaboration, and problem-based collegiality. These provided the broader areas to be investigated and served as “bins” for sorting the data. The function of the substantive categories was descriptive and included an interpretation of the concepts such as “the role of friendship in mentoring” and beliefs of the participants (Maxwell, 2013).

The codes led to categories, which led to themes and concepts, which ultimately culminated in findings related to the research questions. There were seven main codes with multiple sub-codes and sub-sub codes. These included:

1. *Process, materials, discussions through which co-mentor each other*, with nine subcategories:
 1. recommendations for change
 2. description of WLA
 3. differences than other PD
 4. origin of WLA
 5. WLA meeting needs (adaptable)
 6. recommendations for WLA to continue
 7. structure of WLA
 8. value of WLA
 9. what WLA produces

2. *Leadership Journey* with five subcategories and two sub-subcategories:
 1. personal barriers
 1. impact of WLA on personal barriers
 2. didn't set out to be a leader
 3. impact of WLA on perception of leadership trajectory
 4. professional barriers
 1. impact of WLA on professional barriers
 5. promoted from within versus coming in as a leader
3. *Overcoming second-generation gender bias* with four sub-categories and one sub-subcategory:
 1. mutual support
 2. mentorship
 1. co-mentorship
 3. female role models
 4. networks)
4. *Great Quotes* with one subcategory
 1. "aha" moments
5. *Role Congruity Theory*
6. *Social Role Theory* with one subcategory and one sub-subcategory:
 1. leadership identity
 1. safe space
7. *Mid-career*

Documents and Observations

After coding the interviews, the documents and session observations were coded in a similar manner to triangulate the data and more fully address my research questions.

Memos

Memos were used as a strategy for data analysis, as well as reflection on the goals, theories, methods, and research questions of my study (Maxwell, 2013). Memos are a key element of qualitative analysis (Groenewald, 2008), which can not only capture thinking about data, but also facilitate thinking (Maxwell, 2013). I kept memos as I reviewed transcripts, documents, and observation notes.

Positionality

This phenomenological study could have been negatively influenced by the nature of my role as a colleague with the participants. I was aware that it was not easy for me to keep a “bird’s eye view” as a researcher, and I might be tempted to respond in a personal manner as opposed to an objective researcher, especially if the participants voiced frustrations. Thus, I emphasized my role as facilitator and refrained from inserting my own opinions into the conversation. I used triangulation throughout the study, not only in my interviews but also in my observations and the reviews or artifacts and reflections. Triangulation guarded against subjectivity and enabled me to uncover an objective story versus the story I might have perceived I heard based on my own experience.

Reliability and Validity/Credibility and Trustworthiness

As a current facilitator of “Alliance,” I had access to the roster and documentation of all Alliance activities since its inception in 2016. In addition, I already developed relationships with some of the current and former members, including one peer in my ELP cohort.

An impact on the reliability is my built-in bias due to my experience with mentorship (or lack thereof) and the challenges I experienced as a female mid-level leader. To ameliorate this, I provided direct quotes from interviews, multiple instances of direct data collection and analysis, and thorough observation notes. I did this to lessen interpretation bias. Additionally, I share the data gathered and findings with the participants to get multiple perspectives.

Since these women worked at different independent schools, some of which might be competitive with one another, the women may not have been completely forthcoming in their responses. They may have projected a more positive image of their school or themselves. To reduce this reactivity, I worked hard on trust-building and emphasized that we can help each other most by sharing candidly about experiences. I also used written reflections and memos to validate or contrast with what was shared verbally in the interviews and during observations.

Study Limitations

Using purposeful selection can sometimes be interpreted as convenience sampling, which is intended to provide the best data for the study, but this can lead to the possibility of unrepresentativeness of the participants (Maxwell, 2013). Additionally, the small number of participants in the study and the fact that I asked them to participate based on a connection I felt with them can be seen as a limitation since the findings may not be generalizable. Another limitation was that some of the data being studied, such as many of the documents from the Google Folder, were second hand and represented the perspective of the person creating the document. For instance, the notes from meetings were written through the lens of the note-taker, not the neutral lens of a researcher. Thus, I relied upon my experience in WLA and relationship with the participants (document creators) to best provide an objective analysis, yet ultimately the documents were secondary sources.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study contributes to the body of knowledge related to women in educational leadership, and more narrowly within the independent school setting. I used my professional connections as a facilitator of the Womxn's Leadership Alliance to find participants who were currently (at the time of the study) or were recently members of the Alliance. This study triangulated data from interviews, document analysis and observations to fill a gap in the research through its focus on an understudied population of mid-level female independent school administrators. All data was coded in relation to the research questions and themes emerged from the coding that contributed to the findings that follow in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Summary of the Findings

In this chapter I will present findings based on the triangulated data gathered in this study. Chapter Four starts with a summary of the findings. Then for the remainder of the chapter, I will address the findings I gleaned from the data. As the pathways to leadership are non-linear for all participants, the findings are organized around four major themes: Non-Linear Career Trajectory; Professional Development Through Relationship Building; Confidence, Support and Self-Efficacy; Intersectional Identity. I conclude with a synthesis of the findings before transitioning to a discussion of implications and recommendations in Chapter Five.

Each of the nine participants arrived at where they are in their career as a mid-level leader through a non-linear trajectory. The women reached their current positions through some combination of unintentional leadership, invitation of others, intention to make an impact, or from a field outside of education. Sharing of these non-linear paths had an impact on the participants at Womxn's Leadership Alliance (WLA), and each interviewee could explicitly name the impact that WLA had on their career trajectory. These impacts included understanding the importance of leading from any position (in their school), acknowledging emotions and voice as part of the process of developing your lead, and pushing past one's comfort zone to grow as a leader.

The leaders that were interviewed found that WLA is a place to develop relationships and bonds that develop over time, irrespective of distance or changing group composition, and WLA meets participants where they are in their leadership journey. One of the ways this happens is through developing relationships over time. These relationships provide emotional support outside of school. The women can be their genuine selves and develop authentic relationships

that are grounded in trust and vulnerability. Additionally, these relationships were fostered through the therapeutic and joyful connections that arise through the responsive content and structure of WLA. Lastly, the longitudinal nature of WLA enables it to meet multiple needs through a broad range of content and structure.

According to participants, the confidence built in a supportive space and a lack of competition leads to a sense of self-efficacy for the mid-level leaders. WLA moves beyond a sense of competition that exists in independent schools to a space of generosity. This promotes a sense of safety for the women to take risks, and the networking that takes place at WLA provides the women information they need to continue to grow as leaders. Through their growth as leaders, the participants increased in their confidence to be proactive in their leadership journey, asked for what they needed and brought change back to their own schools.

Lastly, it was clear that the intersectionality of identity needs to be addressed to meet the needs of female mid-level leaders. There is an automatic intersectionality with gender and leadership that occurs in WLA, but other identities such as race need to be specifically considered. Another element named by interviewees is the multiple layers of identity that need to be addressed simultaneously, such as the intersectionality of gender, race, and age. Taking the intersectionality of identity even further, less traditional intersectionality such as body size must be addressed to meet the needs of female mid-level leaders.

Findings

Theme 1: Non-Linear Career Trajectory

Finding 1: Each Participant Has a Unique Non-Linear Path to Leadership and Can Name the Impact WLA Had on Their Leadership Career Trajectory.

Despite taking different paths to their leadership positions, each participant named the direct impact WLA had on their career trajectory and noted the non-linearity of their professional journey. There is an assumption that there is a linear path to leadership during which women encounter barriers, and then they either surpass the barriers or their path is blocked. The interviews show that every woman arrived where she is through a non-linear path, and most of the women did not set out to be leaders. Their paths can be labeled in the following categories: unintentional leadership, invitation of others, intention to make an impact, or from another field.

Unintentional Leadership. Leila explicitly stated that she did not set out to be a leader, and she “fell into” a leadership title through the informal leadership work she was already doing. Leila started out substitute teaching in a small independent school, and then went to England to earn her master’s degree. When she returned, she became a long-term sub at the same small independent school as a 4th/5th grade multi-age teacher. The following year she continued in that position as the full-time teacher. As the school grew and developed more needs, she became the Director of Curriculum and Student Affairs, which was the second highest position at this school; thus, when the Head of School was off campus, she was in charge. From this experience Leila decided that she wanted to be an administrator. Once Leila moved to a larger independent school as a specialist teacher, she did not have any formal leadership titles. However, she continued to serve in informal leadership roles, such as the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) committee chair. After being at the school for a couple of years, the school gave her the official title to formalize what was already happening. Leila stated, “And even before I got that official title, I was the de facto DEI leader in Lower School, and everyone knew it. Giving me the title, it was just kind of formalizing that situation.”

It was at this point that one of the facilitators of WLA invited Leila to join a meeting.

The facilitator worked at the same school as Leila, and when she left the school, she let Leila know about WLA. Leila accepted the invitation and enjoyed the two times she was able to attend in person before the pandemic forced all meetings to be virtual. The meetings were on Wednesday nights and Leila was teaching a class at the same time as the meeting. One of the facilitators kept the Zoom room open and stayed after the meeting ended to connect with Leila since the facilitator knew how important the friendship and connection was to Leila. This meant so much to Leila that she started to tear up during our interview. One of the guidelines at Alliance is “What is said in Alliance stays in Alliance,” and for Leila this allowed for a veil of silence that happens between friends in a space of trust. Leila stated, “So I could talk about stuff that was happening at my school with people not at my school, and get insight and perspective, which is really important.”

Once Leila’s leadership position was formalized, she found that her experiences with WLA gave her confidence to claim her role and ability as a leader. Then she asked for mentorship from the head of school to continue the leadership trajectory that she desired. The head of school agreed to mentor Leila, but he did not follow through. Leila used her experiences at WLA to fill in the gaps for mentorship she was not receiving from her school.

Soo stated that leadership was not on her radar, but it has always fallen into her lap, similar to the way that WLA fell into her lap. While she was not intentional about it, she recognized that she “must put out some sort of vibe.” For example, Soo remembers an in-service day of professional development at her school where facilitators lead an activity. It was not going well, and Soo remembers stepping in and directing the activity. The facilitator stopped the activity and pointed out to everyone that Soo had emerged as the leader. Soo felt uncomfortable because she was in her early 20’s and surrounded by senior teachers. This moment was one of

the first times she realized that she had leadership abilities. Because others named that Soo had a quality which made people listen to her and enabled her to teach and help others, she started saying “yes” when people tapped her to join things. WLA was one of the things that Soo was “tapped” to join.

At WLA Soo met other women who had made their own non-linear path to leadership, and Soo realized that even if she did not want to be a head of school, she could still be a leader. She started doing things like interviews for the school and became the Board liaison. Once Soo moved schools, she realized she had many abilities that were not being used in the classroom and pitched an idea to the head of school about what she wanted her administrative position to look like. Soo had been in a variety of mid-level leadership roles and felt that her ideal leadership role was behind the scenes supporting others who lead in more public spaces. Through being part of WLA, Soo was inspired to forge her own path and follow her own interests versus following a path that was already there.

Samantha is another interviewee who did not intend to go into leadership. Samantha avoided anything that had the word “leadership” in it early in her career. In addition, she felt her journey has been beset with doubters who do not feel like her move from the performing arts into independent school leadership gives her the right “credentials” to be successful. Samantha started out directing plays at an independent school, and she now sees that this was leadership. Since she was at a well-resourced school and moved from directing shows to starting a whole theater department. At the same time, she had been thinking about how she loved advisory and wanted to be a dean of students.

Samantha became involved in diversity work from attending the annual independent school diversity conference, and she joined every committee that had to do with diversity at her

school. Every time a new committee was formed, she volunteered to be on it. She felt that her participation in so many committees allowed her to voice her opinions about all the ways the school functions, and this is what led her on the path to be an administrator. However, it was also at this time that the doubt of others (and herself) started to seep in that a theater person cannot be an administrator because they are just an arts teacher. Samantha highlighted how being a theater person has helped her develop creative problem-solving skills and other 21st century learning skills that are important for leaders.

Samantha moved schools and took her first job as an administrator, and it was the first time she officially thought of herself as a leader. It was this year that she “allowed herself” to attend the WLA meetings when she was invited, even though the group name had the word “leadership” in it.

During her first year as an administrator, she was afraid and felt like an imposter, so she did everything that was asked of her. Samantha found a female mentor at this school, who is still her mentor to this day. This mentor has supported her in ways that have enabled her to continue to move forward in her career trajectory and feel safe and supported. Samantha stated,

I probably missed some opportunities for excellence because of fear and because I had so many disastrous things I tried that went so badly. And then I had a boss, a mentor who was like yeah, that's how you figure it out. She would say ‘good fail’ or ‘that was a great fail. So now what?’ And once I got over the gut wrenching feeling the first couple times and then got to experience the iteration process and be like, oh, whoa, the failure just became less and less. And of course, the past two years I’m like, ‘Whatever, I'll do anything. I'll try anything.’ And that, to me, is like the most, the most incredible gift.

And I have to say it's really, most of that is because of the way that my relationship with my mentor.

The relationship Samantha has with her mentor is something that she tries to pay forward in her role in WLA. For example, she invited a teacher from her school to the meeting, and the teacher replied, "But I am not a leader." Samantha replied, "While leader is not in your title, you are an educator who likes people and camaraderie, so come."

Invitation of Others. Gladys stated her leadership journey was marked by reluctance and accepting the invitation of others. In fact, she became involved in WLA through an invitation from a colleague who asked her to help run a WLA meeting. Gladys added that this reluctance was not isolated to one time or moment in her journey. At each step of her journey, she questioned herself, "Would I like that more responsibility thing (position)?" She identified this proclivity is probably gendered, since women and girls are socialized to be helpful and do a good job at what they are doing without aspiring to do more. Because of this she felt like she did not consider aspiring to anything else. Gladys planned to attend graduate school and become a professor, staying away from teaching because her whole family are teachers. She ran an afterschool program at her alma mater, and they convinced her to apply for a lead teacher position. At the next school where she worked, the head of school convinced her to apply for a dean position, which she initially resisted. In thinking more about it, she realized she would love that position and be good at it. This move in her career was concurrent with Gladys offering to be part of the new facilitation team of WLA, which was for the first time not at the invitation of another but rather from her own desire. This was a turning point moment in her leadership journey.

Similarly, Alexandra's journey was also about accepting the invitation of others. She described her journey to mid-level leadership as being in the "right place [at the] right time". Alexandra started in education working in preschools, and then had the opportunity to work as a kindergarten/ first grade lead teacher at the school she attended as a child. Alexandra knew she loved children and planned to be a life-long teacher. After a few years she talked about leadership with the head of school, saying she would like to take on more responsibility at the school. The head of school came to her months later and said the school was creating a new position, and he told Alexandra he thought she'd be good at it. She recounted,

We just had some great conversations. And he said, I think you'd be great at this. And I was like, "You're crazy." And he's like, "No, I'm not." And I'm like, "Yes you are." And he's like, "Stop saying that." Then I became the first assistant head of school at this particular school.

While the initial conversation with the head of school was about taking on more responsibility and not about a specific position, Alexandra was talking about her future interest in leadership. While the school she was working at did not have a position for an assistant head of school, it was clear that the head of school needed this support and identified Alexandra as the right candidate for this position.

Alexandra had an advantage of being a graduate of this school and a relationship with many of the teachers who were still there, and whom she knew and loved. It was a nurturing environment, so she felt safe during the time of growing pains as she figured out how to be an administrator. Part of her journey as an administrator involved attending graduate school in education leadership. Alexandra's journey to graduate school was part of her having the bandwidth, time, desire, and invitation to professionally develop herself.

