BECOMING VISIBLE: NECESSARY STRATEGIES OF ACTION UTILIZED BY FEMALE EDUCATORS TO GAIN ACCESS TO FORMAL LEADERSHIP ROLES IN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL SETTINGS

Susan L. Feibelman

A DISSERTATION

in

Educational and Organizational Leadership

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

2013

Supervisor of Dissertation

______________________________
Sharon M. Ravitch, Senior Lecturer

Dean, Graduate School of Education

______________________________
Andrew C. Porter, Dean and Professor

Dissertation Committee:

Sharon M. Ravitch, Senior Lecturer
Jolley Christman, Senior Research Fellow, Research for Action
Dana Kaminstein, Affiliated Faculty
Linda Skrla, Professor of Education, University of the Pacific
BECOMING VISIBLE: NECESSARY STRATEGIES OF ACTION UTILIZED BY FEMALE EDUCATORS TO GAIN ACCESS TO FORMAL LEADERSHIP ROLES IN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL SETTINGS

COPYRIGHT

2013

Susan L. Feibelman
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family—George, Eva, and Zeke—who have taught me the importance of creating a space in which our private and public lives can co-exist peacefully. You are my heart and my soul, and it is your compassion and conviction that carry me forward.

This work is also dedicated to the sixteen women who took a leap of faith, trusting me to listen with an open heart and open mind to the stories they had to share. It has been a privilege to bear witness to your achievements.

Lastly, I dedicate this work to my mother, Ayleene Rubel Feibelman, and my mother-in-law, Ruth McLean Turner, who have always spoken up and spoken out with confidence and conviction.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It has been a singular privilege to work with Dr. Sharon Ravitch, who has been endlessly generous with her wisdom, creativity, and the all too precious gift of time. Early on, her encouragement and camaraderie set the tone for my work—and that has made all the difference. Sharon, thank you for your guidance, for knowing when and how to push me forward, and most of all for being the consummate teacher. This journey has been made all the richer by the commitment and support of my committee members—Dr. Jolley Christman, Dr. Dana Kaminstein, and Dr. Linda Skrla—who offered unconditionally their expertise and insights. Dana, thank you for your encouragement and candor. Your carefully crafted feedback has been an invaluable resource, guiding my decision making as a researcher and writer. Linda, your contributions to the field continue to shape my thinking about the role of qualitative research as a feminist strategy and force me to think critically about the ways in which I enter this discourse as a researcher and practitioner. In so doing, I have taken risks with this study that I would not have considered if you had not been there to open the window. Jolley, I continue to learn from your work and it has been an honor to have you serve on my dissertation committee.

Beyond my committee is a lively and dedicated family of Mid-Career doctoral students—Cohort IX—and faculty of the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania, who have challenged me to think deeply and critically about my practice as a leader and educator. I hope you will find the scholarship I have produced to be
worthy of your instruction. I want to offer a special acknowledgement to Jan Pullen, Ann Bonitatibus, Barbara Russell, Melinda Bihn, Rikki Hunt-Taylor, and Larry Fryer, who have been present to offer encouragement and support each step of the way (no matter what the temperature is outside).

I also want to acknowledge my school community—Greensboro Day School—and my colleagues in independent schools across the country for their support and friendship. I am particularly appreciative of the support provided by Bruce Galbraith, executive director of the National Association of Principals of Schools for Girls and its membership. Thank you all for understanding the significance of this work and providing me the time and space to be consumed with a “wild passion” for examining our leadership practices. And to my dear friends—Martha, Gene, Scott, John, Russell, Scott, Ted, Bill, Atom, Pam, and Janet who unconditionally opened their homes, provided me with quiet places to work, and delicious meals; it is because of you that I have travelled this far.
ABSTRACT

BECOMING VISIBLE:
STRATEGIES UTILIZED BY FEMALE EDUCATORS TO GAIN ACCESSS TO
FORMAL LEADERSHIP ROLES IN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL SETTINGS

Susan L. Feibelman
Sharon M. Ravitch

Similar to staffing patterns in public school systems, the majority of faculty employed in the 1,174 National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) member schools are women, suggesting that school leadership pipelines are filled with female faculty, along with middle- and senior-level administrators who demonstrate daily their executive leadership capacity. Yet women remain unable to achieve access to head of school leadership positions at a rate equal to their male colleagues. Utilizing qualitative research methods and the lens of post-structuralist feminist theory, this phenomenological study examines the gendered nature of leadership roles in independent schools and the ways this cultural phenomenon informs the strategies used by African American and White women seeking mentor-protégé relationships, networks of support, and sponsorship from “recognized” independent school leaders. Utilizing a feminist framework to examine the cultural context that informs women’s leadership preparation (Olesen, 1994, 2003), semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 participants whose lived experience as independent school leaders and/or as executive search consultants for independent
schools illuminated points of tension between settled and unsettled periods in the lives of aspiring women leaders and explored the strategies of action (Swindler, 1986) used to negotiate points of discursive disjunction (Chase, 1995, 2003). This study contributes to the present discourse regarding the role gender plays in the normalization of independent school leadership, proposes questions for further inquiry, and suggests strategies of action for independent school communities, trustees, and professional organizations to use when crafting policy, planning leadership training/development, and succession planning that addresses gender disproportionality.
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>xii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Story Behind the Story</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Research Questions</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Research Questions</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Framework</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction and Historical Perspective</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of Literature Review</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining Independent School Leadership: An Intrinsically Gendered Orientation</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gendered Nature of Leadership: Women in the Role of School Leader</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing Women for School Leadership</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ways Women Lead</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminism: Methods and Models</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale for a Qualitative Methods Approach</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Selection</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of the Researcher</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection Methods</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of Participants</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biographical Sketches of Participants in the Study</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applying a Conceptual Framework to Explicate Leadership Attainment for</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women in Independent Schools</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Context</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies of Action</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discursive Realms ................................................................................................................. 145

Chapter 5: CONCLUSION ................................................................................................. 164
Purposes of the Study ........................................................................................................... 164
Becoming Visible ................................................................................................................ 165
Key Findings ....................................................................................................................... 171
  Leadership Potential and Organizational Fit ................................................................. 171
  Mentoring and Networks of Support ............................................................................... 172
  Intersection of Gender and Race .................................................................................... 173
Implications for Further Research .................................................................................... 175
Researcher Reflections ....................................................................................................... 177

APPENDICES ....................................................................................................................... 179
  Appendix A. Findings: Pilot Study Data ........................................................................ 179
  Appendix B. IRB Consent Form ...................................................................................... 180
  Appendix C. Information and Consent Form ................................................................. 182
  Appendix D. Interview Protocol—Aspiring Woman Independent School Leader .......... 184
  Appendix E. Interview Protocol—Woman Head of School ........................................... 188
  Appendix F. Interview Protocol—Experts in the Field/Search Consultants .................. 191

REFERENCES ..................................................................................................................... 193
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Demographics for NAIS Fellowship for Aspiring Heads
2003-2011 (NAIS, 2010) ................................................................................................. 9
Table 2: Profile of Participants, Interview Setting, and Methods of Recruitment ...... 39
Table 3: Demographic Representation of Study Participants ..................................... 42
Table 4: Relationship Between Theoretical Framework and Research Strategies ...... 43
Table 5: Thematic Organization of Preliminary Codes .................................................. 51
Table 6: Master Code List .............................................................................................. 55
Table 7: Participant Profiles ......................................................................................... 107
Table 8: Schools Represented in the Study (The School Websites) ......................... 115
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework ........................................................................................................14
Figure 2: Categorization of Participants and Data Collection Strategies ..........................37
Figure 3: Conceptually Clustered Matrix: Strategies of Action ..................................54
Figure 4: Discursive Realms ........................................................................................................55
Figure 5: Intersection of Theoretical Framework and Women’s Independent
  School Leadership ..................................................................................................................111
Preface

Feminist perspectives center and make problematic women’s diverse situations and the institutions that frame those situations. (Olesen, 2000)

I have embarked on the research for this dissertation aware of the ways that my engagement with post-structural feminist theory shapes the choices I have made throughout this study. Working from this post-modern position demands that I acknowledge and embrace the subjective nature of scholarly inquiry and it requires that I create a space for periodic reflexive pauses in order to examine my engagement with the work (Marshall, 2001). As Laurel Richardson (2000) observed, “We are always present in our texts, no matter how we try to suppress ourselves. We are always writing in particular contexts—contexts that affect what and how we write and who we become” (p. 154). So I begin with a deliberate meditative break to locate myself within this analytic event.

In recent years, a collection of distinct moments have jarred my sensibilities as a school leader, demanding that I consider the relationship between gender and the strategies for enacting leadership in independent schools. In 2003, as a participant in the first cohort of the National Association of Independent Schools’ (NAIS) E.E. Ford Aspiring Heads program, a white, male head of school was assigned by the program to be my mentor for the year. In our first meeting, he confided that he believed a woman could be a head of school. In this brief introduction, my mentor strategically reminded me not only of my gender, but how he perceived it as a limiting factor that might hinder my
ambitions. His recognition of the masculine normalization of leadership was an expression of the power dynamic I would have to negotiate should I one day choose to pursue a school headship (Skrla, 2003).

Four years later, I was asked by the Klingenstone Center at Columbia University’s Teachers College if I would serve as the mentor for a master’s student in the school’s Education Leadership Program. The Klingenstone’s graduate program is one of the few in the country to offer a concentration in Private School Leadership, and the student, on sabbatical from a northeastern boarding school, had asked to work with a female for the internship segment of her studies. Apart from my participation in a two-day leadership seminar sponsored by the National Association of Principals of Schools for Girls (NAPSG) in 2005, this was the second time I had encountered a formal recognition of the gendered nature of leadership in independent schools.

The following year during the 2007-2008 presidential primaries, as Hilary Clinton and Barak Obama challenged each other for their party’s nomination, my 22-year-old daughter—an independent school graduate and women’s college alumna—enthusiastically announced her support for Obama. I knew she was keen to vote in her first election and confident that she was endorsing the candidate she thought was best equipped to serve as our national leader. But I could not resist asking about her decision to not support Clinton, who would bring more years of leadership experience to the role. Her terse reply—“Mother, I don’t have to vote my anatomy”—haunted me throughout the campaign season. I wondered, had young women discovered something that I had neglected to notice? Had leadership finally achieved a genderless status, or had I failed to
adequately instruct my daughter to detect the presence of second-generation gender bias as it unfolded on the nation’s stage?¹

As I began making connections between these dissonant moments, I started to notice a curious pattern being acted out in the student body of the independent school where I was the Upper School Division Head. Despite the fact that our student population was seemingly balanced between males and females, and well-qualified girls ran for the office of Student Council president each year, in the dozen years that I had been leading the division, only three girls had been elected to that leadership role. This sobering realization prompted me to engage with colleagues in a conversation that explored how our school’s culture afforded male students greater access to highly influential leadership opportunities.