After the first summer in graduate school, Alexandra met Rachel, the founder of WLA. They bonded because they were three out of 50 students in the program who were from Southern California. Rachel invited Alexandra to a WLA meeting, and “it felt right (to Alexandra) at the time.” Alexandra realized what an amazing opportunity WLA offered, and her graduate school experience had opened her eyes to how valuable it was to talk to other people outside her school about this work and how meaningful those conversations could be. Alexandra thought about how she could continue to grow in her role, life, and profession, and WLA provided her the opportunity to talk and grow with others.

Intent to Make an Impact Through Leadership. Rachel worked at a traditional school with high performing students and became dissatisfied with teaching because it became rote and uninspiring for her and the students. Rachel looked for inspiration from attending workshops and conferences, joining a group on Twitter, and texting with other educators she met. She started feeling more engaged, and her sense of purpose was re-ignited. Rachel realized that she wanted to pursue leadership roles, so she enrolled in graduate school. She felt she had the knowledge and expertise, but somehow did not have the right education or credentials to be a legitimate leader for others. This feeling was compounded by the changes she tried to implement in her department, such as teaching from a constructivist pedagogy, which were constantly met with apathy or resistance. Rachel’s experience after graduate school did not go as she expected. She remembered,

I thought I might as well just go to grad school, and I just need leadership skills. And I went to grad school to get my leadership skills. I thought that after grad school I could just be a mirror (for my colleagues) and if I just had the right words, and then they too,

would want to do better. And it turns out, that wasn't the case. Somehow the words were not enough.

In between Rachel's two summers in grad school, she created WLA. She was on a journey of wondering what her role was and the changes she would like to make in the spaces she occupied. She wanted to try on new ideas with a group of like-minded women, and she partnered with another teacher she met through CATDC to start WLA. Rachel founded a group that inspired her and others, and she hoped that this would help move the needle in her job aspirations.

Rachel was given administrative tasks at her school, but it was not the true change she had been looking for. One of her friends from graduate school saw a job posting that she felt would be great for Rachel, so Rachel applied for the Dean of Academics and Student Life at an independent school and was given the job. When her family moved, she switched schools to another administrative position that did not feel like the right fit and found herself looking for a third leadership job in a three-year span. Through a graduate school connection again, she assumed a Director of Teaching and Learning position where she has been ever since.

Throughout this journey, Rachel facilitated WLA and other learning spaces for educators to think together. She was active on Twitter and blogging all the time because she wanted to understand the world and did this through writing. Facilitating WLA furthered Rachel's opportunity to practice her words and figured out what she was trying to say. Rachel says that all the elements in her leadership journey to make a greater impact aligned to give birth to WLA.

Career Changers. A couple of the interviewees did not start out in education at all, including Alice. Once Alice moved into education, she did not set out to be a leader. Additionally, she did not have a network of female leaders to learn from and with. She stated, "In

fact, there have been times in my actual leadership journey where people have sort of named me as a leader and I have been like, No, I'm not.” Alice started out in advertising and felt that it was part of the plan that she needed to continue to move up. In looking at the trajectory of those ahead of her in the advertising field, like senior account executives, she decided, “I don't want their lives, that doesn't sound great at all. I don't want to be in charge of that stuff. That sounds terrible.” She took a leap of faith and earned her master’s degree and credential in one year, landing at a charter school where everyone did a bit of everything, and what they did was outside of their job description. She reflected,

And it was kind of expected that you would sit on committees and expected that you would be part of conversations, and just by virtue of being employed there. And nobody told me I shouldn't lead. And I just kept saying yes to things. It was a wonderful place to grow. I don't know that I named it leadership at the time, but I was encouraged to always speak and always be part of the conversation and always have a seat at the table.

When Alice landed at an independent school, she found there was not always the invitation to sit at the table. The inner circles in independent schools were more exclusive, and she felt a sense of being placed in a prescribed role. It was a shift for her to come from a place where she was actively involved in all operations of the school to now be put in a limited role. She elaborated,

I come from a place where I was involved in all the things and then suddenly it was like, ‘No, you can be involved in all the things here's what you get to be involved in this small circle, because you're a teacher, this is what you do.’ So, I kept showing up in spaces saying they would like to have me involved. I just put myself in people's faces and spaces.

Alice realized that ultimately, she wanted to be of service and had ideas to offer to support others at school. At the charter school it was expected that she would take part in roles that were leaderly, but now she saw formal leadership positions as the way to make the biggest impact in terms of service. After talking this through with her then head of school about who she was and what she could offer, Alice realized that she wanted to be in a formal leadership role.

The timing worked out that when Alice decided she wanted to be in a leadership role, a leadership role became available that was the right fit for her. Once she assumed the leadership role, she realized she had no idea how to lead or what to do, so she needed a network of support. Alice was chosen to be part of a visiting accreditation committee, and when she was on the plane to the school, she sat next to a woman who was an admissions director at a local school. The admissions director gave Alice the advice to join an informal network called WLA to meet people who were in her same situation. Alice shared, “And so I did, and the rest is history.” In WLA, Alice found a supportive space to develop her leadership skills and gradually become more comfortable and competent in her new role. Her feelings were validated, and in conversation with other like-minded women, she realized she had the necessary skills for the position.

Another career changer whose leadership journey has taken many twists and turns was Mirabelle. She referenced a line from the show *Family Matters* as her mantra: “I always use this quote...If you wait for the float with Miss America, or something like that, while you are waiting for the float with Miss America, the whole parade is gonna pass you by.” While attending college she worked in the admissions office, and in this position she found she had the personality and skill to “hook people in.” Mirabelle stated, “And that was probably like the first place where I started to kind of fine tune or maybe identify my leadership skills.”

After college Mirabelle went into the music industry, but she realized this was not a viable long-term plan, so she moved into the corporate world into the project management department at a corporate real estate firm. Mirabelle left that job because she was still chasing an entertainment career.

Mirabelle went to graduate school and found an area of study called edutainment, which pulled her towards the disparities that exist in communities of color and lower income communities. She was not sure what she wanted to do after graduating, so she took a college counseling position at a private Catholic Jesuit school. Her boss at the high school recommended her to a doctorate program in leadership, and this led her to a newly developed diversity leadership position with a state-wide charter school organization. Through a recommendation of one of her doctorate colleagues, she ended up taking a mid-level leadership position at an independent school, focusing on diversity work.

It was at this independent school that Mirabelle met a colleague who she spent a lot of time with who introduced her to WLA. They would meet regularly and informally to talk about everything: from the things they were thinking to the big plans they had. When the colleague, who at this point was also a friend brought up WLA, Mirabelle asked her more about WLA and her friend invited Mirabelle to participate. Mirabelle and her friend were naturally having the type of co-mentoring relationship that would expand to others once Mirabelle started attending WLA.

Mirabelle said she benefited from hearing where people were on their journeys at WLA because that is not a space women are allowed to be in at work. Additionally, WLA allowed her to be her authentic self and was a safe space to ask questions that supported her professional growth:

WLA allows you to take your mask off for a little bit and kick your shoes off. And it's interesting hearing where people are on their journeys, because I think that oftentimes, we are not allowed to, to be in that space at work.

Mirabelle added that she consistently felt inspired and refreshed from hearing other people's journeys on their career path.

Mirabelle likened her career path to writing a dissertation where “the beauty is the journey.” She stated,

That's kind of the way I feel about my journey because I was all over the place. I've met so many amazing people and I learned so much about people. In fact, I think it was that journey that made me so good at what I do.

Mirabelle's leadership journey has given her a wide perspective that not many people have and is important to diversity work. As Mirabelle explains, “I have this interesting perspective of...the way that people understand the world and the way that... adults learn when they need to be successful...I think all of that kind of makes me good at what I do here.” And this perspective has been enlarged through her experiences with WLA where she realized that she is not alone and the burden she feels as a female leader is not her burden to carry alone, because other people are having similar experiences.

Impact of Sharing Non-Linear Career Trajectory. Hearing other women's stories about their paths to leadership was helpful for all the participants in WLA. Rochelle mentioned this when talking about the impact of her participation in WLA. Rochelle was in her first administrative mid-level leadership position and was previously the president of debate leagues while informally helping other leaders in different capacities. This past year was the first time

she had the official title and job description of a leader. Rochelle thrived from hearing the experiences and stories of more experienced leaders in WLA:

I think hearing other people's stories about specific steps they took, like 'I used to do this, then I did this, I spoke with this woman, she told me this and then as a result, I ended up doing that' So, hearing her (another participant's) story, I found it very useful, because then I could map on her approach to things or the way she thought about things. And then also, because I'm pretty type A, it's also interesting for me to realize how haphazard some people's decision-making is. Or how much about chance it seems to be, and not necessarily plotted out. This has helped me because ... there are five different branches where this (my career) could go. And I have no clue what it is.

Rochelle's understanding of the nonlinear nature of other women's leadership journeys helped her move forward one step at a time, and she is considering getting her doctorate even though she does not have a clear idea of where that step will lead her.

Despite coming from different origins, all nine of the women interviewed could explicitly name the way that their participation in WLA supported their leadership journey. The three categories of impact are: leading from any chair, acknowledging emotions and voice, and pushing past comfort.

Leading From Any Chair. Four of the participants said that WLA taught them that being a leader does not mean that one person is in charge, but instead that anyone can lead from any chair. Soo stated, "It's not about a hierarchy, someone has to steer the ship at some point. It's like why not me? I think being part of WLA really impressed me. That it's available for anybody interested in taking on that role." This is a sentiment that Alice echoed when she said something

she learned from WLA was “I can claim my identity as a leader... WLA has taught me that you can be a leader. And it doesn't have to be the person in charge that you can lead from any chair.”

For both Rachel and Gladys, the notion of leading from any chair was heightened by their roles as facilitators of WLA. Rachel was a facilitator from 2016-2020, and Gladys started as a facilitator in 2020. Gladys reflected:

It feels like a really clear line to like starting to come to WLA and seeing myself as someone who could facilitate. When I moved into the role of facilitator at WLA that changed the way that I was willing to own my skills. Before being a facilitator for WLA, I didn't have confidence in my ability to lead in that way. I brought this confidence to my workplace and put myself in more situations where I needed to lead and facilitate.

Rachel echoed the benefit to both herself and her workplace because of her facilitation of WLA. While early on in her career she panicked when she was asked to facilitate situations, she learned more about her own style from her experience of facilitating WLA. This helped her through the process of being a younger teacher to the role of mid-level leader. Rachel stated,

In conversations, when I was a younger teacher, or even a new leader, I remember panicking, especially if I thought somebody was going to ask a question. I thought I wouldn't know what to say. And then you practice enough. And you're like, I know who I am. And you're like I actually know what to say and that feels good. And you get that with practice. And WLA definitely helped me with that (through my experience facilitating at WLA).

Both Rachel and Gladys brought the experiences they had as facilitators of WLA to grow in their leadership skills and brought that growth to their schools as they moved forward on their leadership journey.

Acknowledging Emotions and Voice. Alexandra feels that WLA had an impact on her leadership journey because her emotions were validated. Alexandra explained in WLA “you get messages that you don’t have to fit into a box to be a leader.” Through the meetings and readings in WLA, Alexandra received the message that her feelings and emotions are real and okay:

And I've learned through my work with WLA in meetings and with some of the readings that we've done about leadership that it's okay to acknowledge them (emotions and feelings). It's important to acknowledge them, it's important to name them and you can be a leader with all of that. Like you can be a leader and have challenges at home with your kids and with your partner and you can still be a leader.

Alexandra is one of the founders of WLA, and she mentioned that while this message was not intentionally embedded into the curriculum, it came out in the readings such as *Dare to Lead* by Brené Brown and *Onward* by Elena Aguilar.

Leila is another participant who asserted that WLA impacted her leadership journey by validating her emotions and her voice. Leila’s experiences at school did not validate her ideas and voice, which was the opposite of her experience at WLA. Her experiences of being validated at WLA gave her confidence to apply for positions she might not have applied for previously and move forward on her leadership journey. Leila affirmed,

While we realize that women's voices are really important at leadership tables, this is not shared by all. Perspective is really important. And I think WLA does a lot to make the women who come realize that their voices matter, and their perspectives matter.

This realization had a powerful impact on Leila. She continues to attend every WLA meeting, and when she cannot make it, she connects with someone who did attend to benefit from the learning, growing, and validating that took place during the meeting she missed.

Pushing Past Comfort. Samantha felt more comfortable with men than women her whole life. This continued into her teaching career, where she met her husband at the school where she was teaching and spent most of her time with him. When she heard about WLA, she was hesitant to join because her previous experiences with women were not positive. She was sure she would be annoyed and felt she had everything she needed with her male friends and educators:

So it was my first experience of this kind of group of women coming together. And I was so skeptical. They were so vulnerable. They said so many honest things and allowed me to say things that I had never said before, because I thought people would judge me for them. And I got embraced. And so from there, I was like, wait, maybe groups of women aren't so bad. Maybe I'm missing out on being sort of a guarded person over here. I think I need the women.

By pushing past her comfort zone and giving WLA a chance, Samantha was able to move forward in her leadership journey in ways she could not have anticipated. For instance, she was introduced to Brené Brown, who she says changed her life, and she was exposed to other working mothers who showed her that women could be a “badass leader” and a mother.

Rochelle mentioned that without WLA she would not have applied for the mid-level leadership position she is currently in. As a classroom teacher, Rochelle was interested in a few mid-level leadership positions, but she did not feel qualified. Rochelle felt it was easier and more comfortable to stay in her teaching position than take a risk to apply for a leadership position:

It was someone in WLA, who encouraged me to even apply for certain positions or who actually convinced me that I was qualified for certain positions. That was huge.

Last year, I had applied for some director positions, and I would not have done that if I hadn't spoken to someone from WLA who was like, Yeah, you absolutely could do that.

And then I got to like the final round for two schools. It's funny sometimes you probably especially like women more than other people, but you just need someone else to be like, yeah, that's you, like, go do that. So that was something that came out of it.

Rochelle recognized that she was not alone in needing a nudge out of her comfort zone, and that it is a particular need for women.

The reality that several of the women in this study have taken a non-linear path towards leadership positions challenges that notion of a linear path of advancement without barriers and detours. Women leaders in this study were invited by others to lead, unintentionally assumed leadership roles, and were career changers. Only one woman intended to make an impact through leadership. The diverse nature of the participants' career trajectories - and the impact it had on their leadership identity - points to the need for nuanced and responsive mentoring and support that begins with relational investment.

Theme 2: Professional Development Through Relationship Building

Finding 2: WLA is a Network to Develop Friendships and Bonds that Develop Over Time, Irrespective of Distance or Changing Population, and WLA Meets Participants Where They Are in Their Leadership Journey.

Developing Relationships Over Time. WLA allows women to develop relationships and connections over time. WLA has been around since 2016, and its longitudinal nature fosters a deep level of growth across the entire cohort. Additionally, it consistently meets throughout the year, which Alexandra called this a “touchstone” feature of WLA. Gladys also highlighted that the sustained nature of WLA makes it like nothing else she has experienced. Women in the cohort have held different jobs, moved schools, families, and earned graduate degrees, yet WLA remains a collection of mostly the same people who rotate in and out. Samantha stated, “Whether

I see one person once or somebody every time for two years, we're all coming with this generosity of spirit." The connections can be seen in the familiarity of the way they greet each other when they arrive at a WLA meeting. At every in-person meeting in the '21-'22 school year and each informal get-together, women hugged each other, and their voices raised with excitement when greeting each other. It was observed that the women welcomed each other with signs of affection and warmth as if they had been friends forever, even when they met someone for the first time.

New members experienced the feeling belonging immediately because this feeling is inherent to WLA and does not depend on the people attending. Two of the interviewees stated that one of the reasons the feeling of community and friendship is inherently part of the Alliance is because the founders ran it for so long. Gladys added, "So there's this friend component of it or you know, at least friendly, that feels really different than other professional development." This can be seen in a meeting that took place over Zoom on December 19, 2021. Over half of the participants in that meeting were attending for the first time, and everyone except one person stayed for an "After Party" where participants talked about favorite T.V. shows they binge watch. It is the consistent core of women who attend and maintain the WLA culture and spirit who help foster the sense of belonging and relationships for even the new participants.