While our campus-level conversation gained momentum, NAIS published two leadership studies, which examined the state of leadership in member schools. The first study, published in 2009, examined the effectiveness of the NAIS Aspiring Heads, a leadership preparation program for independent school educators whose career goals include serving in the most influential leadership roles on independent school campuses. The second study, published in 2010, described the current state of leadership in independent schools. Both investigations found increasing gender and racial disparity at the highest rungs of the leadership ladder. The dots connecting my lived experience to the experience of my female students’ appeared to parallel the findings of the two NAIS studies, begging for more questions to be asked.

¹ Popular political commentary has begun to energetically examine this phenomenon, exploring the public’s perceptions of women’s fitness for public office (Kornblut, 2009; Myers, 2008; Wilson, 2007).
As a practitioner-researcher using the lens of post-structural feminist theory, I have positioned myself to actively mediate the relationship between my own lived experience and my examination of the gendered nature of leadership roles in independent schools. Yet the pervasive nature of this patriarchy has so completely colored the perceptions of independent school leadership that the ability to sense how it shapes institutional culture has been dulled. Consequently we—the women who participated in this study and I—are at risk of unconsciously accepting the androcentric patterns that frame the discourse (Swidler, 2002). Consequently, we have intentionally taken up an inquiry that invites discourse relating to our experiences of achievement and success as independent school leaders and individual experiences of gender and racial bias.

2 Holland and Ramazanoglu (1994) assert, “Feminist researchers benefit from making explicit their interpretive choices, the processes and decision points that result in the interpretation, and the reasoning upon which the choices are based. This is a complex process filled with vivid contradictions that shine a light on the limitations of the researcher’s own experience and the silences or absences in the data she is interrogating” (Olesen, 2004, p. 356).
Chapter 1:
INTRODUCTION

This study is the outgrowth of a pilot study (Feibelman, 2011), which examined the ways that White, bi-racial, and African American women are mentored for leadership roles within independent schools, and informed by research in the area of gender and school leadership, which focuses on the experience of women within public schools, e.g., superintendents, assistant superintendents, and secondary and elementary principals. While at present, twice as many women serve as heads of independent schools compared to that of female public school superintendents, “overwhelmingly, heads of independent schools are Caucasian, male, and in their 50s” with few changes in the organization’s school leadership profile in the last seven years (NAIS, 2010, p. 2). Similar to public school systems, the majority of faculty and staff employed in the 1,174 National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) member schools are women, suggesting that the leadership pipeline is filled with female faculty, middle and senior level administrators who are demonstrating their capacity for school leadership (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010) yet are unable to achieve access to the most prominent school leadership position—head of school—at a rate equal to their male colleagues.³

³ According to some of the most recent data published by NAIS regarding the relationship between gender and school headships, “While women fill a majority of the administrative positions (62 percent), women have historically made up only a third of heads…During the eighties, close to 70 percent of heads were male…. Throughout the nineties, the gender gap decreased a little bit and the percentage of female heads increased to around 40 percent… Between 2000 and 2009, the percentage of men and women heads has remained mostly constant at around 65 percent and 35 percent respectively” (Torres, 2011, p. 12).
The findings from this preliminary study, which focused on the experiences of women in mentor-protégé relationships, suggested the need for a broader consideration of the impact gender has on leadership attainment and positionality, i.e. the way in which others in an independent school setting—individually or as a group—perceived women as school leaders (Franks, 2002). While the initial study focused on a single form of leadership preparation—the mentor-protégé relationship, which has been broadly examined in school and organizational leadership literature (Gardiner, Enomoto, & Grogan, 2000; Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010; Jackson, 2001; Kanter, 1977; Mertz, 1987; Noe, 1988)—I discovered participants were frequently engaged in a mentor-protégé relationship that was woven into the supervision and evaluation structure of their respective schools. As a result, early in an individual’s leadership career, she could face negotiating points of tension between a mentor-supervisor’s thoughtful guidance and the threat of a negative performance review. The nature of these opposing roles—mentor-protégé versus supervisor-supervisee—raised more questions about the quality and consistency of mentoring available to aspiring women leaders in independent schools.

In the absence of a mentor and/or sponsor, participants described their individual strategies for utilizing peers and colleagues as sources of guidance and support to further their leadership aspirations. Although stylistically, the interviewees varied their approach to building professional networks, each talked about a desire for feedback and encouragement from supervisors and colleagues within their immediate independent school community, as well as the desire to connect with leaders from other schools.
Research studies that explore the impact of a “glass ceiling” or a “labyrinth” on aspiring female corporate executives serves to inform a growing body of literature regarding barriers faced by women who occupy a broad array of leadership roles in corporate and not-for-profit settings (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010; Eagly & Carli, 2008; Fletcher, 1999; Ibarra, 1997; Ibarra et al., 2010; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). These findings, applied to the world of independent schools, draw attention to the ways nesting mentor-protégé relationships within a hierarchical schema has led to a self-perpetuating organizational culture that reinforces the disproportionality of men and women in leadership roles. As a result, females who aspire to attain formal leadership positions in independent schools may be faced with negotiating an array of barriers that have been assigned to women by a self-perpetuating organizational culture (Adkison, 1981; Gilligan, 2011; Shakeshaft, 1989).

My interest in this topic is rooted in my personal experience as a school leader. Grounded in my first-hand experience with mentor-protégé relationships in both public and independent school settings, as well as the beneficial peer-to-peer mentoring relationships I have with other women leaders. In recent years, these conversations have acquired a frankness that reveals a growing impatience with the gendered nature of independent school leadership and the fomenting of a “new boys club” that supports the perpetuation of a disproportional number of women successfully navigating through the leadership pipeline (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010). Repeatedly women’s (Black and White) personal narratives describe the systematic regularity with which they are passed over for formal school leadership roles. Our mutual exploration of the context in which
this practice unfolds has spawned a “mental itch” (Booth, Colomb & Williams, 2003, p. 40) that is reinforced by a compelling body of research that describes a similar trajectory for women leaders in public school. Fletcher (1999) refers to this phenomenon as “the story behind the story.”

All research—the particular question it finds important to ask, the point of view from which the question is posed, the source of the data used to find answers, and, of course, the interpretation and conclusions drawn from the analysis—are surely, albeit invisibly, influenced by the standpoint of the researcher. (Fletcher, 1999, p. 7)

The Story Behind the Story

I stepped into my first school leadership role in 1992 as principal of a small, urban (150 students and 15 teachers/staff) magnet high school for academically gifted students located in North Texas. I was in my mid-thirties; a white, Jewish woman sharing a high school campus with an African American, male principal who was my senior with respect to age and the social capital he had acquired through years of employment in the school district. The school was situated on the perimeter of a public housing project, in an economically disadvantage neighborhood that was zoned for residential, commercial, and industrial use. An active lead smelter located less than two miles from the school had been closed for only a few years prior to my arrival. In this context, my understanding of leadership was shaped by a culture that aligned social capital with racial identity and served as the primary means for identifying and promoting teachers into the ranks of school administration.

Analogous to Sherman and Wrushen’s findings in 2009, there were few women principals in this large, urban school district beyond the elementary grades, and the ones
who had risen through the ranks to achieve the status of middle or high school principal fell into two categories. There were those who led neighborhood schools and had the reputation of being “tough, no nonsense” women, approximating the “ideal-worker norm” (Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006, p. 500, as cited in Sanchez & Thornton, 2010); or there were women, like myself, who had been appointed to head small magnet and specialized high schools, scattered across a large urban school district. Our schools were viewed as the “easier assignments” and our success as leaders was diminished by an unspoken attitude that these “trouble-free” schools could run themselves. Separate and apart from female principals were the handful of women who occupied the position of assistant and associate superintendents. These women had either worked their way up the career ladder, having proven their mettle as high school principals (Sherman & Wrushen, 2009) or had specialized knowledge in fields such as bi-lingual education, special education, or student services (counseling and social service) that promoted them through the ranks of central administration.

It was not until 1996, after I had left the racially charged environment of public schools to be the upper school division head in a northeastern independent school, did the gendered nature of leadership, separate and apart from racial identity, come into clear focus. The day following my first upper school parents’ night, a male student casually shared his mother’s observation that my opening remarks sounded like something a woman would say. It was easy to infer that the feedback he was parroting had not been intended to compliment my leadership ability or affirm a female leadership style (Grogan

---

4 The work of Kanter (1977), Shakeshaft (1989), and Ibarra et al. (2010) refute the notion that corporate as well as school leadership roles are attained as a result of individual merit and operate independent of culturally laden, gender preferences that favor males as managers.
In this moment, I had unknowingly discovered an unsettled boundary in my new environment, which in time would require that I re-negotiate the margins that had shaped the school’s culture (Swindler, 1986).

During my first year as a high school principal, a female friend with a successful private practice as a clinical psychologist, recommended that I read Mary Catherine Bateson’s book, *Composing a Life* (1989). I had shared with her the challenges I faced trying to balance my roles and responsibilities of being a mother of two young children as I stepped into a 24/7 leadership role (it was not unusual for parents, teachers, and students to call me after hours at home if they had a problem and wanted my input). As I devoured Bateson’s case studies of five women who had struggled with the same dilemmas I now faced, I experienced my first inkling that I was not alone, nor were my challenges unique to my role as high school principal. Over the years, this balancing act became a familiar routine. Yet discussions regarding the gendered nature of leadership remained in the margins as professional development offerings by NAIS and state associations, both sources for mentor-protégé relationships and networks of support that guided aspirants into leadership positions, were framed by the prevailing organizational culture that normalized masculine leadership (Skrla, 2003). It was becoming apparent that women who expressed a desire to step into school leadership roles should be prepared to act

---

5Master’s theses by Leonard (1994) and Scott (1997) and a doctoral dissertation by Bryans (2000) are emblematic of the limited scholarship examining the gendered nature of independent school leadership. Each of these works offers detailed descriptions of the impact family demands have upon women’s career choices. As noted by Leonard (1994), “The postponement of career advancement to accommodate childcare needs was a common solution to the demands of the dual roles of administrator and housewife” (p. 41).
autonomously if they wanted to hone a set of strategies for re-negotiating their positionality within their schools.

**The Research Questions**

A close interrogation of the pilot study findings (Feibelman, 2011) encouraged me to re-think the assumptions I had made in that study about the ways in which women are prepared for school leadership roles. This re-working prompted me to consider a broader set of variables that may emerge as women begin leadership journeys that transport them from schoolroom teachers to school heads. This reflexive process resulted in the formulation of a more nuanced set of research questions that describe the scope of the current study:

- How do women who self-identify as aspiring school leaders portray the strategies they use to prepare for leadership roles in independent school settings?
- Do these women seek out mentor-protégé relationships, networks of support, and/or sponsorship from “recognized” independent school leaders; if so, then how does this work?
- Does gender influence the strategies women use to prepare for independent school leadership roles?

**Significance of the Research Questions**

Research in organizational management beginning in the 1970s promoted the mentor-protégé relationship, claiming this interpersonal dynamic played a crucial role in advancement to the upper levels of management and administration (Kanter, 1977;
Mertz, 1987). However for women who aspired to leadership roles, mentorship and sponsorship occurred less frequently than for men with comparable aspirations (Mertz, 1987; Noe, 1988; Jackson, 2001; Searby & Tripses, 2006; Sherman, Munoz, & Pankake, 2008; Sherman & Wrushen, 2009; Ibarra et al., 2010). According to Noe (1988), while the number of women in the workforce has grown, “the number of mentoring relationships (mentorships) available to women does not appear to be keeping pace with the increasing number of women needing mentors” (p. 65). More recent research notes that women are not mentored or sponsored with the same regularity as men for leadership roles, not only in business (Ibarra et al., 2010) but also in school systems in which females continue to outnumber men (Gardiner, Enomoto, & Grogan, 2000; Sherman, Muñoz, & Pankake, 2008; Sherman & Wrushen, 2009).

While currently twice as many women serve as heads of independent schools compared to that of public school superintendents, the disproportionality of white males in this position persists (NAIS, 2010). While for over a decade NAIS has promoted a series of strategic initiatives to foster greater diversity within independent school communities, all too frequently the prescriptive literature written for aspiring independent school leaders acknowledges the disproportional number of women in leadership positions, yet fails to consider the ways in which normalizing masculine leadership impacts who is perceived to have the “right stuff” to be a successful school leader (“Closing the Women’s Leadership Gap,” 2011).  

NAIS defines the term “diversity” as a list of social identifiers that include—age, ability, ethnicity, race, socio-economic status, gender, family of origin, language, religion, sexual orientation, learning style, globalism/internationalism, body image, educational background, beliefs, and academic/social (Retrieved on October 30, 2011 from www.nais.org/equity/index.cfm?Itemnumber=147336&sn.ItemNumber=147596)
...when heads were asked to rank different factors that could explain why there were fewer female heads, 28 percent of female heads indicated that having few women in assistant/associate/division head positions in independent schools was one of the top factors. ...In addition, the perception that women were passed over in the hiring and promotion in favor of candidates who fit the traditional male profile was considered somewhat of a factor by 37 percent of women heads. (Torres, 2011, p.12)

This phenomenon is further illustrated in a 2010 NAIS board report to the Equity and Justice Committee (NAIS, personal communication, June 6, 2012), which examined the formal leadership attainment of 480 independent school educators who had participated in one of the Association’s Aspiring School Heads Fellowship Program’s nine cohorts between 2003-04 and 2010-11. Although no participants from the 2009-10 and 2010-11 cohort had yet become a head of school, of the 359 remaining participants 54 had attained this leadership position in an independent school. Of the 54 successful “aspiring school heads,” 13% were male and less than 2% were female (see Table 1).

Table 1
Demographics for NAIS Fellowship for Aspiring Heads 2003-2011 (NAIS, 2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort Year</th>
<th>Male Participants</th>
<th>Female Participants</th>
<th>Male School Head</th>
<th>Female School Head</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003/04</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004/05</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005/06</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006/07</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007/08</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008/09</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009/10</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010/2011</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7 The expressed goal of the NAIS Aspiring School Heads Fellowship Program is to prepare participants to become heads of school (NAIS, personal communication, May 25, 2012).
The preponderance of efforts to further greater awareness of the ways that gender bias may impact access to leadership roles in independent schools has traditionally been the domain of members of single-sex schools and attendant professional organizations like the National Association of Principals of Schools for Girls (NAPSG). It has only been in the past two years that NAIS has undertaken an intentional examination of the ways in which current leadership development programs and professional literature may serve to perpetuate a predominantly androcentric—White, middle-aged, male—leadership culture (NAIS, personal communication, June 8, 2012).

To begin, purposeful research must take into account the gendered nature of independent school culture. This can be achieved using the lens of post-structural feminist theory, which provides strategies for examining how perceptions of women as school leaders are situated in relationship to their positionality within independent schools (Young & Lopez, 2004). According to McLaren (2002), male dominance permeates all aspects of life, including the construction of knowledge, division of labor, and the structure of social institutions such as schools. In a field in which women outnumber men in both school districts and independent schools across the United States, the troublesome discrepancy between the frequency with which men and women are promoted to school leadership positions mirrors this claim.9

---

9According the NAPSG website, “NAPSG is an association of approximately 625 members: heads and other administrators of Independent schools enrolling girls, and executives of colleges, representing wide geographical diversity. Since an increasing number of formerly schools for girls are now coeducational, the name of the organization should not be construed to mean that NAPSG membership is confined to schools for girls.” The NAPSG leadership seminar has been held annually since 1985 (Retrieved on October 30, 2011 from www.napsg.org).

9Fifteen percent of public school superintendents are women (de Santa Ana, 2008, as cited in Sanchez & Thornton, 2010), with a slightly greater number of women currently heading independent schools—31% (NAIS, 2010).
Conceptual Framework

The pilot study (Feibelman, 2011) examined the ways in which White, bi-racial, and African American women are mentored for leadership roles in independent schools. The seven women who participated in the pilot study represented a culturally and racially diverse group of school leaders who occupied the role of assistant head of school or division head for a co-educational or single-sex school affiliated with the New York State Association of Independent Schools (NYSAIS). Through in-depth, structured interviews, participants described their experience with multiple forms of mentor-protégé relationships. It was the variable nature of these experiences that begged the asking of additional, and even more complicated, questions about the quality and consistency of mentoring available to aspiring women leaders in independent schools.

Whether or not she had actually experienced the benefits of a mentor-protégé association, in each case, the interviewee was able to clearly and articulately describe the behaviors she believed were essential to a successful mentoring relationship. Although current research emphasizes that women are not mentored for leadership with the same regularity as men (Gardiner et al., 2000; Sherman et al., 2008; Sherman & Wrushen, 2009), the experiences described by these women framed an additional set of concerns. Frequently they found themselves limited to a mentoring relationship that was embedded in the hierarchical supervision and evaluation structure of their school. Thus mentor-protégé practices served to reinforce independent school cultures that normalized masculine leadership (Skrła, 2003).
To further compound the complex dynamic of being mentored by a supervisor, several interviewees recalled a time in their careers when they had not been recommended for a position by the head of school (mentor) or took on a leadership role despite the head of school’s (mentor) lack of support. Additionally, each interviewee’s visibility as a leader and occupational status relied on her ability to successfully navigate the unique culture of the independent school where she worked. Just as Swidler (2002) asserted, “if culture influences action, then, it is not by providing the ends people seek, but by giving them the vocabulary of meanings, the expressive symbols, and the emotional repertoire with which than can seek anything at all” (p. 312), for women who had themselves attended independent schools, the nomenclature and customs were easy to interpret. However for those whose introduction to the independent school landscape was linked to their first teaching position (often directly after college), the struggle to read this opaque world was only made more complicated by their minority status as a person of color in a predominantly white school.

As I teased apart the interview transcripts, I realized that in order to more fully understand how women step into formal leadership roles in independent schools, I would need to employ a wider lens. Moving then from a pilot study whose scope had been limited to an examination of the ways women are mentored for leadership roles, I have adopted a broader array of questions to explore the strategies used by women educators as they prepare to take up key leadership roles in independent schools: do women participate in prescribed and emergent networks of support that further their growth as school leaders (Coleman, 2010; Lord & Preston, 2009; Peters, 2010); do aspiring women
leaders utilize mentor-protégé relationships (Gardiner et al., 2000; Sherman & Muñoz, 2008); how does the gendered nature of organizations inform their professional strategies of action (Acker, 1990; Sherman & Wrushen, 2009; Skrla, 2000; Skrla et al., 2000); and how do they conceptualize independent school leadership (Brunner, 2000; Chase, 1995; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Scott, 2003; Swidler, 1986, 2002)?

Any examination of women and independent school leadership demands an exploration of the cultural context that actively fosters gender stereotypes and establishes male school leadership as the status quo (Chase, 1995; Chase & Bell, 1990; Shakeshaft, 1989, 2011; Skrla, 2003; Tallerico & Blount, 2004). These conspicuous biases can be used to define the social power and status of members in the school community and are communicated to participants in implicit and explicit ways by locating the problem—the unequal representation of women in key leadership roles—with women themselves (Gilligan, 1982).

While a critical body of scholarship describes the gender stratification of leadership in public schools and is beginning to amass with regards to independent schools, the dynamic factors contributing to the disproportionality of women serving in formal school leadership roles merits further attention.\textsuperscript{10} Current scholarship describes the culturally instantiated gender biases that create a maze of obstacles that serve to slow or derail the trajectory of women aspiring to occupy these roles. Building out from the premise of cultural biases, I have concentrated on the ways women negotiate their own

\textsuperscript{10} Since undertaking this interview study, two dissertations that examine the leadership attainment of women in independent schools have been published, suggesting that an increased interest in this subject is gaining momentum.
leadership preparation within environments that can be overtly and covertly antipathetic to promoting women to formal leadership roles.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework I have employed for exploring these questions begins with an examination of the cultural context of independent schools and how cultural context shapes the avenues of preparation available to women aspiring to leadership positions in these schools. This stance interrogates how the culture of independent schools is defined by commonly accepted beliefs and habits associated with administrative leadership, which is supported by Swidler (1986) who argued that during unsettled cultural periods when unfamiliar habits of behavior begin to emerge, new strategies of action begin to surface and individuals are engaged in practicing these unfamiliar patterns of behaviors until they become familiar habits (p. 279).