Provides Emotional Support Outside of School Through Friendships. The women underscored how the loneliness of their upward moves was softened by the bonds and friendships they developed through the WLA network. The loneliness was made clear by Rachel when she stated,

You go to another school and that reputation you have as a teacher does not follow you. You come in and they think of you as their boss. They (teachers) harp on whatever time you put your foot in your mouth. That's what they remember and tell others. And that's weird to have people talk about you behind your back. They (teachers) wouldn't do that to another teacher. But they do that to the boss because they think it's okay. It's hard.

Rachel described how a distance develops between administrators and teachers, dissolving friendships that previously existed before the person became an administrator. She added that teachers can visit their friends' classrooms, get lunch together and “shoot the shit all the time,” while administrators do not often have colleagues at their school to develop friendships with. Rachel found the friendships and connections through attending WLA, so fulfilling and life-giving that she became a facilitator to be an active agent in fostering that connection for other women.

Soo echoed the sentiment that people sought social connections because “leadership roles of women are particularly isolating.” Soo and Alexandra explained how a sense of loneliness that can accompany mid-level leadership is counteracted through relationships developed at WLA. Soo said she found people to connect with both professionally and personally through WLA and Alexandra says that she no longer felt isolated as a result of being part of WLA.

Authentic Selves and Authentic Relationships. One of the founders of WLA stated that it was important to her that women could show up and be their whole authentic selves and feel that everything was going to be okay. One of the six guidelines of WLA is “Come as you are.” This safety created by this guideline was expressed by Alice:

You show up and can be exactly who you need to be right here and right now. You've driven across the city, you're exhausted, you're tired, but in this moment, you're not

somebody's boss, or somebody's employee, and you're not somebody's parent, or sister, or aunt or uncle or cousin or whatever. And you're not in charge unless you would like to be. You are just here to experience whatever this is.

As a result of the women being their authentic selves, meaningful relationships developed and led to intimate conversations. Gladys described this when she said,

WLA is authentic and real with a fair amount of intimacy. I feel like it's because of the culture of Alliance. Regardless of how close I am with those individual people, or how long I have known them, I always feel like we're having a real conversation about real things. And I'm not showing up and thinking about how I'm presenting myself in that 'surfacey meeting you at a conference kind of way.'

At WLA Gladys felt she engaged in authentic conversations and presented herself authentically, regardless of the length of time she knew the person she was talking to.

Trust and Vulnerability as Confidence Builders. Through the authenticity women experienced at WLA, a sense of trust and vulnerability was fostered. This is part of the fabric of the group and is addressed explicitly in the work that the group does. For instance, in 2017 the group focused on Brené Brown's idea of how vulnerability relates to leadership and used an article she wrote and one of her TED talks as resources. The discussion questions included:

- Brown defines a leader as “anyone who holds her- or himself accountable for finding potential in people and processes.” What processes do you rely on?
- Brown writes, “Do we have the courage to show up, be seen, take risks, ask for help, own our mistakes, learn from failure, lean into joy, and can we support the people around us in doing the same?” Can you remember a time when a leader demonstrated vulnerability? How did it impact you or the community?

- What are the risks of vulnerability? What is scary about vulnerability?
- Brown says, “We use invulnerability as a shield to protect us from discomfort, anxiety, and self-doubt...perfecting, pretending, and pleasing...” When has the desire to perfect, pretend or please held you back?
- Vulnerability means asking questions, being open to being wrong. How might we bring this quality to leading?
- Whole-hearted people who are connectors have a sense of belonging because they believe they’re worthy of love and belonging. How do we start the cycle? What gets in the way?

The meeting achieved its goal of addressing vulnerability, and in the recap from the meeting on January 23, 2017, is the note: “I noticed that the stories were resonating because the person sharing was doing so from a place of vulnerability and authenticity. Sharing stories and experiences seems key for leading with vulnerability.”

Through explicitly and implicitly fostering a sense of vulnerability, WLA provides a space where the women feel safe enough to take risks and try out things they normally would not as mid-level leaders in their work setting. For instance, Alexandra said that she can show up to WLA and say, “I don’t know what to do about this” or “I am really struggling.” Alexandra feels that the sense of safety and trust she feels at WLA, and the connection to others in the group, allows her to bring up questions and problems that she would not bring up in other school or professional development environments. Showing a level of vulnerability, acknowledging limitations, and asking for help are not things Alexandra feels are encouraged or fostered outside of WLA.

Recognizing and learning from failures helps all the women grow and learn, not just those who experienced the failure. Samantha feels that WLA helped her minimize her isolation as a mid-level leader as she gained a sisterhood. Samantha stated,

I thought it (being in a group of women) was going to annoy me so much. But no, it was the opposite. Because they were so vulnerable and said so many honest things it allowed me to say things that I had never said before because I thought people would judge me for them. And yet instead I got embraced... This was a group of women who were being honest and laughing at their failures and showing up again and again and again.

Through the trust and vulnerability of others that Samantha felt, she was able to be more authentically herself and say things she never said before.

Connection Through Therapy and Joy. When thinking about how participants would describe the deep trust and vulnerability developed in WLA to someone else, the words therapy and joy came up often. The notion of WLA being a therapeutic space was also mentioned by one of the founders. Rachel said that in its early iterations, the group meetings consisted of asking a series of questions that everyone was grappling with. Then the group would talk about the questions without judgment. Rachel also mentioned that part of the therapy was just laughing together and stated,

We just laugh and laughter is therapy, right? Because somebody would say something genius or hilarious and someone would be like, “Oh, my God, I had an aha moment” and they'd say it out loud. And we just lifted them up. Or somebody would say something hilarious, and we'd all be cracking up. And that's like free therapy.

Echoing this sentiment, another participant also said participation in WLA was like her relationship to therapy. Alexandra described going to WLA in another way:

It's funny, leading up to Alliance I have the feeling like it's like my relationship to exercise. I don't wanna do it, and I don't want anyone to make me do it. But afterwards, I'm like, oh my god, it feels amazing. And then I look forward to the next one. She added that having wine and cheese (and other snacks and drinks) at every meeting adds a feeling of lightness and joy as participants celebrate each other.

The joy and laughter continue today as an integral part of Alliance. In every one of the meetings, I observed laughter occurring throughout the meetings, and each meeting had activities geared towards creating a joyous environment, such as one dubbed “Fish Stapler.” During this Zoom WLA meeting, participants had one minute to collect an object from their house that brought them joy and then share it in small groups. The laughter in each Zoom room was rampant, which was a huge release of tension from the daily stress the women were experiencing in their daily pandemic-lead school lives. The activity was summed up in the notes from September 2021: “Our meeting opened with a game we have affectionately dubbed ‘Fish Stapler!’ Everyone shared an object that brought them joy or made them laugh! We all broke into smiles and collective ‘Awws!’ as several cute dogs made their appearances! It was a great reminder to find joy every day.

Meeting Multiple Needs Through Content. One of the reasons that women kept coming to meetings was because the longitudinal nature of WLA enables it to meet multiple content needs. Instead of being singularly focused on a particular content or area, there is a broad range of topics and needs that are covered. One interviewee talked about how as a diversity professional, most of her leadership experience (conferences, professional opportunities, networking, etc.) was through the lens of diversity. She appreciated being in the space of WLA

where it was not focused on one lens of leadership, although she acknowledged diversity is an important lens and should undergird all elements of education. Mirabelle echoed this sentiment:

It's great to be in spaces with people who have a broader focus in the leadership space in independent schools. You get a different perspective from that space, versus being with a group of professionals who are focused on one aspect of leadership. Specifically, having a broad focus has been refreshing. There are other areas of focus being brought to the table and you get to see what people are encountering on a daily basis.

As you can see from the list below, the responsive list of conversations met the participants' needs for professional and personal growth. Over the years, topics included:

- Giving and receiving feedback (2017)
- Engaging in difficult conversations and reframing them for the participants (2018)
- Exploring the nature of shame and how it may impact one's leadership (2019)
- Identifying and sharing about the courage to take leaps of faith (e.g., moments of change, obstacles that have created opportunities, and closed doors that opened new ones) (2020)
- Effectively asking for help (2021)
- Examining what it means to create a sense of belonging for yourself and others (2022).

Meeting Multiple Needs Through Structure. The stability of membership and consistent structure of WLA enabled it to meet the multiple needs of women at different points in their career trajectory. Instead of being singularly focused on a particular stage in a women's career, there was a broad range of career trajectory needs that were covered. Rebecca characterized it as

If you are searching for a network, it could be a network for you. If you need a space to talk some things through while you take your next leap it can be a mentoring space. It can

be a space to mentor, or it can be a space to show up and say I need something in my life where I can help other people.

Many meetings were centered around contemplative activities, giving participants an opportunity to reflect on themselves and their leadership journey and identity. Other times the meetings were more informal and social; in those meetings, participants made connections they could build on long after the meeting ended. At the informal social hour at a facilitator's house on September 2, 2022, the makeup of the attendees included several women who had never met each other previously. One participant who had been attending WLA for less than a year discovered that she went to college in New York with another participant's high school friend. That same participant went to high school in Los Angeles with another participant's husband, and her husband works at the high school they attended. That same participant met one of the founders of WLA and discovered that the founder and her head of school were in the same "new heads" group through CATDC. Throughout the entire gathering people made connections. The structure of informal socializing enabled the women to get the information and connections they needed for where they are in their career. The structure and stability of WLA facilitates connection and relationship building that leads to mentorship and professional development both in WLA and outside of WLA, filling a void that participants may experience at their schools.

The more formal meetings were often based on a mentor text or reading group. For instance, in 2018-2019 the group used Elena Aguilar's framework for cultivating emotional resilience as detailed in her book *Onward* and focused on one attribute of resilience per month. In 2019-2020, the group read the book *Becoming* by Michelle Obama to frame the conversations and activities of the five meetings. Each month was a different chapter: September was "Needs and Desires," November was "Becoming Me," January was "Becoming Us," March was

“Becoming More,” and May was “Epilogue” where participants wrote their own epilogue. When the group read the book *Onward* by Elena Aguilar, Gladys reflected that when she was in her 30’s no one had told her any of this amazing information about being a better person and a better leader in a way that made sense to her. Alice felt that by reading *Onward*, she was being mentored by an amazing woman in the company of other amazing women. She was then able to bring what she learned back to her school to apply immediately. Alice stated,

I don't think I knew who Elena Aguilar was until we read *Onward* in WLA, which is crazy to me now. Going through *Onward* with a group of people where I was doing exercises was so helpful for me at the time. And it was impactful for me because it was professional growth for myself. But then I could bring all those things back to my community and be like, you probably didn't have time to read *Onward*, neither did I, but I went to this really cool thing where somebody else read it. And so let's do this together.

Whether the meetings were inspirational or aspirational, mixing up the structure gave everybody an entry point and a place where each participant could get what they needed.

The meeting structure benefitted the mid-level women female leaders depending on what they needed or were seeking at that point in their career. For instance, Soo mentioned that earlier in her career she was looking for more structured meetings that gave her “more meat”, in the form of specific leadership development ideas and content. After she settled into her leadership journey, she preferred informal meetings to connect and develop supportive relationships. Alice talked about how at a different point in her career she would have liked to show up as the mentee, but now she needed to be the person who helped others:

When I came into WLA, I needed to network, and I needed to not feel alone. I needed to know that there was a world outside of the one independent school that I'd ever been at,

because I knew that I'd only been at one independent school and I knew there was a wider world out there. And I knew that there had to be other people who had thoughts and ideas and things. I needed to be the mentee, I needed to be the person who just kind of showed up and was a participant and like, just met people. And over time, and especially now, I don't need to be the mentee. What I need is to be the person who helps other people. That fulfills a different kind of need for me, but it's the same WLA. And it's the same format. It's just, my needs are different, and it still meets them (my needs) in that same kind of way.

WLA has been able to meet her different needs at different times in her career. Through thoughtful and responsive content delivery and stable structures, WLA participants like Rebecca were able “to get up tomorrow and be the things for other people that you are required to be in your job.” Attendees left the meetings restored and ready to meet the challenges of their jobs as mid-level leaders.

Theme 3: Confidence, Support and Self Efficacy

Finding 3: According to Participants, a Combination of Confidence and Lack of Competition They Experienced in WLA Led to a Sense of Self-Efficacy.

Existing Outside of Independent School Culture. WLA exists outside the restrictive environment of educational systems, and independent schools in particular. Educational systems are restrictive no matter what type of school it is: from traditional to progressive. As Samantha explained, this binding takes away from a sense of control for the individual. She expanded on this saying that schools and its leaders live in a framework, bound by restrictions and linear systems from strategic planning leading to goal setting to discussing those goals in multiple consecutive faculty meetings. Samantha postulated,

Educational systems are binding in a lot of ways, right? Like, no matter what style of your school, even a progressive school is bound to a lot of restrictions, limitations... But it (WLA) doesn't have to exist in the linear systems of school. (As female leaders) each of us live within a system and this group (WLA) doesn't. And that feels so important to everything. The fact that it has more freedom to ebb and flow, the fact that it has more freedom to switch leadership without contention, the fact that people have freedom to show up, not show up.

As Samantha explained, WLA exists in direct opposition to the controlled linear system of schools and can change its leadership without contention. She feels WLA has more freedom to ebb and flow than education systems - even down to the fact that participants can show up or not show up to the meetings. There is nothing binding about the meetings - no obligation, no fee, no mandatory assignments, etc. Samantha stated that everything she does for her job has to fit into a certain compartment or follow certain rules, and she does not experience this in WLA. Samantha clarified that WLA still feels safe because there are clear boundaries (through the goals and guidelines) that the women have promised to uphold. She shared,

The fact that it (WLA) has freedom to show up, not show up, you're welcome whenever... that is not how our schools work at all. And I think part of what makes us (WLA) successful is that we don't have to adhere to all the boundaries and restrictions that each of us lives within each and every day to do our jobs. And that's so important. In that I think there's freedom.

The flexibility and ebb and flow applies even to the structure of the meetings - from panels, to books, to discussions. After each meeting the participants are asked for input, either

verbally or through an electronic survey, which is then considered when planning the next meeting.

Beyond a Sense of Competition. The sense of competition the female mid-level leaders may have felt when starting their careers in the independent school world is often no longer felt at this stage of their career. One participant admitted that when she first started teaching at one of the top-rated independent schools in Los Angeles, she felt she had “made it” and thought to herself, “I got the fancy school.” As a mid-level leader, she has a different relationship to a sense of competition and said that from the moment she joined WLA she never felt a sense of competition.

It (WLA) wasn't about competition like I felt like with the independent schools in LA.

And then I started being in this room of these women from all different schools, and it was about support. The vibe of competition was never there.

Instead, she stated the vibe was all about support and she began to think about how this group of women was in the position to change the world by changing the independent school landscape in Los Angeles.

Generosity Instead of Competition. Participants communicated that in WLA a sense of competition was replaced with a sense of generosity. Alice said that the independent school world in California is small, and there can be a sense of competition when applying for positions. However, in WLA this sense of competition was not felt. Instead, women wished each other the best even when they applied for the same job. Alice asserted,

We all understand that the independent school world in California is incredibly small and you have to balance a lot of confidential information. But at WLA you can just be like “you're applying to this job, I'm applying for the same job, and I wish you the best”. And

I also wish for myself the best. And if one of us gets the job over the other, it isn't because one of us is better than the other. It's because it was the right fit for that person at that time. And there will be another right fit for me somewhere else.

Alice acknowledged that this spirit of generosity instead of competition does not exist in the independent school world. She felt it is the “magic” of WLA that fosters this generosity of spirit, which could also be in part due to the women who are attracted to WLA. She added,

And that's so generous. And that's not how the world works. It's really wonderful to be in a space of generosity. And I think whatever magic is there allows for that. Or maybe it (WLA) only attracts generous people. But there's not that sense of competitiveness. Even though we are all vying for the same jobs.