Furthermore, Chase’s (1995) introduction of discursive realms as a lens through which to examine women’s leadership experience expands upon Swindler’s theory of
unsettled cultural periods. By employing the “term discursive discourse to refer to the set of discourses—the networking of meanings or ideas—that are culturally available for talking about professional work on the one hand and inequality on the other” (p. 17), Chase (1995) invited researchers to employ a feminist standpoint to investigate women’s work narratives. Utilizing this stance serves to disclose points of tension between settled and unsettled periods in the lives of aspiring women leaders (Brunner, 2000; Chase, 1995; Scott, 2003; Skrla, 2000, 2003; Skrla et al., 2000; Swidler, 1986).
Chapter 2: 

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction and Historical Perspective

The history of the Headmasters Association is emblematic of the androcentric temperament of independent school culture, when in 1893, three independent school headmasters came together to form what would be known as The Headmasters Association.\(^{11}\) Drafting a constitution that established the organization as an annual gathering of male heads of schools for the purpose of “mutual acquaintance…and for the interchange of views and matters of common interest to secondary schools” (Werner, n.d., p. 4). The organization would be composed of 100 school leaders from across the United States, representing both public schools (25 members) and independent schools (75 members). Men who met the definition for a secondary school head could be nominated and elected annually for membership by the current members of the association.\(^ {12}\) It would be 98 years later (February 1981) that The Headmasters Association achieved the two-thirds majority vote that would permit women heads of school to be eligible for membership in this august professional organization. In retrospect, it was an enormously progressive step for this well-situated old boys club. Having been established “‘to increase the opportunities for mutual acquaintance among

\(^{11}\) The founding members of The Headmasters Association were William Coe Collar of Roxbury Latin School, James C. Mackenzie of Lawrenceville, and John Tetlow of Girls’ Latin School in Boston (Werner, n.d.).

\(^{12}\) The Headmasters Association defined a head of secondary school in its constitution to be, “a Head is that person who regardless of title has been designated by the governing board of his school as the chief executive officer of that school” (Werner, n.d., p. 4).
headmasters’ of leading schools,” (Kleiman, 1981, Headmasters bridle on issue of admitting women, para. 40), the organization’s decision to change its membership standards came at the end of a protracted and publicly embarrassing labor.

During the Association’s annual winter gathering in 1978, Hugh Riddleberger spoke to the membership about the possibility of admitting women as members of the organization. Through small group discussion the idea was considered, along with an amendment that would permit members to bring their wives to the mid-year retreat; no action was taken. The following year, Douglas McClure of Princeton Day School spoke on behalf of admitting women for membership to The Headmasters Association, but it would take another year before Stephen Kurtz of Phillips Exeter Academy mustered the confidence to make a formal motion. Called for a vote and seconded by Fred Torrey, the motion fell short of the two-thirds majority needed to amend the organization’s constitution. Two years later, on the heels of a provocative New York Times article (Kleiman, 1981), the group convened in Princeton, New Jersey and on February 6, 1981,

Following considerable discussion it was voted to admit women to the Headmasters Association, the overall size and composition of the Association was not to be changed by such a vote and the women to be elected by the same process with which men have been elected over the years. (Werner, n.d., p. 24-25)

As foreshadow to The National Association of Independent Schools’ 2009 The State of Independent School Leadership: Report of Survey Research Among School Heads and Administrators statement that women represented approximately one-third of school heads (NAIS, 2010), two master’s theses published over a decade earlier made the case for a close examination of the factors that contributed to the disproportionate
representation of men as school heads (Leonard, 1994; Scott, 1997). Scott’s thesis provides a perfunctory exploration of the ways that men and women viewed the role of school head as well as their leadership preparation for these influential positions. Despite the absence of sufficient academic rigor, her work is validated by the more exacting research findings regarding women in public school leadership.

Shakeshaft’s (1989) close examination of women in school leadership noted that employment as a teacher became available to women only after industrialization opened new career paths to men. Up until the second half of the 19th century, it was men who had been our nation’s teachers, with the infrequent exception of dame schools established for young children in women’s homes. The feminization of teaching was quickly justified by arguments that framed the teaching profession as a natural extension of other womanly roles such as wife, mother, and caregiver. Teaching was now understood to offer single women an opportunity to earn an independent living, but only until they were married.

The position of superintendent (or head of school) however, has never benefited from a comparable reframing that might swing open its doors to women. When the work of Frederick Taylor and the principles of scientific management were adopted as the template for transforming school systems into bureaucratic organizations, the role of school superintendent assumed a specialized organizational management function that required goal-oriented, influential leadership. This “modern” perspective gave rise to a gendered organizational culture that preferred men to head school systems, establishing a clear division of labor by assigning women to the role of teacher and men to positions of management (Estler, 1975; Kanter, 1977; Shakeshaft, 1989; Skrla, 2003; 13NAIS reported 1,270 member schools in the 2008-09 academic year.
Tallerico & Blount, 2004). Acker (1990) made a compelling argument in “Hierarchies, Jobs, and Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations” that feminist discourse must invite a re-consideration of the gendered nature of organizational structures. Noting that,

The idea that social structure and social processes are gendered has slowly emerged in diverse areas of feminist discourse. Feminists have elaborated gender as a concept to mean more than a socially constructed, binary identity and image. This turn to gender as an analytic category (Connell, 1987; Harding, 1986; Scott, 1986) is an attempt to find new avenues into the dense and complicated problem of explaining the extraordinary persistence through history and across societies of the subordination of women. (p. 85)

Acker’s (1990) insights called for the development of analytic frameworks that could be used to examine the trajectory of women’s careers in education.

**Organization of Literature Review**

I have employed the stance that educational organizations are inherently gendered and used a post-structural feminist perspective as a frame for considering bodies of literature that examine the intersectionality of school leadership and gender as applied to women’s access to formal school leadership roles. The literature review begins with a discussion of articles pertaining to school leadership that have been published in *Independent School* between 1998 and 2010. As the journal of record for NAIS, the magazine’s editorial choices provide its readership with a normalized representation of school leadership and serve as a documentary data source for this study.

The growing body of research that examines the experience of women leaders in public school settings sits in sharp contrast to the absence of a sustained analytical discussion from the independent school world. The second section of this review describes an emerging female narrative that offers an examination of the ways that
women are prepared for school leadership roles in public school systems. This literature serves as a roadmap for research that extends the exploration of women’s leadership roles in independent schools.

The review concludes with a short discussion of the evolutionary nature of feminist theory applied to practitioner research and the ways in which this dynamic framework informs the choices made in this study.

**Defining Independent School Leadership: An Intrinsically Gendered Orientation**

An examination of articles on independent school leadership appearing in NAIS’s professional publication, *Independent School*, fall into three distinct categories: the state of leadership in independent schools (Feibelman & Haakmat, 2010; Hoer, 2009; Kane, 1998; Witt, 2009); best leadership practices for independent schools (Bassett, 2004; Hargreaves, 2005; Evans, 2009; Baker, 2009; Larson, 2009); and the challenges facing independent school leaders (Clarke, 2005; Davison, 2007; Grace, 2005; Thompson & Melvoin, 2005; Northrup, 2010; Walsh, 2010). Although some authors have integrated the current scholarship on organizational leadership in their writing by highlighting a set of core competencies that include collaboration, delegation, community building, emotional intelligence, and continuous improvement (Kane, 1998; Hargreaves, 2005), male authors consistently employed their lived-experience as an illustrative model for aspiring independent school leaders and, in so doing, substantiated the androcentric

---

14 According to the NAIS website, *Independent School* provides people associated with private schools and those interested in following trends in all sectors of education with the independent school perspective on topics that range from school operations and administration to teaching and learning and working with parents, boards of trustees, and other volunteers. It has been the premier publication in private education for over 60 years ([www.NAIS.org](http://www.NAIS.org)).
culture of independent schools. Both approaches have resulted in a masculine normalization of independent school leadership.

Hargreaves’ (2005) “Sustainable Leadership and Social Justice” attributes a positive shift in leadership practices to the fact that, “there are more women leading schools today” (p. 18), but fails to critically examine the relationship between sustainable school leadership and the culture of independent schools. Pushing in from the margins of the conversation, Feibelman and Haakmat’s (2010) “Independent School Leadership—A Gendered Experience” critiqued the existing approach to grooming aspiring leaders for independent school headships, recommending that, “we need to examine the small and large ways that mentoring [for leadership roles] happens in our schools” (p. 86).

Personal testimony by male practitioners serves as a dominant narrative in the NAIS literature regarding the challenges of school leadership and functions as a prescriptive literature. Davison’s (2007) essay on “The 20-Year Headship” explains that some of the keys to being a successful head of school include, “…being in the right place at the right time, or being fortunate enough to have allies come out of the woodwork when the going gets tough…” (p. 14). Similar reflections are found in Thompson and Melvoin’s (2005) “Surviving, Thriving—and Sometimes Just Enduring—As a Head of School.” While including an occasional reference to a female head of school, the articles in this genre fail to fully consider the gendered connotations of work-life balance, neglecting critical research that examines a different set of competing personal and

---

15Grogan and Shakeshaft’s (2011) most recent work has synthesized literature reviews and findings from relevant research in order to develop a theory of practice, which catalogues leadership strategies most frequently employed by female administrators. According to the authors, women invest in relational leadership; promote social justice through their leadership choices; find personal strength in spirituality; emphasize professional development; and actively seek balance in their lives.
professional demands faced by women leaders (Cheung & Halpern, 2010; Hertneky, 2010; Leonard, 1994; Sanchez & Thornton, 2010; Scott, 1997; Sherman & Wrushen, 2009). More recently, Geissman’s (2010) “At the Forefront: The Experiences and Insights of Young Heads of School” utilizes the experiences of 12 under-40 independent school heads, of which 2 are female, to tell the story of the next generation of school leaders, and implying that the old boys and “new boys” network in independent schools is thriving.  

**Gendered Nature of Leadership: Women in the Role of School Leader**

In a field in which women professionals outnumber men in both school districts and independent schools across the United States, determining the actual numbers of women (White women and women of color) in school leadership roles is difficult to calculate. In the absence of a national data collection system that counts gender and ethnicity in its census figures, we are reliant on statistics collected by professional associations (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Tallerico & Blount, 2004). Additionally the notable lack of research examining the cultural and institutional norms that reinforce the feminine and masculine normalization of school leadership makes it even more challenging to evaluate the topography of the current leadership landscape (Skrla, 2003). Adkison’s (1981) review of educational research concerning women in

---

16 In 2011 NAIS published a compilation of personal essays written by school heads (Batiste & Rivens, 2011). Designed as a guidebook for both “aspiring” and “experienced” heads, the anthology’s authors represent greater gender diversity than represented in the Association’s *Independent School* magazine.

17 Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) refer to the 2007 study by Murphy and colleagues that revealed “only 5 percent of articles published in *Educational Administration Quarterly* between 1979 and 2003 mentioned gender or race” The authors go on to note that the preponderance of “empirical research in educational
public school leadership roles remains one of the most informative examinations of the field to date. This notable absence of research is further magnified by the absence of academic studies that examine the experience of White women and women of color as leaders of independent schools; scholarship consists of a limited number of dissertations and theses (Bryans, 2000; Leonard, 1994; Scott, 1997).

At the start of the twenty-first century, a fledgling body of new research, which explores the gendered nature of school leadership, has started to emerge. This compelling collection of scholarly work builds upon the previous discourse by expanding the range of questions and theoretical frameworks used to probe the personal and professional lives of women leaders in public school settings (Gardiner et al., 2000; Sanchez & Thornton, 2010; Sherman & Wrushen, 2009); by describing the disruptive effect women in leadership roles have on entrenched social systems (Brunner, 2000; Scott, 2003; Skrla, 2000, 2003; Skrla et al., 2000); and by debating epistemological approaches for unsettling the dominant discourse in educational leadership research (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000; Young & Skrla, 2003). This next generation of scholarship explores the public and personal experience of women who have limited leadership opportunities (Brunner, 2000; Tallerico & Blount, 2004); are faced with confronting institutionalized gender bias within organizational frameworks (Chase & Bell, 1990, 1994; Mountford & Brunner, 2010; Skrla, 2000, 2003; Skrla et al., 2000); and have few female role models or homophilous networks of support (Coleman, 2010; Lord & Preston, 2009; Peters, 2010). Most importantly, this work brings to the foreground the experiential differences of women,
both of color and White, who take up school leadership positions, separating their lived experience from the dominant male narrative of school leadership.

Preparing Women for School Leadership

**Mentor-protégé relationships.** Starting with an examination of the mentor-protégé relationship, questions regarding the key role(s) mentors play in the preparation of women leaders have emerged across the literature. Accepted as a fundamental question when studying leadership development, previous scholarship in both corporate and school settings has affirmed the positive relationship between mentoring and a protégé’s ability to chart a successful career path. The same research notes that women are less likely to be afforded mentorship opportunities that will increase their social capital due to the gender biases top management brings to the work of grooming the next generation of leaders for an organization (Eagly & Carli, 2007, 2008; Jackson, 2001; Kanter, 1977; Mertz, 1987; Noe, 1988). Jackson’s (2001) discussion of the glass ceiling in corporate environments drew upon the earlier work of Klenke (1996) when framing an argument for promoting mentoring programs targeted at women already in corporate leadership pipelines. Further discussion of mentoring, reported in the Harvard Business Review (Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010), introduced the distinction between mentorship and sponsorship, arguing that high-potential women do not benefit from mentorships at a rate comparable to their male counterparts. The authors explain that this difference resides in the dual roles that mentorship and sponsorship play in career advancement, reporting survey findings that “Men and women alike say they get valuable career advice
from their mentors, but it’s mostly men who describe being sponsored” (Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010, p. 83).¹⁸

This scholarship also sought to tease apart the interconnected elements of the mentor-protégé culture within public school systems in order to better understand how female school leaders have negotiated social and political challenges in the pursuit of leadership roles, as well as sustained positions of authority during periods of turmoil and uncertainty. *Coloring Outside the Lines: Mentoring Women into School Leadership* (Gardiner et al., 2000) provides a full examination of the way that mentoring functions as the key access point or gateway to leadership roles in K-12 public schools. This comprehensive study of 55 mentors and protégés emphasizes the multi-dimensional nature of mentoring and interrupts the one-dimensional characterization of women. Including in their study females from diverse cultures and geographic locations, their work utilized feminist research methodologies “…to represent women’s thinking, to show the mentoring experiences of women administrators from their own experiences and perspectives…for the pedagogical opportunities to help…Women learn from other women’s voices and experiences” (Gardiner et al., 2000, p. 29). Employing a post-structural feminist perspective, their research paved the way for further studies that look at the small percentage of women in the role of superintendent or assistant superintendent (Sherman et al., 2008), the experience of women secondary principals from diverse backgrounds (Sherman & Wrushen, 2009), and the strategies employed by women

¹⁸ According Ibarra et al. (2010), sponsorship “goes beyond giving feedback and advice; [sponsors] advocate for their mentees and help them gain visibility in the company. They fight to get their protégés to the next level” (p. 83).
leaders to interrupt the domination of “old boys’ networks” in educational administration (Searby & Tripses, 2006).

Mullen’s (2000, 2009) work considers the legacy of mentoring in academic settings and builds a foundation for discussing progressive mentoring models. Examining an array of mentoring practices utilized by professors, practitioners and graduate students, she offers an alternative to a “technical” framework that positions a protégé in a subservient role to her mentor. Mullen (2009) argued that the benefit of a progressive mentoring relationship is that, “peers interact around areas of shared interest, tapping the strengths and qualities of their partners. Members interchange roles as mentors and protégés, sponsoring the learning of all parties through a synergistic, flexible structure” (Mullen, 2009, p. 20.) Co-mentoring (peer mentoring) provides adult learners with collaborative partnerships that promote “constructive feedback, and transparency, and authenticity in learning” (Mullen, 2009, p. 20).

This depiction of non-hierarchical mentoring relationships is reiterated in the work of de Janasz, Sullivan, Whiting, and Biech, (2003) that posits traditional mentoring models are no longer viable in a rapidly changing workplace that is constantly responding to technological advances, restructuring initiatives, and shifting markets. Employing qualitative research methods to document the lived experience of “fifteen, successful corporate executives,” in order to identify themes pertaining to mentor-protégé relationships, the researchers built a case for encouraging protégés to utilize networks of “multiple mentors,” based upon DeFillippi and Arthur’s “intelligent career” model.
Utilizing literature from across disciplines introduces the re-framing of the mentor-protégé relationship as a reciprocal, dynamic relationship and serves as a bridge to scholarship that examines the ways in which women leaders form professional networks of support.

**Women-only networks of support.** Extending the examination of the role mentor-protégé relationships play for aspiring women leaders, a related set of questions addressing the relationship between institutional climate and the need for a reliable and effective support systems for women leaders offers another fertile area for further research. Observers stress that, “Women have to become more deliberate about teaching other women who aspire to leadership positions about ways to effectively engage in mentoring” (Searby & Tripses, 2006, p. 22).

The strength of this assertion is born out in Peters (2010) examination of a district level leadership academy, which provided women in their first year as school leaders an experienced female mentor. This localized study described an institutionally engineered mentor-protégé network, whose effectiveness was attributed to its organizational structure and ability to offer participants the opportunity to be engaged in a mutually empowering relationship (Peters, 2010, p. 125). Additionally, Lord and Preston’s (2009) auto-ethnographic research explored the benefits of establishing a network of support for women leaders within a university system, contending that homophilous organizations encourage critical conversations amongst women professionals, which encourage the development of a collective response to the androcentric culture of universities.
Coleman’s (2008) case study explored the role of women-only networks for secondary school and university leaders in the United Kingdom. This work was presented as part of a larger research study, which contrasted a small, expressive network of approximately 20 high school principals with a large, instrumental network of approximately 50 university professors who possessed some high-level administrative responsibilities. In contrast to the findings described by Peters (2010) and Lord and Preston (2009), Coleman observed that when both groups were established in the 1990s, membership in homophilous social networks offered women leaders in education social and professional support. But a decline in membership over the past 20 years was attributed to the changing job demands on school principals and the changing perceptions of younger women about the gendered nature of leadership issues.

Utilizing scholarship that examines the characteristics, structures, and benefits of women-only networks in corporate settings offers educational researchers additional frameworks for inquiry. In an earlier study, Ibarra (1997) contrasted how women and men in four Fortune/Service 500 companies used support networks for career advancement. Using a mixed-methods approach to examine three facets of professional support networks—homophily, tie strength (closeness of relationship), and range (variety of contacts outside of an existing organizational structure)—her findings indicated that high-performing women pursue close relationships with other women who they perceive as resources from whom they can learn strategies for negotiating bias. Additionally, these women develop diverse information networks in response to the gender disproportionality of their immediate corporate setting.
More than a decade later, The Center for Gender in Organizations ("Panacea or Placebo," 2012) questioned the efficacy of women’s networks in organizations. Utilizing survey questions that explored network structures, goals, activities, services, and benefits to membership, CGO collected data from 269 women attending Simmons Leadership Conference in April 2011 (CGO Insights, “Panacea or Placebo,” p. 1). Their findings revealed that in order for women’s networks to be perceived as beneficial, they must offer women a value-added experience; be supported monetarily and visibly endorsed by senior leaders in the organization; and represent “part of a larger organizational strategy to support both the advancement of women and the goals of the organization” ("Panacea or Placebo," p. 4).

Exploring the transformational learning potential of women’s-only training (WOT), Debebe (2011) examined the social-emotional effectiveness of homophilous professional development.\(^{19}\) Utilizing qualitative methods, she assessed the relationship between WOT in an emotionally safe and supportive environment and learning explicit strategies for interrupting gender-biased, cultural stereotypes. According to Debebe (2011), “Critically, WOT (women only training) programs bring women together making it possible for participants to learn from one another’s experience and have their own affirming experience” (p. 687).

The small number of available studies that examine women’s leadership networks within school settings, contrasted with ongoing research in the corporate setting, raises two questions. Is the dearth of educational leadership research indicative of a lack of

\(^{19}\) Debebe (2011) defines transformational learning as a process that provides participants with the opportunity to encounter a dilemma, examine its meaning, and arrive at transformative insights (p. 680).
interest in the subject or is there an absence of women-only networks of support to be studied?

**Ways Women Lead**

Swidler’s (1986) re-consideration of culture as a theoretical framework asserted that “culture” is a dynamic “tool kit” that individuals use to construct strategies of action during settled and unsettled periods in time. According to Swidler (2002), the transmission of culture takes place through:

- **Codes**—that define the knowledge of what meaning an action holds for others.
- **Contexts**—that provide the immediate face-to-face situations that express ideas that are both coherent and have the capacity to systematically shape behavior.
- **Institutions**—that offer a framework, which defines the boundaries, rules, and beliefs of a culture and prescribes the actions of individuals within the institution.

Compelling scholarship on women in educational administration has employed this framework as a model for examining women’s leadership choices related to tensions between the cultural mythology of individual achievement and women’s experiences of gender discrimination, and the narrative preferences women make when describing their strategies of action during the settled and unsettled periods of their professional lives (Brunner, 2000; Chase, 1995, 2003; Scott, 2003; Skrla, 2000; Skrla et al., 2000).20

The significance of this model resides in its capacity to dissect the enormously complex dynamic confronting women who take up leadership roles within independent

---

20Chase (1995) claims, “that listening closely to how women narrate their experiences is necessary if we want to understand how culture and narrative shape experience, as well as understand what professional women are telling up about their power and subjugation” (p. xi).
schools. While scholarship on the subject of school administration is predisposed to portray school leadership as being devoid of race or gender, *post-structural feminist* theory challenges that position. Similar to Gilligan’s (1982) work that questioned the usefulness of androcentric theories of human development, asserting that, “Women are being seen through traditional theoretical lenses and are being measured against ideals that have historically served men best” (p. 25), this work invites practitioner-researchers to employ an analytical stance that untangles the lore of merit-based achievement and puts forward an inclusive taxonomy of leadership development.