Alice explained that, in fact, women in WLA point out job openings to each other, even if it is a position that the person themselves is interested in. Leila also named the lack of competition she experienced in WLA: “It’s a space that’s really welcoming and accepting and not all school spaces are like that. Education can be so competitive. And I don’t think that’s the point of education. It should be focused on growing together.”

Confidence to Take Risks. The sense of control and confidence that women felt in WLA allowed for opportunities to take risks and try out things they normally would not in their everyday lives as mid-level leaders. This gives the women confidence and sense of control over their own situations. Rochelle stated,

I feel like we all need help with that. Because it's hard. It's like any revolution or paradigm shift that you're trying to motivate. There are walls for a reason, right? It's hard, because it's hard to break down things, because that's how systems are designed- to keep people out.

For other interviewees, WLA provides a safe space to figure out what does and does not work outside of the structures and boundaries of independent schools. This includes getting ideas from others, asking others how to deal with things, or as Rachel mentioned, even just getting an, “I’m sorry that was shitty (what happened to you).”

Confidence Through Having Information. There is a confidence that comes from knowing people and having a deep network. When issues or questions come up at their schools, the participants felt they could reach out to someone in their WLA informal network. This puts female leaders in positions of power since not every female leader has a network of people they can reach out to. During a facilitator meeting, one of the facilitators talked about how it gave her credibility with her head of school that she had “insider information” about other schools’ Covid protocols. An example is when the subject of masking came up organically during a planning meeting. This topic was in the forefront of the daily lived experiences of the facilitators. Each facilitator shared the current masking policy at their school and noticed a discrepancy. Additionally, one of the facilitators said their head of school told her every school was following the same masking policy. When the facilitator realized this was not the case, she asked permission of the other facilitators to tell her head of school what other schools were doing. She offered to keep the school names anonymous, but every facilitator said it was fine to use the actual name of their schools. Having information from other schools to bring back to the facilitator’s school to make informed decisions helped her feel more confident in her decisions as a leader. It also brought a sense of credibility to the information she told her head of school.

Confidence to be Proactive and Ask for More. When looking at the responses of the participants as to the next step in their career, eight out of nine participants said they would like to be in a different position. For some it was a lateral move, yet for the majority it was a vertical

move. However only three explicitly said they aspired to headship. Regardless of their career aspirations, the participants found that WLA provided them a sense of confidence through support and validation. Both Alice and Leila mentioned how the validation they received through WLA gave them confidence to be proactive and exhibit a sense of agency. Alice remembered a time she attended a meeting and was feeling miserable about a situation that occurred earlier in the day with a coworker. The other women at WLA helped her understand it was a messed-up situation and encouraged her to stand up for herself and do something about it. Leila stated

I think it's helped me build confidence in myself as a leader, as something I can actually do. It gave me the courage to apply for positions where I feel like I'm being a little bit ambitious. On paper I may not necessarily have the exact requirements or qualifications but if you read between the lines, it's all there. WLA gave me confidence, like how men apply for things that they're not qualified for all the time.

Rochelle echoed Leila's sentiments regarding the increased confidence she experienced from the Alliance and how this helped her leadership trajectory:

I would say that it was someone in Alliance, who encouraged me to even apply for certain positions or who convinced me that I was qualified for certain positions. I feel like that was definitely huge. Like last year, I had applied for some director DEI positions, and I would not have done that if I hadn't spoken to someone from Alliance who was like, "Yeah, you absolutely could do that". And then I got to the final round for two schools... You know, it's funny sometimes you, probably especially women more than other people, but you just need someone else to be like, "Yeah, go do that".

Soo pointed out that at times it was the collective of women at WLA, versus an individual member of WLA, who provided support to inspire confidence:

I think hearing the stories of other women who've had to ask for raises or who know the value of the position that you're in, or what value you add to a school, can validate that for you. So even if it's not direct advice on how to get a raise, you feel like these are people who understand the value you bring to a school. They can validate that for you so you can go with a confidence of like, "Nope, I know what I'm worth, this is what I should be getting". And I think that's made a big difference.

Soo said it was not one conversation that moved her to have confidence; rather it was the camaraderie developed with other women who were in similar roles and positions. Also, she felt she could have transparent conversations with people asking them point blank: "Can you just tell me what your salary is just so that I have a gauge?" She felt no shame in that, and through participating in WLA she is working to eliminate the taboo of talking about salaries.

Confidence to Bring Change Back to Their Own School. The confidence, aspirations and risk-taking that lead to increased self-efficacy affected the women in a bigger way than just themselves. All interviewees were clear that the increase in confidence they experienced in Alliance was something they could take back to their schools. Rachel said that the Alliance is a place to, "learn and grow our skills as leaders and then go back to our school and kick ass."

This self-efficacy created a sense of agency that the participants in WLA experienced as they became change agents in their schools. Samantha stated,

Because of the vulnerability and people's willingness to be themselves, it's also been a really important space to learn things that I don't know about being in these (independent) schools. I really love being an agent of change in these schools and some of the conversations and people I've met have really changed my perspective because they took the time to be themselves in a way that was so powerful. And that to me is a huge gift.

Samantha highlighted that synergy and communication in the co-mentoring group leads to substantial and positive changes in the thinking and actions of participants, fostering a sense of self-efficacy and agency.

Theme 4: Intersectional Identity

Finding 4: The Intersectionality of Identity Needs to be Addressed in Order for Female Mid-Level Leaders to Fully Develop as Leaders.

The dual identity of being a woman and a leader were commonalities between all the women in the study that WLA explicitly supported, yet there are other intersections of identity that are not explicitly addressed in WLA. Multiple participants clearly named the importance of directly addressing additional identities as they fully develop as mid-level female leaders.

Gender. Women who are mid-level leaders in independent schools have two elements of their identity which overlap: they are women and leaders. WLA is a respite from the androcentric culture the participants experience daily. One participant named this directly, saying that having no cisgender men in the space helped to overcome the imbalance of power dynamics usually present in independent school educational spaces. Another participant stated that being in a supportive room with women from different schools was a stark contrast to the “vibe of competition” that she usually feels when she is in other meetings or professional development situations. She wondered if male educators have ever sat down in a room together to work on changing the landscape of Los Angeles schools like the women of WLA. She concluded, “if they did, it would probably end up being a pissing contest” due to institutionalized and socialized norms of competition.

The participants highlighted that the level of professionalism that mid-level female leaders felt they needed to exhibit in the androcentric independent culture created a guard that

women constantly need to put up. Mirabelle explained that one reason for this guard was because as leaders the women are modeling behavior for their colleagues. The sense of pressure “makes you want to pull your hair out sometimes,” and the Alliance provides a space where the women can be professional and their most authentic self. Mirabelle further described,

In Alliance it seems like you can kind of let all that (guard) down. You can say, we left all of that at the door. We're in this space (together) and let me tell you what is driving me nuts. It's received in a way where somebody else has their guard down, so they're able to receive back. I would just say it's a space where you're able to kind of kick your shoes off and really be yourself and really, say what your brain is thinking without judgment, and with love and support. I think we all want to be good inherently and it (WLA) provides a space for us to work with that.

Samantha expanded on this pressure as a woman to keep her guard up and the way she can be her authentic self at WLA without putting up the façade she has at school. She offered,

I feel like it's a place (WLA) where I can be “not the leader”. I can drop some of the asks on me in my job, and just be in reflection around what I do in a way that I can't do in my job. When you're with your colleagues, you have to hold up a certain modicum and there's something about being in Alliance over time that has given me permission not to. I mean, I'm not gossiping. I'm not. It's just saying, I show up here (WLA) with permission to be myself. I don't have to show up here being a leader. Even as a facilitator (of WLA), I don't feel that. That's important. I show up as myself without having to lead, knowing that I'm accepted for who I am right now.

Rachel explained WLA is a place where you can be yourself and other women will give you grace: “It's a mutual grace giving, is what we (WLA) are doing”.

Participants named that an immediate connection was created between all WLA participants since everyone has independent school experience. This, in tandem with everyone identifying as a woman, created a bond that immediately disarmed façades and alleviated the need for backstories or explanations. Mirabelle stated,

I really love when you come into a space like that and as women, we already know what it is to be a woman. We already know what we face and can talk about stuff and you just get it because as a woman you have a similar experience. I don't have to preface it and say, "You know, women sometimes...", I don't have to say anything. I can speak to my experience because your experience as a woman has been similar. Yeah, because you're a woman we don't even have to give the backstory, we just kind of dive right into. And that is what's always nice.

As Gladys explained, since she is later in her career, this puts her in a place where she is not as likely to try impressing people as she did earlier in her career. Gladys connected this to one of the tenets of WLA, which is "Come as you are." Gladys further explained,

It feels warm and friendly and disarmed. One of the one of the norms is "Come as come as you are" and I really feel that in Alliance you get to show up as however you are. You know, in your pajamas (when it was on Zoom), with your glass of wine or not or with whatever day you had. You just get to kind of be your whole self and are met there. I feel like I don't have to think about how I'm presenting myself at Alliance.

Despite feeling less pressure to impress others in the WLA, participants greatly felt the impact of socialization and society's expectations on them as women. Asking for what they need as a leader felt like more of a burden because they are women, and this had an impact on their career trajectory. Gladys stated,

I mean, there's this second guessing of myself, which also in my head winds up being about trying to figure out what I actually want. I'm really struggling with that. And then trying to detangle the gender and socialization to be happy with what I have. Or to not think I can do something until I'm uber, uber, prepared for it versus just jumping in and trying it. Then, if I don't keep rising, going up a career ladder, does that mean I'm a bad feminist? There are all those competing questions. I think one way that Alliance really helped, is that I've been working with a coach since September... Alliance gave me license to expect that my school should help me sort things out and hire a coach for me.

While Alliance itself did not offer specific answers to Gladys' questions, her experience in Alliance provided her the emotional and psychological support to expect and demand help from her school, which came in the form of hiring a leadership coach for her.

There were times when the interviewees stated they were not treated as trusted, intelligent intellectual educators in their schools. The participants began to internalize this belief about themselves and WLA helped to overturn this belief. One interviewee talked about how early in her career she felt that to move forward in her career trajectory she needed to "comply more." The fact that she was told to "just go along with things" felt gendered because it was a pattern she saw with women leaders who were her mentors. In fact, she felt like the feedback to comply or just go along with things was given to her female mentors in a harder way because they were in positions with more power. The interviewee stated that she began to internalize the idea that she did not deserve to progress in her career because she was not good enough or smart enough. Through participation in WLA, she gained more confidence in herself and realized that failing is an integral element of learning and growing. This was echoed by Leila and other interviewees who felt that Alliance helps women realize the value of their voices and their

perspectives. This was not a message they received at work. The intentional time spent at Alliance supported the notion for Leila that women's voices and perspectives are important at the leadership table.

An additional layer that gender played for mid-level leaders is the socialization of the role of mother. The participants identified that for mid-level leaders who have children, there is a pull to be invested in their children all the time. Also, Alice recognized that as a leader there is the unspoken message that "you are married to the thing you are leading." At home and at work people are reliant on the women. Alice continued with the following metaphor:

My internal struggle is about, "Do I spend more time with my children? Do I spend more time on work? Do I spend more time on myself? Do I spend time with friends?". Like the idea of the four-burner stove. You've heard this metaphor, right? All the burners are on and society tells me that my child burner, my mother burner, should always be on or high. But that means that my leadership burner is never going to be at that level. And maybe I think it can and should be, or needs to be, in order to be really good at it (leadership). And that is something that I think about all the time.

Alice went on to say that hearing stories at Alliance about women in the same situation helped her feel that she was not alone in this perennial push and pull dilemma. The women asked for what they wanted and showed Alice there were possibilities she had not considered. Samantha echoed the support she received from other women when she said, "It was in Alliance that I learned how to be a working mom because there were a bunch of working moms in there who were fierce".

Race. While gender is important to consider when examining the lives of women in leadership, many of the participants highlighted that being a woman of color is an additional layer that needs to be taken into consideration. Leila shared,

I would just add that intersectionality piece, because I think being a woman is one part of it, but also being a woman of color. There's a whole other layer of stuff I have to get through to be able to, you know, to even get to the mentorship and get to that leadership place.

As a person of color, Leila felt typecast at her school and overlooked for leadership training since none of the women of color were ever chosen for leadership professional development. She contrasted this to her experience at WLA where Leila felt her belief that the voices of women of color are important at leadership tables was espoused by WLA. She reflected, "I think WLA does a lot to make the women who come realize their voices and perspectives matter."

One participant felt that having women of color in the group made a difference, and the women who attend WLA are attuned to and strive for equity, inclusion, and justice. The emphasis on storytelling in the meetings was an important part of her growth as a women leader of color. She explained,

I think just telling stories and hearing what other women of color have to go through. We even think about pay scales and I feel like private/ independent schools in general don't necessarily talk about that. I would like to learn even more about how we negotiate and ask for more.

This participant felt like she had carried the load of being the only person of color in the lower school for a while, since she was the only person of color seen by the students. WLA provided a

space for her to be around other women of color and think about ways to increase her effectiveness as a woman of color mid-level leader at her school.

Another participant named a specific interest in increasing Asian American educators in leadership roles. This need stands out at her school because 30-40% of the students are Asian, but in the entire school there are four Asian educators: two in the lower school and two in the upper school. The lack of Asian educators, particularly in leadership roles, was something that she felt WLA could think about more intentionally.

Multiple Identities. Rochelle brought up the layers of intersectionality she experiences as a young woman of color in the independent school world. Rochelle is in her late 20's and said that leadership positions in independent schools are associated with middle-aged white women. When Rochelle looks around her, she does not see anyone that looks like her in certain leadership roles. Rochelle felt a sense of imposter syndrome like she was fooling people because of her age and being a mid-level leader. Yet when she attended WLA, she felt people engaged with her as an adult, and this made her feel valued. She named that the level of conversation "isn't like, what's the weather. It's immediately deep and meaningful, and you get into real stuff that you're unpacking." By being part of WLA, Rochelle feels like what she wants for herself as an educational leader is legitimized because people engage with her in a serious way.

Rochelle talked about experiencing the multiple layers of intersectionality as not only a young leader, but a young leader who is also a woman of color. She mentioned that there is a constant state of wondering if a space would be welcoming for her. She was pleasantly surprised that at one of the WLA meetings there was a discussion about barriers to leadership and the idea of intersectionality was brought up. And when she weighed the pros and cons of sharing an authentic answer, she felt comfortable with being authentic:

I talked about the intersection of race, gender, and age, and I feel like, depending on what type of meeting you were in, you wouldn't give that answer because that's the real answer. There was a moment where I was, like, where am I negotiating? Do I want to give my real answer, or do I want to give my like, Part B answer (that isn't genuine or authentic)? And I think it's cool that I felt like this (WLA) is a space where I'll just give the real answer and it was received well.

When looking at what helped foster this sense of comfort, one participant named a range of things. For instance, she mentioned the effect of the women and the way they greeted her as well as that the quotes used in the meeting were from women of color. These elements made her think, "They (WLA) might be thinking in a certain way or at least aware that this is something that someone has to think about." Rochelle said she felt a vibe at WLA to be real and give of yourself.

Body Size. One participant brought up that body size is an intersection of identity that is not considered often enough in conversations about marginalization and privilege. She named *thin privilege* as an element that is embedded in society's diet culture where she feels everyone is taught that smaller is better. As a person in a larger body, she experiences being perceived as lazy because people feel she does not exercise enough, eats too much, and does not take care of herself. The impact this has on her as a leader is people impose a stereotype that since she cannot take care of herself, she is not going to be able to be responsible for anything else. She confided,

If you are in a larger body, you're clearly not taking care of yourself. And if you're not taking care of yourself, then how are you going to do anything else? How can you be responsible for anything else? And that's kind of a big deal. Because in a leadership

position, one of the things that you're doing is taking care of something beyond just your classroom.