Challenging a binary representation of leadership styles that serves to essentialize men and women’s leadership strategies and reduces the field of organizational leadership to a battle of the sexes, Fletcher’s work (1994, 1999, 2004) considered gender differences through the conceptual framework of relational theory. Utilizing the pioneering work of Jean Baker Miller’s *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (1986) and others to deconstruct the ways that social expectations associated with gender shapes the culture of leadership, Fletcher advocated for the transformational potency of leadership that uses “…relational skills to relate and then making instrumental decisions based on that interaction” (Fletcher, 1994, p. 80).

**Feminism: Methods and Models**

Moving women from the invisible to visible, as both subject and researcher, sits at the heart of this dialogue. Qualitative methods, which invite researchers to utilize the

---

21The impulse of prescriptive literature to assign leadership strategies masculine and feminine traits serves as a troubling distraction from a rigorous study of the intersection of gender and organizational leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2008; Shakeshaft & Grogan, 2011).
techniques of participant observation, personal interviews, journals, and research memos, also open the space for women researchers to employ a feminist stance that utilizes their lived experience. By validating women’s ways of knowing and understanding qualitative data, women researchers are able to marry participatory data collection with lived experience, bringing a bright light to shine on the nuanced nature of the question (Chase, 2003; Oakley, 2003; Lather, 1992; Olesen, 1994, 2003; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000; Young & Skrla, 2003).

In *Feminism and Methodology* (1987), Harding introduced the volume by declaring that she “…argued against the idea of a distinctive feminist method of research” (Harding, 1987, p. 1); however, she suggested that three “methodological features” could be applied to “the general structure of scientific theory to research on women and gender” (Harding, 1987, p. 9). They are as follows:

Reflection on how social phenomena get defined as problems in need of explanation in the first place quickly reveals that there is no such thing as a problem without a person (or groups of them) who have a problem: a problem is always a problem for someone or other…One distinctive feature of feminist research is that it generates its problematics from the perspective of women’s experiences. (Harding, 1987, p. 6-7)

In the best of feminist research, the purposes of research and analysis are not separable from the origins of research problems. Feminist research is an abrupt separation from the social science tradition of men asking questions about women that they want answered, and instead takes up questions that provide for women answers that are derived from the social phenomenon they have observed. (Harding, 1987, p. 8)

The best feminist analysis goes beyond these innovations in subject matter in a crucial way: it insists that the inquirer her/himself be placed in the same critical plane as the over subject matter, thereby recovering the entire research process for scrutiny in the results of the research. (Harding, 1987, p. 9)
In response to Harding’s questioning of a feminist epistemology, the work of Olesen (1994) and Lather (1992) diagram the relationship between positivist, post-structuralist, and deconstructionist modes of inquiry and models of feminist research. Claiming that “feminist researchers see gender as a basic organizing principle that profoundly shapes/mediates the concrete conditions of our lives” (Lather, 1992, p. 91), Lather drew from Gilligan’s (1982) seminal work that split apart the experiences of women from the masculine influence of research practices that had diminished their voices. St. Pierre and Pillow’s (2003) Working in the Ruins: Feminist Poststructural Theory and Methods in Education expanded the discourse through a collection of essays that trouble the points of intersection between working with qualitative methods and employing feminist epistemology.

Looking forward, Young and Skrla’s (2003) Reconsidering Feminist Research in Educational Leadership provided an edited volume of critical essays that reflect on the present state of feminist research in educational leadership and serve as a roadmap for feminist research in the twenty-first century. This anthology of critical questions serves as a provocative reminder for readers that feminist methodology challenges androcentric research methodologies and argues for development of new epistemological frameworks to support the study of women from diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

Summary

Taking the stance that educational organizations are inherently gendered, I have used a post-structural feminist perspective as the primary frame for considering bodies of literature that examine the intersectionality of school leadership and gender. This
literature review has been organized as an exploration of both documentary data that normalizes the cultural beliefs and social practices of school leadership, as well as scholarly research that examines the experience of women leaders in school settings.

While a crucial body of research examines the experience of women (Black and White) leaders in public schools and higher education, there remains a troubling lack of scholarly discussion about the gendered nature of leadership practices in independent schools. The absence of literature examining the intersection of gender and leadership in independent schools informs the focus of this phenomenological inquiry.
Chapter 3:  
METHODOLOGY  

Introduction  

This phenomenological study is the outgrowth of a pilot study (Feibelman, 2011), which employed a post-structural feminist stance to examine the ways that White and African American women are mentored for leadership roles while working in independent schools, and is informed by research in the area of gender and school leadership, which focuses on the experience of women within public schools, e.g., superintendents, assistant superintendents, and secondary and elementary principals. 

Based upon the findings of the pilot study I conducted in 2011 (see Appendix A), I built a set of qualitative research strategies that allowed me, in the role of practitioner-researcher the latitude to examine the discursive disjunctions of an organization that utilizes social/cultural stereotypes of gender to define the power and status of members in a professional community (Brunner, 2000; Chase, 1995; Fletcher, 1999; Skrla, 2000; Swidler, 1986). The methods employed in this study have faithfully enacted the principles of a phenomenological research approach, which “seeks to explore, describe, and analyze the meaning of individual lived experience” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 190) and is informed by a post-structural feminist perspective, which centers and makes problematic women’s diverse situations and the institutions that frame those situations (Olesen, 2000).
This chapter is organized into eight sections: (1) rationale for a qualitative research methods approach; (2) research sample; (3) research design; (4) data-collection methods; (5) data analysis; (6) trustworthiness; (7) limitations; and (8) summary.

**Rationale for a Qualitative Methods Approach**

At the heart of this interview study is the belief that qualitative research methods and a phenomenological approach argue convincingly for a reinterpretation of the role of researcher and study participant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). My identity as practitioner—independent school leader—and researcher effectively re-organized the artificial distance between interviewer and interviewee. Additionally my social identity as a white, Jewish woman and parent both aligns me with the participants in the study and divides the interview space. This reflexive stance informed my interview methods, which were designed to invite women to share stories from their lived experience as independent school leaders (Oakley, 2003). As a result, each of the in-depth interviews purposefully opened-up room for dialogue by inviting participants into the realm of shared investigation. Still, rigorous attention was given to ensuring that each woman could take on the role of principal narrator/discussant by shaping interview questions that offered the participant an opportunity to explore the storyline of her lived experience (Chase, 2003).

Qualitative researchers certainly agree that the questions we ask make a difference to the quality of the information we collect; that our questions should be phrased in everyday rather than sociological language; that we need to ask about our participants’ experiences, thoughts, and feelings to gather data thick enough to shed light on our sociological problems; and the relationships we construct with interviewees affect the quality of their response to our questions. (Chase, 2003, p. 275)
Utilizing qualitative research methods, the study employed semi-structured interviews, researcher memos, member checks, and document analysis. Additionally, field notes from my participant observation in National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) and North Carolina Association of Independent Schools (NCAIS) conferences, as well as the National Association of Principals of Schools for Girls (NAPSG) leadership development program and informal interviews with NAIS executives contributed to a thick description of the phenomenon being studied. These methods faithfully enact a feminist interrogation of the cultural context that informs women’s preparation for and enactment of independent school leadership roles (Olesen, 1994, 2003). Engaging women in multiple levels of conversation allows for the excavation of narratives that illuminate points of tension between settled and unsettled periods in the lives of aspiring women leaders and explore the strategies of action (Swindler, 1986) used to negotiate points of discursive disjunction (Chase, 1995, 2003).

**Figure 2. Categorization of Participants and Data Collection Strategies**

*Note. Chase and Bell (1994) note that search consultants serve as “gatekeepers” to influential leadership roles because of the ability to influence the hiring and evaluation of candidates (p. 37).*
Participant Selection

Participants entered into this study as a result of attendance at the NAPSG Women and Leadership seminar (October 2011), through informal conversations within professional networks, or through the snowball method of sampling. Employing purposeful selection provides researchers the opportunity to “deliberately examine cases that are critical for the theories that you began the study with, or that you have subsequently developed” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 90). I used the strategy of purposeful selection to identify an initial group of participants from the attendees and faculty who participated in the NAPSG Women and Leadership Seminar (October 2011). I had attended the NAPSG seminar as a participant (October 2005) and knew from first-hand experience the attendees came from a geographically and culturally diverse set of independent schools, self-identify as potential school leaders, and were actively pursuing networks of professional support.

Accordingly, I attended the NAPSG Women and Leadership Seminar in October 2011, but this time I entered the setting as an observer, collecting preliminary field notes on my computer and engaging with participants and faculty in informal conversations during the three-day seminar. Through prior arrangement with the NAPSG executive director, I was given the opportunity during the opening session to introduce my study and solicit participation from the 42 women registered for the program. Ten of the seminar participants (+20%) responded, agreeing to participate in the study.

---

22The October 7-9, 2011 conference was hosted by Miss Porter’s School in Farmington, Connecticut, and began Friday evening, concluded at noon on Sunday.
Out of that number I selected five women as participants based upon geographic diversity, race, age, leadership role, and type of school. I then proceeded to add further racial diversity to the sample by recruiting two African American women who had participated in my pilot study (Feibelman, 2011) and through the snowball method of sampling.

Two additional participants in the study currently work for small, executive search firms, specializing in senior administrative searches for independent schools. These women offer a privileged perspective based on their previous role as influential school leaders and their current role as search consultants to independent schools’ boards of trustees (Chase & Bell, 1990; 1994).

Table 2
Profile of Participants, Interview Setting, and Methods of Recruitment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Interview Setting</th>
<th>No. of Interviews</th>
<th>Recruitment for Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jill Bretton</td>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Assistant Middle School Director</td>
<td>Single-Sex (Girl) 6-12</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>NAPSG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connie Burr</td>
<td>50-54</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Lower School Division Head</td>
<td>Single-Sex (Girl) K-8</td>
<td>West Coast</td>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>NAPSG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siobhan Carroll</td>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Director of Enrollment and Lower School Admissions</td>
<td>Single-Sex (Girl) K-12</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>Carroll’s office</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Professional network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela Charles</td>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Director of Admissions and Financial Aid</td>
<td>Single-Sex (Girl) 5-8</td>
<td>West Coast</td>
<td>Phone Skype</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Snowball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen Cooper</td>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Middle School Division Head; Head of School elect</td>
<td>Coed PreK-12; PK-8</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>Cooper’s office Researcher’s home</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Pilot Study Professional network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michaela Curry</td>
<td>55-59</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Upper School Division Head</td>
<td>Single-Sex (Girl)</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>Curry’s office</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Professional network</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Interview Setting</th>
<th>No. of Interviews</th>
<th>Recruitment for Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regina Kunstenar</td>
<td>50-55</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Assistant Director of Admissions and Coordinator of Diversity and Multicultural Affairs</td>
<td>Co-ed K-12</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>Kunstenar’s office Phone</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>NAPSG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hilary Riley</td>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Interim Upper School Dean of Students</td>
<td>Single-Sex (Girl) 6-12</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Snowball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth Saunders</td>
<td>60-65</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Head of School</td>
<td>Single-Sex (Girl) PK-12</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Professional Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judith Stein</td>
<td>60-65</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Head of School</td>
<td>Co-ed 7-12</td>
<td>West Coast</td>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>NAPSG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth Strong</td>
<td>45-50</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Search Consultant</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Snowball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne Taylor</td>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Head of Upper School</td>
<td>Single-Sex (Girl) PreK-12</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Snowball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie Watts</td>
<td>60-65</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Search Consultant</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Professional Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pamela Young</td>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Director of Admissions and Financial Aid</td>
<td>Co-ed 7-12</td>
<td>West Coast</td>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Snowball</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* There are a total of 16 participants in this study. For purposes of confidentiality the names of participants have been changed.

Sherman and Wrushen’s (2009) study of women of color in school leadership roles further informed the choice of participants for this study.
Minority women leaders have a different social experience. As such the category of women, although sometimes helpful to consider in singular terms, is not always helpful; it encompasses a vast spectrum of women, backgrounds, and experiences. Minority women leaders view the world from a positionality of race and gender…

(p. 176)

The intersectionality of race and gender was not used as an analytic lenses in the NAIS *The State of Independent School Leadership 2009* (2010). Instead the Association chose to separate the social identifiers of race and gender from their data analysis, thus weakening their findings and recommendations (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). For the purposes of this study, I chose to examine the relationship between social identity—race and gender—and the leadership strategies enacted by African American and White women occupying formal independent school leadership roles (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Sherman & Wrushen, 2009). Inviting women from diverse backgrounds and perspectives to share their first-hand experience of leading in independent schools serves to refocus the discourse around the state of independent school leadership.

Irrespective of their current school affiliations, the 14 participants who are at present serving in leadership roles have been classroom teachers and/or occupied formal leadership roles in 40 different independent schools, which enables them to draw upon a deep and broad range of experience as independent school educators. Five participants in this study have worked at 4 or more independent schools, while the average number of schools a participant has been affiliated with is 2.9. Only 3 of the participants are presently employed at the independent school where they began their career, and 3 of the

---

23 According to NAIS (Batiste & Rivens, Eds., 2011) in 2009, 4.8% of school heads self-identified as a person of color or ethnic minority; 39% of this group are women. One-third of the participants in this study are women of color.
14 participants have spent their entire career in single-sex (girls) schools. It is important to note that a disproportionate number of participants in this study are presently located in single-sex (girls) schools, although seven of these ten women have work histories that include multiple years as educators in co-ed school environments (see Table 3).

Table 3

Demographic Representation of Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Role</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>School Population</th>
<th>School Size</th>
<th>Region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Head of School</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>1 African American</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Single-Sex (Girls) 8 PK-12 4 Northeast 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admissions Director</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>3 White</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Co-Ed 4 K-12 2 Mid-Atlantic 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Division Director</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6-12</td>
<td>3 West Coast 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Division Director</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8-12</td>
<td>1 South 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dean of Faculty</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50-54</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>K-8 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department Chair</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>55-59</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5-8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interim Dean of Students</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>60+</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity Director</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Design

In the role of practitioner researcher, I bring an insider’s perspective to this study, which has allowed me to make meaning from the ways participants talked about their experiences as school leaders. According to Creswell (2009), “ Particularly in qualitative research, the role of the researcher as the primary data collection instrument necessitates

---

24Two separate pairs of participants are located at the same school, which explains the discrepancy between the number of participants and the number of schools represented in this study.
the identification of personal values, assumptions and biases at the outset of the study” (p. 196). Additionally, choosing to approach this phenomenological inquiry from a post-structural feminist perspective demands that I actively grapple with the objective and subjective nature of engaging in qualitative research and readily acknowledge the relationship between women’s diverse situations and the formal and informal structures that inform their sense-making (Olesen, 1994). Harding (1987) asserts,

While studying women is not new, studying them from the perspective of their own experiences so that women can understand themselves and the world can claim virtually no history at all. It is also novel to study gender. The idea of a systematic social construction of masculinity and femininity that is little, if at all, constrained by biology, is very recent. Moreover feminist inquiry joins other “underclass” approaches in insisting on the importance of studying ourselves and “studying up,” instead of “studying down.” (p. 8)

The points of intersection between the conceptual framing of the research problem and its representation within the context of this study is outlined in Table 4, along with the qualitative research strategies I have employed.

Table 4
Relationship Between Theoretical Framework and Research Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Frame</th>
<th>Independent School Setting</th>
<th>Qualitative Research Methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Context</td>
<td>Independent School’s Mission Organizational Fit</td>
<td>Semi-structured Interviews Emergent Design Coding Data Member Checks Document Analysis Participant Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Cultural Competencies Professional Networks</td>
<td>Semi-structured Interviews Emergent Design Coding Data Member Checks Document Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies of Action</td>
<td>Growth Producing Relationships</td>
<td>Mentoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discursive Realms</td>
<td>Resistance to Dominant Meanings</td>
<td>Unsettled periods</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Role of the Researcher**

**Research journal(s) and research memos.** Both feminist theory and qualitative research methodology demand that the researcher take reflexive pauses in order to observe what Marshall (2001) refers to as the “inner arc” of attention.

…as an inquirer I have especially paid attention to the inner arcs, seeking to notice myself perceiving, making meaning framing issues, choosing how to speak out…I pay attention for assumptions I use, repetitions, patterns, themes, dilemmas, key phrases, which are charged with energy or that seem to hold multiples meanings to be puzzled about, and more. I work with a multidimensional frame of knowing; acknowledging and connecting between intellectual, emotional, practical intuitive, sensory, imaginal, and more knowing. (Marshall, 2001, p. 433)

I began this reflexive practice by writing a “researcher identity memo” at the start of my pilot study. The memo examined my relationship to the topic by describing my own leadership journey and the assumptions, beliefs, and emotions I associated with this experience (Maxwell, 2005). The practice of writing memos and maintaining a research journal throughout the study offered a reliable location where I could purposefully explore the “inner arc” of my attention.

As such, the ongoing practice of writing researcher memos and maintaining a research journal has been woven throughout the design of this study. This deliberative
exercise is reinforced in the work of Marshall and Rossman (2011) who note, “research designs should include reflection on one’s identity and one’s sense of voice and perspectives, assumptions and sensitivities,” (p. 96) and is further substantiated by Harding’s (1987) feminist epistemological claim that

...the beliefs and behaviors of the researcher are part of the empirical evidence for (or against) the claims advanced in the results of research. This evidence too must be open to critical scrutiny no less than what is traditionally defined as relevant evidence. Introducing the “Subjective” element into the analysis in fact increases the objectivity of the research and decreases the “objectivism” which hides this kind of evidence from the public. (p. 9)

By acknowledging my dual role of reflexive researcher and fully vested participant, I have employed written memos and journals as a strategy for faithfully examining my response to each participant’s lived experience. Each reflexive pause is informed by the principles of post-structural feminist theory, which make claims that research by its very nature is a subjective endeavor and as such requires the “observer” to incorporate a counterspace within the research design. These intentional breaks invite the researcher to consciously locate herself within the analytic event. Richardson (2000) observed that, “we are always present in our texts, no matter how we try to suppress ourselves. We are always writing in particular contexts—contexts that affect what and how we write and who we become” (p. 154). So it is through this lens that I find myself mediating the relationship I have as the researcher with the data. As a result, I have continuously grappled with the subjective nature of my methodological approach, my responses to and reflections on the interview process.
**Semi-structured interviews and social distance.** Making use of a reflexive pause to consider the strengths and gaps in the interview strategy I utilized in the pilot study, I wrote:

…my time constraints throughout this pilot study shaped the choices I made regarding data collection. Keeping to a single interview, meant that essential follow up questions, which emerged during my data analysis, remained unanswered. For example, I would have probed further into the role of gender as a social identifier for female school leaders, by exploring the ways that gender informs their approach to leadership. Additionally, I would have asked more questions about future leadership aspirations in order to ascertain if they are engaged in mentor-protégé relationships that will position them to become school heads. (Feibelman, 2011, p. 24)

My thinking in this regard has also been shaped by Oakley’s (2003) reflections on a feminist interview paradigm because it speaks to my dual role of researcher and interviewer when collecting data for the pilot study (Feibelman, 2011).

…ethical dilemmas are generic to all research involving interviewing and for reasons I have already discussed. But they are greatest where there is least social distance between the interviewer and the interviewee. Where both share the same gender socialization and critical life-experiences, social distance can be minimal. (Oakley, 2003, p. 258)

This dual role is articulated more fully when placed within the context of the principle of relational theory, which argues,

…growth and development require a context of connections…interactions are characterized by mutual empathy and mutual empowerment where both parties recognize vulnerability as part of the human condition, approach the interaction expecting to grow from it and feel a responsibility to contribute to the growth of the other. (Fletcher, 1999, p. 31)

Mindfully noting the intersection between feminist thought and relational theory enables me to view the interview process through the lens of relational theory’s growth-in-connection, and serves to explicate the dynamic that emerges between the interviewee
and the interviewer when engaging in the research process. A compelling example of this dynamic runs throughout the work of Chase (1995) and Skrla (Skrla, 2000; Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich, 2000), and provides a well-defined roadmap for in-depth interviews with women educators in influential leadership positions. Adroitly choreographing interviews with women superintendents, Chase developed

...a series of questions about the tasks and problems women superintendents face in their current positions, the professional and interpersonal contexts in which they work, their work histories, the relationship between their personal and professional lives, and the difference that gender and race or ethnicity have made to their work experiences. (Chase 1995, p. 219)

Relying on the organizational structure of her prepared questions allowed Chase (1995) the flexibility to diverge from her script so as to invite each interviewee to tell the story she was interested in narrating.25

After having identified their research focus and design, Skrla et al. (2000) chose to not utilize pre-structured questions, and instead the team, “…designed interview guides based on what emerged from previous interviews, and the participants were involved in shaping the interview guides for the second round of individual interviews and the focus group” (p. 55).26 My decision to employ the qualitative research tool of in-depth, semi-structured interviews is informed by the work of Chase (1995) and Skrla et al. (2000). A semi-structured interview has the capacity to unearth a detailed personal

25In a later essay on interview methodology, Chase (2003) observed, “…attending to another’s story in the interview process is not a simple matter and it requires an altered consciousness of what interviews are and how we should conduct them. If we take seriously the ideas that people make sense of experience and communicate meaning through narration, then in depth interviews should become occasions in which we ask for life stories” (p. 274).