The participant said she has experienced a complete lack of awareness of body size. From concrete things such as not having access to chairs that are sturdy and fit a multitude of sizes, to being taught that being in a larger body means she does not have the right to talk or take up space with ideas because her body takes up space. She shared,

In terms of leadership, how that impacts me is, as a person in the larger body, I'm taught not to talk. Basically, I am taught that because my body takes up so much physical space, my voice should not take up any airspace.

Through WLA she found people who listened to her and saw her first and her size second. From the support at WLA and therapy, she realized she needs to advocate for herself. Something she feels WLA could do even better in this arena is addressing the pervasive nature of "thin privilege" and providing a platform to talk about how people in bigger bodies do not have this privilege.

Conclusion

Based on the data, there are four themes and four main findings. The first theme is Non-Linear Career Trajectory, the next theme is Professional Development Through Relationship Building, the third theme is Confidence, Support and Self-Efficacy and the fourth theme is Intersectional Identity. Each of these themes are supported by findings that delve more deeply into the experiences of mid-level female leaders in independent schools.

In Chapter Five, the discussion chapter, I begin by reviewing the findings and then outline the study implications and recommendations. This will be followed by the study limitations and implications for future research on this topic.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

Historically, women have faced prejudice, bias, and inequitable treatment in a multitude of personal and professional areas (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ibarra, 1997; Ibarra et al., 2010). Women's rights are consistently under attack, as we see from the recent Supreme Court ruling which reversed the almost 50-year-old constitutionally protected right of women to be in control of their own bodies and reproductive rights. First generation gender bias, which includes visible and intentional acts of discrimination and explicitly excludes women from spaces and roles in society, is no longer permissible (Grover, 2015). Yet, the bias has moved to a more subtle form of bias: second-generation gender bias (Ibarra et al., 2013) that is more hidden and appears more neutral (Grover, 2015). For instance, while women are no longer prohibited from being in the boardroom, other cultural barriers to full equity and access remain (Heilman, 2001; Fiske, 1998; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Elacqua et al, 2009). When a company's retreat involves a round of golf at the local country club, the subtle bias against those who do not play golf (more likely to be women) and those who are not able to be members of the club (historically marginalized people) serves as a barrier to equality. These informal barriers, expectations and perceptions lead to unequal pay and inequitable pathways to advancement that men do not face (Lyness & Heilman, 2006), and men are overrepresented in positions of power (Pew Research Center, 2018; Glass, 2020; Catalyst, 2021). The gap between women and men in leadership positions, as well as their different pathways to such positions, remains a litmus test of society's progress.

The gender gap in K-12 educational leadership is particularly illustrative of this inequity since women make up the majority of teachers and administrators, yet they hold proportionally

fewer top positions in schools compared to male counterparts. While 72% of all faculty and administrators in independent schools are female (Hunt et al., 2020), in the 2020-2021 school year an average of 40% of the heads of school were female (National Association of Independent School [NAIS] Trendbook, 2021-2022). The entire education system is founded on androcentric mental models which emphasize a male point of view and masculine interests, and this dynamic can be seen clearly when looking at administrative positions (Shakeshaft, 1989). Reproducing and reinforcing power and privilege is particularly entrenched in independent schools from their original purpose to fortify status groups (Persell & Cookson, 1985). Women are represented in mid-level administrative positions that serve as stepping stones to headships, yet these women are not reaching the highest levels of educational leadership (Sanchez & Thorton, 2010).

The conceptual frameworks that undergird this study include the ideas of the leadership labyrinth, second-generation gender bias, and the theories of social roles and role congruity. These conceptual frameworks provide lenses through which to view the barriers women face on their leadership trajectory and the role that WLA provides in overcoming or addressing these barriers.

The research questions that guided this inquiry were:

1. In what ways do participants of an informal co-mentoring network say the network is impacting their perceptions of their leadership career trajectory, if at all?
2. According to participants, how does an informal mentoring network address and overcome second-generation gender bias, if at all?
3. What are the processes, materials, and discussions through which mid-level female leaders in independent schools co-mentor each other in an informal co-mentoring network to overcome second-generation bias?

This phenomenological qualitative study triangulated data from nine semi-structured interviews of mid-level female leaders in independent schools in California; formal and informal observations conducted during Womxn's Leadership Alliance (WLA) meetings and informal get-togethers; and analysis of WLA documents (e.g., meeting notes and agendas, presentation slide decks, survey feedback, etc.) to address the impact of an informal co-mentoring network on the experiences of mid-level female leaders in independent schools. The study confirms and extends research about women in educational leadership. Additionally, the study expands on previous studies through a focus on mid-level leadership in independent schools.

This chapter summarizes the study's findings and then reflects on the significance of the findings in the context of previous research. Next, the implications and recommendations of this study are addressed, along with the limitations and suggestions for future research. The chapter concludes with a reflection on my positionality and how this study intersects with my experience as a mid-level leader in an independent school.

Overview of Findings

This study revealed four main themes and four main findings. The first theme is *Non-Linear Career Trajectory*, and the findings showed each participant has a unique non-linear path to leadership and can name the impact WLA had on their leadership career trajectory. The next theme is *Professional Development Through Relationship Building*, and the findings show that WLA is a network to develop friendships and bonds that develop over time, irrespective of distance or changing population and WLA meets participants where they are in their career trajectory. The third theme is *Confidence, Support and Self-Efficacy*, and the data demonstrates that according to participants, a combination of confidence and lack of competition they experience in WLA leads to a sense of self-efficacy. The fourth theme is *Intersectional Identity*,

and the data illuminates that the intersectionality of multiple identities needs to be addressed in order for female mid-level leaders to fully develop as leaders. While there is a clear intersectionality with gender and leadership occurring in WLA, other identities need to be specifically considered because they present other challenges for one's leadership journey

Discussion of Key Findings and Connection to Prior Research

Theme 1: Non-Linear Career Trajectory

For many years, the research on women in leadership invoked the “glass ceiling effect,” which argued that as women aspire to top leadership positions they face one barrier at a specific point in time (the glass ceiling). The glass ceiling names the androcentric framing of both culture and leadership that prevents the upward trajectory of female leaders through gender bias, stereotypes, and prejudice in the workplace (Powell & Butterfield, 1994; Reynolds, 1999; Oakley, 2000; Ragins et al., 1998; Bass & Avilio, 1994). There is also an assumption that there is a linear path to leadership (Oakley, 2000), yet the research of Eagly and Carli (2007) has argued that the path to leadership for women is more like a labyrinth with many barriers along the journey. The assumption of linearity is called into question through the findings of my study, as each of the nine participants noted the non-linearity of their professional journey, and the labyrinthine path was confirmed in my interviews. Participants named the direct impact WLA had on their career trajectory, and each woman reached their current positions through some combination of unintentional leadership, invitation of others, intention to make an impact, or a career change. Additionally, sharing of these non-linear paths positively impacted the participants at WLA and supported their career advancement. These impacts included understanding the importance of leading from any position in their school, validating emotions

and voice as a source of leadership development, and stepping out of their comfort zone in order to grow as a leader.

Socialization

While only one participant explicitly named the impact gender played in her journey, the role of gender and socialization is woven throughout the narratives of the interviewees. Gladys identified the impact of socialization through reluctance she felt in her leadership journey and doubt she felt as she wondered if she was ready to lead; this clashed with her gendered idea that women/girls should be helpful and do things well. This socialization originally prevented her from aspiring to do more. Gladys is referring to “second-generation gender bias,” which is a subtle bias and prejudice that occurs in workplace settings (Ibarra et al., 2013) and has roots in social role theory and the roles that men and women should play (Eagly & Wood, 2016). While other participants did not overtly name the gendered nature of their experiences in the same way as Gladys, the majority of participants say they would not have become leaders without the encouragement of others or fortuitous circumstances. These are examples of second-generation gender bias termed *gendered modesty*, which refers to the way women underestimate their value and self-worth in relation to professional settings and situations (Gregultez et al., 2019).

Labyrinth

Through the variety of paths these women took on their career trajectory, it is clear that there is not one road to leadership. The constant twists and turns women encounter in the labyrinth require that women work harder than their male counterparts to advance in their careers (Gregultez et al., 2019). Out of the four categories of career trajectories explored in Chapter Four (unintentional leadership, invitation of others, intention to make an impact and career changers), not one woman started out with the intention to be a leader in an independent school. In fact, the

greatest number of women fell under the category of *unintentional leadership*. Although their journeys can be grouped into four categories, there were a myriad of barriers that they encountered along the way in their career trajectory. As Alice stated, “I don’t think that independent schools make it easy (for women) to step into leadership positions. I think the structures (in independent schools) very much keep people in their little spaces.” While the term “glass ceiling” put a name on what prevents the upward trajectory of female leaders in an androcentric culture and understanding of leadership (Bass & Avilio, 1994; Oakley, 2000; Powell & Butterfield, 1994; Ragins et al., 1998; Reynolds, 1999), it oversimplifies the journey. The gender bias, stereotypes, and prejudice in the workplace that prevent the upward trajectory of female leaders is instead a labyrinth with a series of dead ends, no final destination, and a journey that unfolds (McDonagh & Paris, 2012).

Beyond Socialization

Through their participation in WLA, the women gained “keys to the labyrinth,” which helped them move forward in their career trajectory. Pernambuco-Wise (2014) states that women make their way through the labyrinth using these “keys” to unlock doors and navigate the labyrinth to the goal of a top leadership position. One of the keys to unlocking the doors was an understanding that leading can happen from any position. Through their experiences in WLA, participants learned that leading is not about a hierarchy where only one person steers the ship. Soo realized that leading is “available for anybody in taking that role.” This realization helped the women understand that there are many different forms leadership can take.

Another key to unlocking the door was the validation of each woman’s voice and emotions by others in the group. Alexandra received the message from her participation in WLA that her feelings are real and can be valuable information, Alexandra was able to counter the

harmful messages she was getting outside of WLA that she had to fit into a prescribed box if she wanted to be a leader. The message the interviewees received outside of WLA is that men are considered agentic while women are considered communal (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001). The agentic roles in society, such as top leadership positions, highlight assertiveness and independence, while communal roles, which are often associated with women, call attention to friendliness, unselfishness and focus on others (Eagly & Wood, 1991; Eckes & Trautner, 2000). Based on this social role theory, it is assumed that women have fewer agentic characteristics that qualify them for top leadership jobs (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Through the valuation of voice and emotions, the women in WLA increased in their confidence and embraced their identity as a leader that does not adhere to the binary of being agentic or communal.

A third key was that the women were encouraged by their experience in WLA to push past their comfort zone to apply for positions they did not feel qualified for or put themselves in uncomfortable situations that were needed to move forward in their career trajectory. In the instance of Rochelle, she did not feel prepared for a leadership role because she adopted a masculine framework to the gendered perception of women and saw herself as unfit for the particular role (Heilman & Caleo, 2018). Heilman & Caleo (2018) call this a “lack of fit model,” and is based on the idea that attributes women embody are incompatible with masculine characteristics that are deemed necessary for successful leadership. Through support women received as participants in WLA they overcame this social construct and advanced in their career trajectory.

Theme 2: Professional Development Through Relationship Building

The findings show that WLA is a place to develop supportive friendships and bonds that develop over time and irrespective of distance or changing population. Additionally, WLA is able to meet participants at any point in their career trajectory. This is akin to a spiral, that represents many cultural traditions that constantly unfold and spiral the cosmos. The spiral metaphor represents the continual evolution of humans, both inwardly and outwardly - growth, change and a return to the familiar (Córdova, 2020). This visual echoes the spiraling nature of WLA and its participants. The changing population, stability of a few leaders, and diverse yet overlapping pathways of the women provide a multitude of learning opportunities, representing the spiraling iterative nature of WLA. The relationships that develop are authentic and provide emotional support over time. The women feel they can be their authentic selves, and the relationships are predicated on trust and vulnerability. The data also highlights that the relationships are supported through therapeutic and joyful connections embedded in both the content and structure of WLA.

Loneliness

The space female-mid level leaders occupy can feel lonely and isolating. They are often the only people at their institution who fulfill these particular roles. The informal network created through WLA can serve the function of creating community for participants and learning about perspectives outside of the independent school where they work. This is particularly true for women who have worked at a single independent school their whole career. It makes an impact on female mid-level leaders to meet people who are on a similar journey or are interested in the same journey.

This element of friendship is important for mid-level leaders because there is a shift in how leaders are viewed by their colleagues as they move up a trajectory. The interviewees mentioned that when you are a teacher everyone is your friend. Teachers can go visit their friends' classrooms, hang out during lunch, and "shoot the shit all the time," as Rachel noted. The shift from teacher to administrator can feel lonely when females move up the career ladder at their own school, particularly if most leadership roles are occupied by men. A distance develops between administrator and teachers and friendships dissolve. Lack of friendships are also exacerbated when female leaders move to new schools as an administrator.

Relationships

In WLA, meaningful relationships develop with female mid-level leaders that lead to intimate and supportive conversations about the personal and professional challenges faced during one's leadership journey. This differs from other professional development opportunities where superficial conversations occur with people who may not be invested in each other's development and will probably never see each other again. Through participation in WLA, the women experience the benefits of informal co-mentoring, which includes a psychosocial support predicated on the high social intensity and the completely voluntary nature of the friendship (Sosik et al., 2005).

This is particularly important for women in independent schools because informally mentored proteges report increased levels of organizational commitment and role modeling than their counterparts who are formally mentored (Sosik et al., 2005). In fact, the participants found the friendships, conversations, and connections so inspiring and life-giving that a couple of the participants became facilitators of WLA so they could give back and foster that connection for other women. In addition, the act of facilitating gave the women added confidence they could

bring back to their leadership role. As one participant summarized, “When I moved into the role of facilitator at WLA that changed the way that I was willing to own my skills. Before being a facilitator for WLA, I didn’t have confidence in my ability to lead in that way. I brought this confidence to my workplace and put myself in more situations where I needed to lead and facilitate.”

Co-Mentoring

The data points to the fact that the experience of women at WLA goes beyond informal mentoring to co-mentoring. Co-mentoring compliments informal mentoring networks through its focus on psychosocial support needed to promote leadership growth (Mullens, 2000). As Mullens (2000) states, co-mentoring is predicated on collaboration and places value on diversity, as well as promoting the creation of new “synergistic relationships and organizational structures” (p. 4). The promotion of diversity and inclusion is felt by the participants, and they feel like the emotional support allows them to be their authentic selves and develop authentic relationships. WLA was founded on the premise that women could show up, be their whole authentic selves and feel that everything was going to be okay.

Furthermore, in WLA (and other successful co-mentoring groups), the most effective method to achieve successful relationships is through open-ended conversations. These conversations should not be limited by time restrictions, should have flexible commitments, non-standardized monitoring processes and more closely mirror peer relationships (Sosik et al., 2005). This is the case in WLA where Gladys described it as, “Regardless of how close I am with those individual people, or how long I have known them, I always feel like we're having a real conversation about real things. And I'm not showing up and thinking about how I'm presenting myself in that ‘surfacey meeting you at a conference kind of way.’” Being in a peer

relationship increases the chances that the person providing support might demonstrate an understanding of the person beyond simply career concerns (Burke & McKeen, 1990). This echoes the words of Samantha what stated, “Whether I see one person once or somebody every time for two years, it’s just we’re all coming with this generosity of spirit.”

The synergy created through co-collaboration is increased through WLA’s self-direction support systems (Brokema, 2020). The content, structure, and longevity of WLA enable synergy to meet the needs of the participants no matter where they are in their career trajectory. Through the trust and vulnerability that being their authentic selves fostered, being part of WLA allowed the women to feel safe enough to share concerns they would not normally share at work. As Alexandra stated, she feels vulnerable enough to be her whole self and say things like, “I don’t know what to do about this” or “I am really struggling.” Through sharing uncertainty about how to approach a problem or confide in others about their struggles, the women support and co-mentor each other in authentic and long-lasting ways. Just as Mullen (2000) found in her study of university students, participants in WLA found that communication and synergy prompted them towards positive and substantial changes in their actions and thinking. Participants of WLA collaborate to produce something that is useful and beautiful to everyone involved, which is particularly important for mid-level leaders who often do not have access to meaningful relationships (Bona et al., 1995).

Theme 3: Confidence, Support and Self Efficacy

According to participants, their experiences in WLA fostered a sense of confidence and an atmosphere of supportive co-collaboration which created a sense of self-efficacy. Participants experienced generosity instead of the competition experienced in workplaces, which built a sense of safety for the women. In this space of safety, the women took risks and obtained the

information they needed to continue their growth as leaders. For instance, Soo felt like she could have transparent conversations with people asking them point blank: “Can you just tell me what your salary is just so that I have a gauge?” She felt no shame in that, and through participating in WLA she is working to eliminate the taboo of talking about salaries. This led to a continued increase of self-efficacy for Soo and others, since as a women’s confidence increases, so does their proactivity in their leadership journey, such as asking for what they need.

Competition in Independent Schools

The independent school world in California is small, and there is a scarcity of and competition for positions. A sense of competition is part of all aspects of independent school life, down to the application process for student admission. The women interviewed said that at WLA they did not feel a sense of competition the way they do in their work lives outside of WLA. A sense of competition, which is an inherent element of an independent school environment and is viewed differently by women and men (Skrla, 2003; Kesebir, 2019), is not present in the WLA space. Instead, WLA is based on generosity of spirit and growing together through mutual support. The women felt safe to take risks and talk openly without being judged, which is a necessary and preliminary step to learning from common experiences of others (Ibarra et al., 2013). This is true even down to an example of two women applying for the same position at the same school and genuinely wishing each other the best.

Increased Self-Efficacy

Since these women are mid-career leaders, they are in a place where they are less likely to try and impress people as they might have felt pressure to do earlier in their career. This does not mean the women are automatically their authentic selves when they enter WLA, yet the prevailing experience of WLA participants is that they are vulnerable and willing to be

themselves. In this environment, the women feel safe to see what does and does not work, as they are outside the boundaries of their independent schools. Being authentic increases a sense of self-efficacy, and this is particularly important for mid-career women because feelings of self-efficacy decrease as women age (Keohane et al., 2011). Women who believe in their own self-efficacy are less likely to be limited by the constraints of their environment (Bandura, 1993). Ibarra et al. (2013) highlight that an increasing sense of self-efficacy is an iterative process and can be hindered by lack of confidence, lack of aspirations, and lack of risk-taking opportunities (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010). Within the supportive structure of WLA, the participant leaders are provided the space to grow in confidence and assertiveness as they develop career aspirations.

Confidence

In the competitive world of independent schools, increased self-efficacy and confidence are key ingredients to the career trajectory of women. Hiring and promotions are connected to appearing confident (Smith, 2013), and the biggest obstacle for women trying to achieve top leadership positions is self-doubt, while for men it is the lack of a postgraduate degree (Scott, 1997). Through their experiences at WLA and the network they develop, the women gain confidence in a multitude of areas, including, taking risks, being proactive and asking for more opportunities, and, most importantly, bringing change back to their own school.

The lack of confidence many female mid-level leaders feel is of immediate concern because fewer female leaders expressed interest in moving to the headship than male mid-level leaders (Scott, 1997). Student achievement and the overall school community are directly impacted by educational leaders (Hallinger & Heck, 1998) and having women in education leadership is important because it fosters a wider vision of education, encourages inclusive ideas, and affects students' mental models (Feibelman & Haakmat, 2010).

Theme 4: Intersectional Identity

It is clear from the data that the intersectionality of identity needs to be affirmed for female mid-level leaders. The intersectionality of being a woman and a leader are commonalities between all the study participants, and they identified ways that WLA supported these two identities. Participants also named the importance of directly addressing the intersectionality of additional identities, such as race and age, as they fully develop as mid-level female leaders. Participants also called out the need to take this a step further and address less traditionally named intersections, such as body size.

Identity Workspace

The participants found that Womxn's Leadership Alliance provided a safe identity workspace where they could authentically develop their identity as a leader. The identity workspace allowed their learning and growth to be supported by similarly positioned women (Ibarra et al., 2013). Women in independent schools often work in siloed environments, and particularly for women in mid-level leadership positions, they often do not have colleagues to learn from or work with. A lack of colleagues, role models and mentors put the women at a disadvantage, creating a two-pronged problem. In addition to the mid-level leaders not having a vision of something to aspire to while creating a sense of loneliness and isolation, this has a subconscious impact on women's beliefs about women leaders and their own ability to lead (Dasgupta & Asgari, 2004).

The women who participated in WLA found that seeing their peers as role models helped them overcome both the professional and personal barriers they experienced as mid-level leaders. These barriers are based in social role theory gender stereotypes that women should be in care-taking roles based on communal behavior, and men should be in authoritative roles based

in agentic behavior (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Wood, 1991). The stereotypes are learned and maintained through observation of peoples' environment, and when mid-level leaders do not have role models or mentors the stereotypes are reinforced and propagated (Dasgupta & Asgari, 2004; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Wood, 1991). The women in WLA were able to see role models and peers who led by example of how to be a "fierce working mom" as asserted by Samantha, how to negotiate for salaries, and how they requested/insisted for help or respect from their school.

It is also important that WLA introduced its members to alternate models of leadership other than the androcentric ones most of them see at their schools. When women can see themselves as leaders, they are able to achieve role congruity. Instead of seeing gender and leadership norms as incongruent and applying a masculine framework to the gendered perception of women, women are seen as fit for leadership roles (Catalyst, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001). Women are more likely to feel they are competent and qualified when role congruity is achieved and are therefore more ready to embrace the headship's potential for influence and impact (Brokema, 2020). An important process for female mid-level leaders is developing a congruent, internalized leadership identity. Since this identity cannot often be explored and nurtured in the workplace, a co-mentoring network like WLA was vital for women leaders to explore, develop, and affirm their leadership identities.

Significance and Recommendations for Practice

The data gathered in this study are significant in that they add to the growing literature on the development and career trajectory of mid-career female education leaders, and the findings point to several recommendations for practice for independent schools seeking to improve the leadership opportunities and environments for women. The diverse nature of the participants'

career trajectories - and the impact it had on their leadership identity - points to the need for nuanced and responsive mentoring and support that begins with relational investment.

Replicating Informal Co-Mentoring Networks

Compared to their male counterparts, female education leaders have fewer networking and mentoring opportunities, and the opportunities narrow even further when focusing on the career advancement opportunities for independent school leaders who are not yet heads of schools. The minimal opportunities that do exist for female mid-level leaders are often time-bound and offer no opportunity for continued and informal networking and mentoring. This is a major setback for female mid-level leaders since informal mentoring has been found to be even more effective than formal mentoring in providing support for role modeling, psychosocial support, organizational commitment, and career involvement (Sosik et al., 2005).

There is a need for an increase in female heads of school, and the informal leadership network/ co-mentorship model can be replicated by other groups of female mid-level independent school leaders. This has the potential to serve a wider range of female mid-level leaders who would also benefit from participating in an informal leadership network to support their career advancement and overcome second-generation bias. The structure and stability of WLA facilitates connection and relationship building which leads to professional development that fills a void that participants may experience at their school. The benefit of either expanding or replicating WLA among other CAIS or NAIS schools is clear. Since it is in the best interest of both CAIS and NAIS schools to have female heads of school, it would behoove both organizations to promote and sponsor informal co-mentoring networks like WLA. Similar to the way that WLA was born from connections through the CATDC Women + Leadership Conference, additional informal co-mentoring groups could stem from more formal exemplar

programs such as the UCLA Women's Leadership Academy ([WSLA](#)) or the American Council for Education ([ACE](#)) Women's Leadership Mentoring Program.

Shifting Mindsets

Research has shown that stereotypes change when people observe the roles of men and women beginning to shift (Diekman & Eagly, 2000; Eagly & Steffen, 1984). Additionally, shifts within a local environment in short amounts of time can have a substantial influence on changing stereotypes (Dasgupta & Asgari, 2004). WLA and other female-centered organizations would benefit from making the invisible visible to women. For instance, throughout the interviews the women became more aware of the impact that WLA had on their lives, and the deep potential the WLA has to transform not only other women's lives, but also the independent school landscape. This begs the question of what can be done to make WLA and other organizations like it more inclusive and affirming. It would behoove WLA to look more closely at researched practices for shifting mindsets, particularly in relation to socialization of women and cultural shifts in power distribution and intentionally incorporate this into the meetings and overall learnings. One example of a way to shift a school culture from one of competition to collaboration is utilizing Appreciative Inquiry, which is grounded in asset-based and positive inquiry-based methods to provide feedback, set goals, and engage in mentorship.

Questioning Independent School Culture

The facilitators and participants of WLA need to think more about how WLA can play a transformative role in naming, questioning, and upending the androcentric systems that give rise to inequities in independent school culture. Gladys acknowledged that WLA continues to be a fairly white, heteronormative space. Gladys suggested looking at what can be done to make WLA a more welcoming space and creating more opportunities for explicit mentoring based on

individual intersectionalities. While WLA does explicitly address second-generation gender bias, there is a need for WLA and other support spaces to explicitly address the intersections of identity even further and highlight non-traditional identities such as body-size, non-binary gender identification, physical ability, and primary language. Through an increased focus in these areas, WLA (and other organizations like it) are better positioned to be part of the change needed to disrupt systemic barriers for career advancement for women in independent schools.

Recommendations for WLA and Other Co-Mentoring Women Leadership Groups

When looking at WLA specifically and other similar groups that promote the development of women education leaders, the findings point to several recommendations and questions to consider as co-mentoring groups evolve.

Inclusion of All Narratives

First, since educational spaces are predominantly comprised of white women, leadership groups like WLA need to intentionally focus on inclusion of the narratives of all women. This includes women who may be even further marginalized due to their racial or ethnic identification, sexual orientation or identity, and other identities that impact their career trajectory. Conversations need to explicitly address embedded norms, prejudices, and barriers to inclusion and equity that exist in predominantly white independent schools. Providing a space that validates the counter-narratives of a diversity of voices, spaces like WLA can begin to challenge the entrenched biases and norms and androcentric power structure of independent schools.

Reflection on Impact

On a related note, women leadership spaces need to regularly reflect upon the impact they are having on women's leadership journeys, as well as who they are impacting. The

obligation and role of women leadership spaces to support and promote upward mobility for female leaders needs to be considered and purposely woven into the fabric of the meetings. One way to begin to address this could be by creating more intentional reflecting time about the role of WLA and similar spaces on the female leaders, as well as explicitly addressing second-generation gender bias and its impact on their career trajectory (both personal and professional barriers).

Supporting New Leaders

Another area that requires explicit reflection is how the group is supporting new leaders with the explicit consideration of the multitudinous layer of intersectionality. Leaders of such groups, need to recruit a diversity of members more actively and consider all intersectionalities of identity. Being present at various recruitment fairs or independent school conferences could help with these efforts. Additionally, participants in WLA and similar groups need to see themselves reflected in the leadership of the group. Similar to the way that research has shown that educational leaders have an impact on student achievement and feelings of self-efficacy (Bell et al., 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Witziers et al., 2003), female mid-level leaders seeing themselves reflected in the leadership of WLA will have a positive impact on their career trajectory and feelings of self-efficacy.

Accessibility

Lastly, facilitators of these groups need to regularly review accessibility issues, such as the opportunity costs of attending, as well as how, where, and how often gatherings are held. This is particularly important for women leaders since often they are pulled in a multitude of directions as mothers and caretakers in their lives of school. These women should be afforded the same opportunity to multitude of benefits that WLA, and groups like it, provide.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Limitations

While the study was thoughtfully designed and conducted with the parameters and resources at my disposal, there were limitations to this study. Some limitations were known going into the study, while some arose later. Either way, there are opportunities for deeper exploration of the issues and topics addressed in this study.

First, generalizability is often cited as a shortcoming of qualitative studies as there are fewer participants than larger quantitative or mixed methods studies and the site of the study is often localized. However, since there are fewer women's voices in this niche area of informal co-mentoring groups, I was only able to interview a small number of women education leaders and the women were handpicked by me, so they do not necessarily represent the majority experience of women in WLA. Even so, the findings may be generalizable to other contexts, so I encourage other leaders and decision-makers to consider how the implications may apply to their contexts. That stated, since this is a niche area, further scholarship that includes a higher yield of interviews would be beneficial.

Next, my study design focused on mid-career women educational leaders, which is an underrepresented group in independent school leadership, yet the career trajectory of women leaders is also impacted by other identities. While I originally considered designing a study that focused on the intersection of gender and race, as a white woman and a participant researcher I felt like I was not in a position to faithfully carry out the study because of the privilege of being white. Thus, future research conducted by women of color might be able to shed more nuanced and personal insight on this topic. This could also be the case for other marginalized identities that a majority of the women in WLA do not experience.

As alluded to above, as a participant researcher and facilitator of the WLA, my biases may have skewed the data. To guard against this, I aimed to use many direct quotations from interviews to faithfully convey participants' experiences. I also felt like my positionality and pre-existing relationships with participants were an advantage because the women felt comfortable to be honest and vulnerable during the interviews.

Implications for Future Research

To add to the limited body of research on the career trajectory experiences of women educational leaders, there are several directions for future studies. First, as noted above, future studies should consider how additional layers of marginalization (such as race) impact a women's leadership journeys. Additionally, the fact that women show up differently in different spaces needs to be considered.

WLA is not the only co-mentoring group in existence, so a comparative case study that involves several co-mentoring groups focused on this niche of women leaders could offer a deeper look at the impact of such groups and directions for more generalizable implications. In addition, while my study focused on the impact of this informal co-mentoring network group and its impact through the lived experiences of the participants, an additional study could be conducted to further analyze the group with the intention to replicate it.

Next, in my study the theme of confidence-building arose in six of the nine interviews, and it formed the basis of one of my significant findings; thus, a study more focused on correlation between confidence and career advancement for women would be beneficial.

Personal Reflection

I feel it is not a coincidence that all my formative schooling and work experiences have been rooted in some element of female leadership. The elementary school I attended was

founded by two women in 1911, nine years before women had the right to vote. They boldly founded this co-ed school at a time when schools were separated by gender, since the prevailing thought at the time was that girls and boys were educated for different purposes and roles in society. Afterwards, I attended a Montessori school that was founded on the principles developed by Maria Montessori, the first woman to earn a medical degree in Rome during the late Victorian Age (Montessori, 2004). Later, I enrolled in an all-girls middle school, where the curriculum focused on correcting the misrepresentation of the roles and contributions of women in society.

The co-ed college I attended was founded as a college for women and the early faculty included pioneers such as Maria Mitchell, the first American female astronomer. Unlike most colleges which were founded around the same time (1860's), the college I attended was established to offer young women a liberal arts education equal to the best men's colleges.

From graduate school to the current day, my mentors have all been women. As a mid-level leader in independent schools, it was natural for me to explore the challenges and opportunities of leadership for women in independent schools. I had never experienced anything like WLA and it immediately impacted me as a leader. I couldn't believe that there was a group of other women who were experiencing similar struggles and joys.

Through my experience of this study, my thinking continued to evolve about the importance of female leadership, the androcentric nature of independent schools and the need for honest examination and overhaul of the leadership pipeline that regularly underrepresents women. It has helped me refine my identity as a leader and reinforce the importance of a community of educators working together interdependently to welcome and embrace growth, knowing that for our students to grow, we must grow. To have a more equitable society we must each actively participate in transformation together and change often starts small and then ripples

out. This study inspired me to advocate for immediate changes in WLA, such as thinking about how to be more inclusive of other marginalized identities. This made an impact on the theme this year to focus on belonging, and what it means to belong. I have also begun to recruit other women more actively about joining WLA. In addition, I am looking for ways to disseminate the findings more widely from this study, including presenting at various conferences and finding arenas to publish the information to encourage other female mid-level leaders to grow and transform the independent school culture.

Conclusion

This chapter highlighted four themes and four findings addressing the experiences of female mid-level leaders in independent schools through their participation in an informal co-mentoring network. Womxn's Leadership Alliance provides a place of safety and trust for the women, fostering a sense of self-efficacy in their career as mid-level leaders. By providing a safe space where women feel empowered, the mid-level female leaders can be themselves in ways that are vulnerable and authentic. This is in contradistinction to their experiences in school where they often must put up a façade. In this safe identity space, the women are provided targeted support with both professional and personal barriers they are experiencing in their leadership career. One of the elements that enables the effectiveness of WLA for the mid-level female leaders is that it exists outside of the structures and boundaries of independent schools. The structures of schools, and independent schools in particular, is androcentric. By existing outside of the culture of independent schools, WLA fosters a unique network of co-mentors that meet the participants where they are emotionally and in their career. While this study was focused on one small group in the Los Angeles area, I believe the findings can be generalizable to other

areas/school systems where women education leaders are facing similar challenges as they navigate the labyrinth of career advancement.

Appendix A

Recruitment Email for Participants Asked in Person

Dear----

You mentioned that you would be willing to participate in an interview for my grad school dissertation. Thank you so much for your willingness and generosity to participate in my doctoral study. Your ideas, input and insights are extremely valuable. Attached is an Interview Consent Form. What is your schedule in the next few weeks for the possibility for an interview? Also, happy to talk about this more before/ after the WLA meeting on Tuesday. Feel free to reach out any time with questions, ideas, or wonderings.

With appreciation,

Sarah Colmaire

Dean of Academics, Berkeley Hall School

UCLA Doctoral Candidate, ELP Cohort 27

scolmaire@ucla.edu

310-472-4451

Appendix B

Recruitment Email for Participants Not Asked in Person

Dear --,

Hi! We met earlier this year in a WLA meeting. I was in a breakout room with you and ----- and we “took each other’s recess” by talking about inspiring things with each other.

Hope you are having a super weekend! I am writing to see if you are willing to participate in an interview for my grad school dissertation. I attached to this email is a draft of the form with more information about the study.

If you by chance have any interest, I want to see if there is an hour/ hour and a half I could get on the books with you for an interview. We can do it in person or over Zoom. And if we do it in person, I can come somewhere is convenient for you. Is there any time in the next few weeks that might work (weekday or weekend)?

Thank you for taking this possibility into consideration.

Warmly,

Sarah Colmaire

Dean of Academics Berkeley Hall School

EdD Doctoral Candidate UCLA ELP Programs

Appendix C

Interview Consent Form/ Welcome Letter

Dear----

Thank you so much for your willingness and generosity to participate in my doctoral study.

Your ideas, input and insights are extremely valuable. Below is more detailed information about the study and your participation.

Feel free to reach out any time with questions, ideas or wonderings.

With appreciation,

Sarah Colmaire

Dean of Academics, Berkeley Hall School

UCLA Doctoral Candidate, ELP Cohort 27

scolmaire@ucla.edu

310-----

Study Information Sheet

Informal Mentoring Networks and Mid-level Female Administrators in Independent Schools

I am conducting a research study to explore benefits female mid-levels leaders gain from participation in an informal co-mentoring network and what impact participation in an informal mentoring program have on the career trajectory of participants. You are selected as a possible participant in this study because you are, or have been, a member of “Womxn’s Leadership Alliance”. Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

Why is this study being done?

Women continue to be outnumbered by men in top leadership positions, particularly in independent schools with middle and upper schools. This inequality exists even though most mid-level administrators in independent schools are female. There are barriers for female mid-level administrators, which make advancement opportunities and support particularly imperative for female mid-level administrators. One of the support opportunities is through informal mentorship networks, such as “Womxn’s Leadership Alliance”. Findings from this research could give insight into specific benefits and impacts involved in an informal mentoring network and be utilized to promote the development and formation of additional networks that support the career advancement of female mid-level administrators.

What will happen if I take part in this research study?

If you volunteer to participate in this study, the researcher will ask you to do the following:

- Participate in one 60-90 minute individual interview with the researcher.
- Individual interviews will take place in person or via Zoom, based on your preference. The researcher will conduct the interview in a private room.
- The interviews will be recorded, and you will be able to review, edit, and erase the recordings of your interview if you wish to do so.
- During or after the interview, researcher may request that you send them available documents or artifacts that are relevant to your work/your interview, e.g., brochures, pamphlets, manuals, policies.
- After the interview, if follow up questions arise, researcher will send participants those questions through email.

How long will I be in the research study?

Participation will potentially take anywhere from 60-90 minutes, depending on the length of your interview and the potential for follow up questions.

Are there any potential risks or discomforts that I can expect from this study?

There are no anticipated risks or discomforts connected to this research.

Are there any potential benefits if I participate?

You may benefit from the study as you will have the opportunity to reflect on your leadership career trajectory and what has helped or hindered your progress. You may also find satisfaction in knowing that sharing your experiences might support other female mid-level leaders in independent schools through the formation and strengthening of informal mentorship networks.

Will information about me and my participation be kept confidential?

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify you will remain confidential. You and your institution will be given pseudonyms, of your choosing. All identifiers will be removed from information collected as part of the research. In addition, information gathered in this study will not be used in future research studies. In accordance with best practices for research studies, identifiable information will not be shared unless a) written permission is given or b) it is required by law or university policy. Data will be saved using both a password protected laptop and a backup hard drive.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?

- The choice is up to you of whether you want to be in this study.
- The consent to be in this study may be withdrawn at any time.
- You may withdraw without penalty to you.

- You can remain in the study even if you refuse to answer questions you prefer not to answer.

Who can I contact if I have questions about this study?

If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about the research, you can talk to one of the researchers. Please contact: Sarah Colmaire 310----- and scolmaire@ucla.edu or my committee co-chairs, Dr. Robert Cooper cooper@gseis.ucla.edu or Dr. Diane Durkin at durkin@humnet.ucla.edu.

UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program (OHRPP): If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researcher, you may contact the UCLA OHRPP by phone: (310) 206-2040; by email: participants@research.ucla.edu or by mail: Box 951406, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1406.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Appendix D

Pre-Interview Email with Questionnaire

Dear -----

Thanks so much for taking the time for me to interview you (time and date) for my dissertation.

If you are able to please fill out this 5-minute survey before we meet that would be great! I

realize you are busy, so if it doesn't work to fill it out before we meet, you can fill it out another time:

<https://forms.gle/aH95BuuigtRjmLek8>

With appreciation,

Sarah

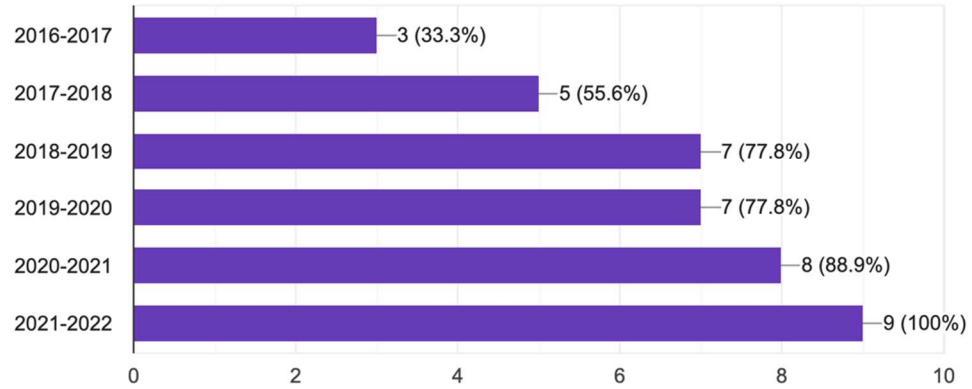
Appendix E

Pre Interview Questionnaire: Data on Participants

Names: Alexandra, Alice, Gladys, Leila, Mirabelle, Rachel, Rochelle, Samantha, Soo

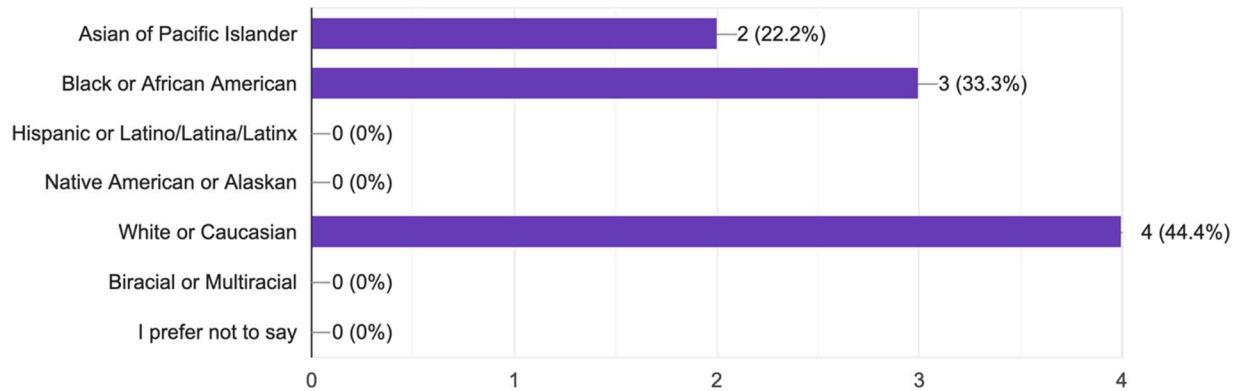
What year(s) did you participate in WLC? Check all that apply.

9 responses



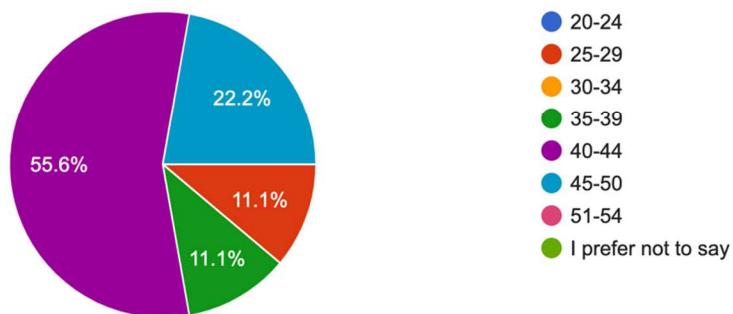
How would you describe your ethnicity? (Please check all that apply)

9 responses



What is your age range?

9 responses



What best describes the gender you identify with?

9 responses



Q: How long have you worked in education?

Minimum: 4 years

Maximum: 25 years

Q: How long have you worked in independent schools?

Minimum: 4 years

Maximum 25 years

Q: What is your job title and position?

-5 Directors

-1 Specialist

-2 Deans

-1 Head of School

Q: What previous job titles and positions have you had at independent schools?

-8 out of 9 had previous job titles and positions

-Min: 1 other title

-Maximum: 12 other titles

Q: What are you aspiring to in your career trajectory?

- Division Director / DEI Director
- I aspire to coach and support faculty and other educational leaders, to inspire and create engaging, authentic curricular experiences, and to support teachers and schools as they grow in their DEIJ lenses. That could be all kinds of positions!
- I'm never sure. I think about being a division director or a head of school, but I'm not sure that I would like that. And I am always second guessing myself.
- continued headship
- I am not sure :) For a long time, I did think I was searching for the "next level up" and now I have changed my tune...now I am searching for the roles (or would eventually, right now I am SUPER HAPPY where I am) that are the most fulfilling for my evolving purpose (and how my interests have changed in a very surprising way due to my experiences) and I really don't have an attachment to whether or not those things mean more \$ or status, etc. I just want to LOVE what I am doing!!!
- Head of School
- I don't know. Maybe Head of School?
- Research - maybe a professorship somewhere that gives me sabbaticals and the summers off to travel the world
- Not exactly sure, something along the lines of Instructional Coach

Q: How did you become involved with Womxn's Leadership Alliance (WLA) and why?

- Was invited to attend by Rachel (founder)
- I was invited to Alliance on a plane right in 2018 (on my way to be part of a visiting accreditation team). My team member heard my desire for a space to grow as a leader and suggested WLA as one way to continue that growth.
- I was asked by an Alliance leader to help lead a particular session and then I was hooked.
- I began co leading the space when my colleague said she needed a partner
- I have been an attendee and then a committee member on the CSEE Women in Leadership Conference for a long time, which led me to WLA!
- I founded it because I didn't want the energy from an annual workshop to only be once a year.
- Another woman invited me to join while the WLA was meeting virtually. I wanted a supportive space to connect with womyn, especially while we were in quarantine and it was so hard to connect.
- My colleague Alice invited me.
- Rachel invited all the women at our Curriculum Consortium meeting and it seemed like a good opportunity to network and stay current with the educational landscape in independent schools.

Q: How does the PD and mentorship you receive outside of WLA impact your experience in WLA?

- I hunger for the WLA experiences because I don't have any outside of the WLA.
- I'm a huge sharer of information, so I'm always sharing books/websites/ideas that I've come across in my travels. Both formal PD and my own reading are things that I have always brought to conversations in Alliance. It helps as we're planning experiences for others (and I always know I need to attend more PD when my creativity well runs dry). There have also been many times that I've taken ideas from Alliance back to my own communities.
- I'm not sure there's overlap. I hear about good PD at circle sometimes, and I integrate ideas from trainings into my Alliance leadership
- I see the WLA as offering a unique experience outside of the other PD. Networking plus the space to reflect and share with minimal pressure on a specific outcome is unlike other PD experiences.
- I would say that my desire to participate as a facilitator for WLA came from the inspiration and experience I have gained over the years in these other PD experiences. I have always said that I have a "masters" in these inspirational folks...I do NOT have an Ed degree (I have two degrees in theater) and so PD for the past 20 years has been instrumental to the development of my ed philosophy and my practice.
- I have never thought about the relationship between the two prior to reading this question. I probably take the advice and information that I receive and note whether or not it builds upon advice or ideas that I gain from the group.
- I bring many skills I've learned into the Alliance. All my experiences are carried with me into this space.

Appendix F

Founder Interview Protocol

Good morning (afternoon, evening). Thank you so much for taking some time out of your busy schedule to participate in a study I am conducting for my dissertation at UCLA's Educational Leadership Program. The focus of my interview will be informal mentoring networks for women mid-level independent school administrators, more specifically, your experiences being part of Womxn's Leadership Alliance. You have been chosen for this study because you are a mid-level administrator in an NAIS and CAIS independent school either currently or were when you were a participant in Womxn's Leadership Alliance. I am looking forward to engaging in a conversation with you about the experiences and challenges that you have faced along your journey as a female educational leader in independent schools.

This interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes. Everything you say in this interview will remain anonymous, and any identifying information will be removed or changed. I am asking your permission to make an audio recording of our conversation/interview which I will later use to review, make an accurate transcription, and analyze the data. Do I have your permissions?

Lastly, I will be writing up all the analyzed data in chapters 4 and 5 of my dissertation. The transcripts will be viewed by me and by my dissertation chairs, who are advising me. During the interview, please feel free to let me know if there are points you would like to stop or would like the recorder off. Thank you so much for giving me your precious time to engage in this fruitful conversation. Do you have any questions before we proceed? Might I begin with my questions?

1. Tell me about yourself and your leadership journey:

2. How would you describe WLA to someone who knows nothing about it?
3. How did WLA start? What are the origins of WLA?
4. Tell me about how the group developed over time:

RQ 1: In what ways, if any, do participants of an informal co-mentoring network say the network is impacting their perceptions of their leadership career trajectory?

There are many factors that come into play in female leaders' career trajectory and one of the purposes of WLA is to, "provide strategies and support so women feel empowered to pursue leadership roles". As female leaders in independent schools, we encounter both personal and professional barriers and obstacles in our career trajectory and some might argue that informal networks like WLA can support building strategies and feeling empowered:

5. What are some of the personal barriers and obstacles you have encountered in your career trajectory?
6. What effect, if any, has being part of WLA had on these personal barriers/ obstacles?
7. What are some of the professional barriers and obstacles you have encountered in your leadership trajectory?
8. What effect, if any, has being part of WLA had on these professional barriers/ obstacles?
9. How do you feel like your experiences in WLA are the same or different from other leadership professional development opportunities you are/ have been involved in?

RQ 2: According to participants, how does an informal mentoring network overcome, if it does, second-generation gender bias?

Part of developing as a leader is to gain comfort in leadership roles and developing an identity as a leader:

10. What effect, if any, has being part of Womxn’s Leadership Alliance, had on the development of your identity as a leader?

11. What leadership identity development opportunities, if any, have you had outside of WLA? How is WLA the same or different from these opportunities?

One specific way to support leadership identity for women leaders is through the creation of “identity workspaces” where similarly positioned women can support each other’s learning and growth. One form “identity workspaces” can take is as a supportive group of peers, where women in similar positions emotionally support each other’s learning.

12. In what ways, if any, do you feel that WLA is creating an “identity workspace”?

13. What benefits, if any, do you feel like the WLA identity workspace has on your identity as a leader?

Female leaders and aspiring female leaders are not often exposed to other female leaders nor mentors and in addition are left out of traditional networking opportunities. To address this, WLA attempts to “create a space to talk about career challenges and gain support, hold an affinity space for women in leadership as it is helpful knowing that others are having similar struggles, intentionally attend our need for connection and to develop relationships with educators”, which can be done through exposure to female role models, mentors and networking.

14. What has been your experience with each of these as a result of your participation in WLA?

- exposure to female role models
- exposure to mentors
- exposure to mentoring

- Exposure to networking opportunities

15. What mentoring and networking opportunities, if any, have you had outside of WLA?

16. How is the mentoring and networking WLA the same or different from these opportunities?

Research indicates that peer networks benefit women at similar levels.

17. What benefits, if any, have you experienced from being part of a WLA which is a peer network of women at similar levels?

Women leaders in education are often left out of formal mentoring programs and opportunities for a variety of reasons. Informal mentoring incorporates friendship, collaboration, and problem-based collegiality which support leadership growth, particularly in the face of few opportunities for formal mentorship networks.

18. What has been your experience with informal mentoring through your participation in WLA?

RQ 3: What are the processes, materials, and discussions through which mid-level female leaders in independent schools co-mentor each other in an informal co-mentoring network to overcome second-generation gender bias?

The next set of questions I am going to ask you aim to learn more about your growth and progress as an independent school leader as a result of your participation in Womxn's

Leadership Alliance:

The WLA has several different ways to participate and share in the mentoring and networking, like WLA meetings, informal meetups/ mix and mingles, reading groups, panel discussions, etc.

19. In your mind, what is the purpose of each of these, and does it achieve that purpose?

- meetings
- the informal meetups/ mix and mingles
- reading groups
- panel discussions
- other activities

20. Which of these do you tend to participate more in (the meetings/ discussions/ activities/ etc.) and why?

21. Which of these would you describe as being the most impactful to your growth and progress as a female leader and why?

Appendix G

Participant Interview Protocol

Good morning (afternoon, evening). Thank you so much for taking some time out of your busy schedule to participate in a study I am conducting for my dissertation at UCLA's Educational Leadership Program. The focus of my interview will be informal mentoring networks for women mid-level independent school administrators, more specifically, your experiences being part of "Womxn's Leadership Alliance". You have been chosen for this study because you are a mid-level administrator in an NAIS and CAIS independent school either currently or were when you were a participant in "Womxn's Leadership Alliance". I am looking forward to engaging in a conversation with you about the experiences and challenges that you have faced along your journey as a female educational leader in independent schools.

This interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes. Everything you say in this interview will remain anonymous, and any identifying information will be removed or changed. I am asking your permission to make an audio recording of our conversation/interview which I will later use to review, make an accurate transcription, and analyze the data. Do I have your permissions?

Lastly, I will be writing up all the analyzed data in chapters 4 and 5 of my dissertation. The transcripts will be viewed by me and by my dissertation chairs, who are advising me. During the interview, please feel free to let me know if there are points you would like to stop or would like the recorder off. Thank you so much for giving me your precious time to engage in this fruitful conversation. Do you have any questions before we proceed? Might I begin with my questions?

1. Tell me about yourself and your leadership journey:

2. How would you describe WLA to someone who knows nothing about it?

RQ 1: In what ways, if any, do participants of an informal co-mentoring network say the network is impacting their perceptions of their leadership career trajectory?

There are many factors that come into play in female leaders' career trajectory and one of the purposes of WLA is to, "provide strategies and support so women feel empowered to pursue leadership roles". As female leaders in independent schools, we encounter both personal and professional barriers and obstacles in our career trajectory and some might argue that informal networks like WLA can support building strategies and feeling empowered:

3. What are some of the personal barriers and obstacles you have encountered in your career trajectory?
4. What effect, if any, has being part of WLA had on these personal barriers/ obstacles?
5. What are some of the professional barriers and obstacles you have encountered in your leadership trajectory?
6. What effect, if any, has being part of WLA had on these professional barriers/ obstacles?
7. How do you feel like your experiences in WLA are the same or different from other leadership professional development opportunities you are/ have been involved in?

RQ 2: According to participants, how does an informal mentoring network overcome, if it does, second-generation gender bias?

Part of developing as a leader is to gain comfort in leadership roles and developing an identity as a leader:

8. What effect, if any, has being part of Womxn's Leadership Alliance, had on the development of your identity as a leader?

9. What leadership identity development opportunities, if any, have you had outside of WLA? How is WLA the same or different from these opportunities?

One specific way to support leadership identity for women leaders is through the creation of “identity workspaces” where similarly positioned women can support each other’s learning and growth. One form “identity workspaces” can take is as a supportive group of peers, where women in similar positions emotionally support each other’s learning.

10. In what ways, if any, do you feel that WLA is creating an “identity workspace”?

11. What benefits, if any, do you feel like the WLA identity workspace has on your identity as a leader?

Female leaders and aspiring female leaders are not often exposed to other female leaders nor mentors and in addition are left out of traditional networking opportunities. To address this, WLA attempts to “create a space to talk about career challenges and gain support, hold an affinity space for women in leadership as it is helpful knowing that others are having similar struggles, intentionally attend our need for connection and to develop relationships with educators”, which can be done through exposure to female role models, mentors, and networking.

12. What has been your experience with each of these as a result of your participation in WLA?

- exposure to female role models
- exposure to mentors
- exposure to mentoring
- Exposure to networking opportunities

13. What mentoring and networking opportunities, if any, have you had outside of WLA?

How is the mentoring and networking WLA the same or different from these opportunities?

Research indicates that peer networks benefit women at similar levels.

14. What benefits, if any, have you experienced from being part of a WLA which is a peer network of women at similar levels?

Women leaders in education are often left out of formal mentoring programs and opportunities for a variety of reasons. Informal mentoring incorporates friendship, collaboration, and problem-based collegiality which support leadership growth, particularly in the face of few opportunities for formal mentorship networks.

15. What has been your experience with informal mentoring through your participation in WLA?

RQ 3: What are the processes, materials, and discussions through which mid-level female leaders in independent schools co-mentor each other in an informal co-mentoring network to overcome second-generation gender bias?

The next set of questions I am going to ask you aim to learn more about your growth and progress as an independent school leader as a result of your participation in Womxn's

Leadership Alliance:

The WLA has several different ways to participate and share in the mentoring and networking, like WLA meetings, informal meetups/ mix and mingles, reading groups, panel discussions, etc.

16. In your mind, what is the purpose of each of these, and does it achieve that purpose?

- meetings
- the informal meetups/ mix and mingles
- reading groups

- panel discussions
- other activities

17. Which of these do you tend to participate more in (the meetings/ discussions/ activities/ etc.) and why?

18. Which of these would you describe as being the most impactful to your growth and progress as a female leader and why?

As you know, WLA produces different materials like blogs, summary emails, networking lists, presentation slides and other resources.

19. Which of these (re-say list slowly) do you tend to use most often? How and why?

(Could follow up with “I’ve heard from some participants that some of these materials support their growth and progress as a female leader in an independent school. Have you ever found them useful to you in that way, and if so, can you tell me about that?)

Organizations and networks should continue to grow and change to meet the needs of their members.

20. What do you feel are the best features of WLA, if anything?

21. What are some features that could use improvement if anything?

22. When you think about your participation in WLA and the impact it has had for you, what would you recommend as changes?

23. If you were recruiting new members for WLA, what would you tell them about the value of WLA?

Closing:

24. I have no additional questions. Do you have anything more you want to bring up, or ask about, before we finish the interview? Thank you for your participation.

Appendix H

Sample Follow-up Email

Dear ----,

Hope you are having a wonderful week. Thank you SO much for being part of the interview process for my dissertation. I realize it is no small request to have you take time from your super busy schedule. Also, I genuinely had a wonderful time connecting with you during the interview and after the interview.

Can't wait to continue conversations about all the things. So grateful to know you!

With appreciation,

Sarah

Appendix I

Observation Consent Form

Sarah Colmaire

Dean of Academics, Berkeley Hall School

UCLA Doctoral Candidate, ELP Cohort 27

scolmaire@ucla.edu

310-----

Study Information Sheet: *Informal Mentoring Networks and Mid-level Female Administrators in Independent Schools*

I am conducting a research study to explore benefits female mid-levels leaders gain from participation in an informal co-mentoring network and what impact participation in an informal mentoring program has on the career trajectory of participants. You are selected as a possible participant in this study because you are attending a “Womxn’s Leadership Alliance” meeting. Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

Why is this study being done?

Women continue to be outnumbered by men in top leadership positions, particularly in independent schools with middle and upper schools. This inequality exists even though most mid-level administrators in independent schools are female. There are barriers for female mid-level administrators, which make advancement opportunities and support particularly imperative for female mid-level administrators. One of the support opportunities is through informal mentorship networks, such as “Womxn’s Leadership Alliance”. Findings from this research could give insight into specific benefits and impacts involved in an informal mentoring network

and be utilized to promote the development and formation of additional networks that support the career advancement of female mid-level administrators.

Why is a Womxn’s Leadership Alliance meeting being observed?

One of the questions I am hoping to answer through this study is “What are the processes, materials and discussions through which mid-level female leaders in independent schools co-mentor each other in an informal co- mentoring network to overcome second-generation gender bias.” Through observing the WLA meeting, I hope to gather data that informs this research question.

What will happen if I take part in this research study?

If you volunteer to participate in this study, the researcher will ask you to do the following:

- Consent to an observation of the “Womxn’s Leadership Alliance” meeting that you are participating in by the principal investigator. The purpose of this observation is not to focus on you as an individual, but on the meeting as a whole. There will be no disruption to the meeting as a result of the observation.

Are there any potential risks or discomforts that I can expect from this study?

There are no anticipated risks or discomforts connected to this research.

Are there any potential benefits if I participate?

You may find satisfaction in knowing that the data from the observations might provide information or ideas that support other female mid-level leaders in independent schools through the formation and strengthening of informal mentorship networks.

Will information about me and my participation be kept confidential?

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify you will remain confidential. You and your institution will be given pseudonyms of your choosing. All

identifiers will be removed from information collected as part of the research. In addition, information gathered in this study will not be used in future research studies. In accordance with best practices for research studies, identifiable information will not be shared unless a) written permission is given or b) it is required by law or university policy. Data will be saved using both a password protected laptop and a backup hard drive.

No data collected during this study, including de-identified data, will be stored for future research.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?

- The choice is up to you of whether you want to be in this study.
- The consent to be in this study may be withdrawn at any time.
- You may withdraw without penalty to you.

Who can I contact if I have questions about this study?

If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about the research, you can talk to one of the researchers. Please contact Sarah Colmaire 310----- and scolmaire@ucla.edu or my committee co-chairs, Dr. Robert Cooper cooper@gseis.ucla.edu or Dr. Diane Durkin at durkin@humnet.ucla.edu.

UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program (OHRPP): If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researcher, you may contact the UCLA OHRPP by phone: (310) 206-2040; by email: participants@research.ucla.edu or by mail: Box 951406, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1406. *You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.*

Appendix J

Sample Pseudonym Email

Dear----

Hope you are having a super week! Two very important questions:

1. What do you want your pseudonym to be for my dissertation?
2. What fun ideas do you have for a pseudonym for -----?

See, two of the most important questions you will answer this week ☐

Thanks for your contributions to my dissertation!

With appreciation,

Sarah

Appendix K

Follow Up Request for Additional Interview

Dear-----

At the moment, I have one small follow up question for you about a section I wrote. I feel like it will take approximately 10 minutes or less over the phone. In the section I wrote below (which is an excerpt from the dissertation about your leadership journey), I would like to ask you:

1. If it seems accurate
2. When WLA came into your life in this slice of your leadership journey
3. What impact WLA had on you in the moment it came in your life (and directly afterwards)

Would you be available for a 10-minute phone call or Zoom anytime in the next week or so? I can be flexible around your schedule.

Warmly,

Sarah

Appendix L

Follow-Up Request for Additional Interview with Particular Participant

Dear---

One of the findings I am writing about is regarding the intersectionality of identity (see cut and pasted outline below). I remember you mentioning that body size is something that comes up and is not considered. Since we talked about this after the recorder was off, it was “off the record”, I can’t recall the specifics. I think it is an important element of identity that is often overlooked/ ignored, and I would like to include something about it in my dissertation.

Would it be possible for us to connect at some point in the next couple of weeks and I can ask you a couple of follow up questions? We can do it over the phone/ Zoom and it doesn’t need to take long.

Please let me know your thoughts and if this would be a possibility.

Thanks so much,

Sarah

Appendix M

Sources of Data

RQ1: In what ways do participants of an informal co-mentoring network say the network is impacting their perceptions of their leadership career trajectory, if at all?

Sources:

- Interviews
- Alliance Feedback Surveys

RQ 2: According to participants, how does an informal mentoring network address and overcome second-generation gender bias, if at all?

Sources:

- Interviews
- Documents
 - Alliance Feedback Surveys
 - Observation Notes
 - Meeting transcripts

RQ3 What are the processes, materials, and discussions through which mid-level female leaders in independent schools co-mentor each other in an informal co-mentoring network to overcome second-generation bias?

Sources:

- Interviews
- Documents
 - Alliance Feedback Surveys
 - Meeting Presentation Slides

- Meeting Prep Notes
- Meeting Wrap Up Notes
- WIX website/ Blog posts
- Agendas

Appendix N

Goals and Guidelines for WLA

Goals of WLA

Networking, development, and affinity space for womxn and other underrepresented genders.

- Encourage individuals to gain comfort in leadership roles.
- Provide strategies and support so individuals feel empowered to pursue leadership roles.
- Create a space to talk about career challenges and gain support.
- Hold an affinity space in leadership as it is helpful knowing that others are having similar struggles.
- Intentionally attend for our need for connection and to develop relationships with other educators.

(Slide 2, October 5, 2021).

Guidelines for WLA

- 1) Come as you are
- 2) Step up and step back
- 3) What is said in Alliance stays in Alliance
- 4) Speak from the “I” perspective
- 5) Speak from your personal experiences
- 6) Speak from the heart

(Slide 3, October 5, 2021).

Google Slides

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