26Skrla et al. (2000) “were interested in researching how women who have been superintendents think and talk about gender, the role of the superintendent, and the interactions between these two” (p. 50).
narrative of each participant’s work history and the sense making she applies to this lived experience. To accomplish this, I constructed a set of interviewer questions drawn from two qualitative studies that employed feminist standpoint theory to examine the preparation strategies used by women who have served in formal public school leadership roles (e.g., district superintendent, high school principal, etc.). Some of these questions are the same as those used in my pilot study (Feibelman, 2011), while others have been added as a result of my findings, and I have labeled each question accordingly. It is important to note that these questions were not intended to draw out an objective truth, but rather to engage each interviewee in a dialogue about her personal and work histories, paying explicit attention to points of intersection between the two and by inviting each participant to describe her leadership preparation, e.g. professional development and networks of support, mentors, etc., as well as strategies of action for negotiating gender bias as it mapped onto independent school leadership.

Employing the principles of emergent design (Creswell, 2009) has allowed me to adapt my prepared questions in response to topics and themes that surfaced during each of the interviews. A semi-structured set of interview questions served as the blueprint for each conversation. But I also purposefully explored discursive episodes when responses revealed tension between comfortable conversation and moments of perceptible uneasiness (Chase, 2003).
Data Collection Methods

Prior to beginning this study, approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix B). Additionally each participant was provided formal written consent prior to being interviewed (see Appendix C).

The primary mode of data collection for this study was a semi-structured interview (see Appendix D). Each interview was conducted during a face-to-face meeting; with Skype, which is a software application that allows a computer to be used like a telephone with the additional feature of a simultaneous live image; or by telephone (see Table 2). Fourteen of the interviews were completed over a four-month period.

The first round was organized as an individual, semi-structured interview with 12 participants who occupy a range of formal leadership roles in 11 culturally and geographically dissimilar independent schools (see Table 2). Following a first interview, which lasted approximately 90 minutes, the participant was provided with an electronic copy of her interview transcript and asked to review it prior to the scheduling of a second interview.

A second participant interview was scheduled after each of the participants had reviewed her transcript. At the beginning of the second interview each participant was encouraged to suggest topics she would like to pursue, e.g., reflections on, insights about, or curiosities raised by the previous interview. Second interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and provided an opportunity for the participant and me, the researcher, to adopt the stance of a shared investigation.
Within this same time period, a single interview (see Appendix E) was completed with two participants who are currently serving the role of head of school (see Table 2). Although these interviews followed a similar semi-structured framework, they consisted of a single interview, which lasted approximately 90 minutes. Both participants were provided with an electronic transcript of the interview.\footnote{At the conclusion of each interview, I discussed the possibility of returning with follow-up questions that may emerge from my data analysis. I have since corresponded with Judith Stein, who wanted to add further detail to one of her statements.}

After having completed my first round of coding and data analysis, I conducted semi-structured interviews with two participants, each of whom work for executive search firms (see Appendix F). Employing the principles of emergent design (Creswell, 2009), I developed a semi-structured interview guide that explored the themes that emerged through interviews with aspiring school leaders and school heads.

Each of these interviews was digitally recorded and transcribed. During each interview, field notes were kept in a researcher’s journal and an accompanying contact summary sheet was completed following each interview (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Additional data pertaining to school culture was collected through an examination of admissions literature and school websites.

**Data Analysis**

In keeping with the principles of emergent design as I completed each contact summary form for the fourteen participants, I maintained a running list of possible codes in the margin of each form.\footnote{The two interviews with search consultants were used to triangulate the data. They occurred after I had completed the second round of coding and are not a part of this data set.} I then transferred this evolving code list onto each
subsequent form, which resulted in a preliminary set of possible codes. This strategy resulted in a set of 62 potential codes and definitions. The preliminary list of codes was then organized thematically, using my research questions as the overarching framework in order to assess their comparative strength (see Table 5) (Glesne, 2006). I then applied this initial set of codes to my first round of data analysis. Each of the 14 interview transcripts was coded by hand and reflections were captured in brief researcher memos.

Table 5
Thematic Organization of Preliminary Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do women, who self identify as aspiring school leaders, understand the strategies they use to prepare for leadership roles in independent school settings?</td>
<td>Independent School Environment</td>
<td>Culture Influence Choice Inclusivity Career Planning Gendered role(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do women, who self identify as aspiring school leaders, understand the strategies they use to prepare for leadership roles in independent school settings?</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Authority Power Initiative Role Gendered role(s) Team Integrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do these women seek out mentor-protégé relationships, networks of support, and/or sponsorship from “recognized” independent school leaders; if so, then how does this work?</td>
<td>Mentor-Protégé Relationships</td>
<td>Mentor Peer-to-peer Executive coach Feedback Intimidation Negotiation Old Boys Network Sponsorship Trust Integrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do these women seek out mentor-protégé relationships, networks of support, and/or sponsorship from “recognized” independent school leaders; if so, then how does this work?</td>
<td>Networks of support</td>
<td>Support systems - Peer-to-peer - Sponsorship Advocacy Allies Inquiry</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do these women seek out mentor-protégé relationships, networks of support, and/or</td>
<td>Strategies used by women to gain leadership experience</td>
<td>Agency - Initiative - Confidence - Courage -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sponsorship from “recognized” independent school leaders; if so, then how does this</td>
<td></td>
<td>Risk-taking - Career planning - Choice -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>work?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Catalyst - Unsettled moment - Change -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Education - Generative - Observing -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Merit - Ideal worker - Potential -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Initiative - Owning/claiming - Perseverance -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Résumé building - Negotiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does gender influence strategies women use to prepare for independent school</td>
<td>Participant Self Description</td>
<td>Mindful - Emotional intelligence - Emotion - Observing - Passionate - Family - Family of origin - Nuclear family - Perseverance - Confidence - Working hard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leadership?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does gender influence strategies women use to prepare for independent school</td>
<td>Participant Social Identifiers</td>
<td>Athletics - Athlete - Race - Age [state of one’s life] - Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leadership?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I used HyperRESEARCH, a qualitative data analysis software tool, for the second round of reading and coding transcripts. This round of coding was used to critically evaluate the suitability of codes and definitions in order to identify a “master list” that represented the most frequently used codes. Reworking each interview transcript allowed me to note where in the data I was employing codes in a consistent and confident manner and where I demonstrated an uncertainty or began to question the applicability of a code. As a result, I affirmed my confidence in the robustness of this master set of codes.

Following the second round of coding, I used HyperRESEARCH software to filter the codes for frequency of occurrence. Frequency of use ranged from 3 occurrences (peer-to-peer sponsorship) to 220 (formal leadership). Based upon this frequency report, I selected codes that appeared 49 or more times in the data set (interview transcripts), which resulted in the a master list of 19 codes (see Table 6).

I continued data analysis by looking at the points of intersection between the study’s research questions, theoretical framework, and master code list to construct a series of conceptually clustered matrices in order to magnify theses relationships. (Glesne, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994) Each organizational cluster examined a set of strategies employed by participants seeking to prepare themselves for independent school leadership roles (see Figure 3).
Figure 3. Strategies of Action: How do women, who self-identify as aspiring school leaders, portray the strategies they use to prepare for leadership roles in independent school settings?

I constructed a fourth matrix, organized as a case dynamic framework, to explore the discursive realm of each participant’s leadership journey (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This matrix functioned as a vehicle for examining episodes in which participants were faced with re-negotiating the cultural boundaries of the organization (independent school) in order to access leadership opportunities and/or assume culturally acceptable leadership practices (see Figure 4). Swidler (1986) argued that unsettled periods have the capacity to open up opportunities for promoting new strategies of action within the context of an existing culture framework.²⁹

²⁹ “Culture has independent causal influence in unsettled cultural periods because it makes possible new strategies of action-constructing entities that can act (selves, families, corporations), shaping the styles and skills with which they act, and modeling forms of authority and cooperation. It is, however, the concrete situations in which these cultural models are enacted that determine which take root and thrive, and which wither and die” (Swidler, 1986, p. 280).
Figure 4. Discursive Realms: How does gender influence the strategies women use to prepare for independent school leadership roles?

Table 6
Master Code List

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>Having the capacity to act on behalf of one’s own interests</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Planning</td>
<td>Personal roadmap used for advancing one’s professional life</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalyst</td>
<td>An action/event that results in a demonstrable change in a person’s professional circumstance or working environment</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Shared beliefs and values within an independent school community</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>A participant’s schooling, degrees earned, course of study, or professional development completed</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family (Nuclear/Origin)</td>
<td>Participant’s description of the family she as born into or raised by; Participant’s description of her immediate family, e.g. spouse, children, etc.</td>
<td>71, 61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal Leadership</td>
<td>Recognized by all members of the organization to be an ascribed role supported by the independent school’s resources; affords the individual social and political influence</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gendered Roles</td>
<td>Behaviors associated with or ascribed to independent school leaders based upon their sex</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generative</td>
<td>A participant’s ability to describe new understandings or insights derived from her professional journey</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusivity</td>
<td>Describes the culture of an independent school that encourages diverse ideas and identities to participate in the governance of the school</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor</td>
<td>A direct supervisor, whose acknowledged expertise/experience, and/or personal/professional interest in the participant is used to influence her behavior</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Network</td>
<td>Mutually beneficial professional relationships situated within an established framework or organization</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Identity:</td>
<td>The way in which an individual views herself as the same or different</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although the code, inclusivity occurred 40 times, because of its relationship to school culture, I chose to include it in the master list of codes.
Gender Race from others in society as it relates to— Femaleness Skin color 179 66
Sponsorship Relationships that promote career advancement in independent schools 74
Support System A set of relationships between and amongst individuals—woman-to-woman; woman-to-man 74
Team A group of independent school leaders assigned to working together on behalf of the institution 61
Unsettled Periods An action or episode that causes a temporary or lasting break in the independent school’s cultural norms of behavior 186

**Trustworthiness**

This study is not intended to portray an “objective truth,” but rather to describe the lived experience of the women who participated in this study and to identify the themes and patterns that emerge from their narratives. My identity as practitioner— independent school leader—and researcher, and my social identity as a white, upper middle-class, middle-age, Jewish female, independent school educator—Upper School Division Director (high school principal)—teacher, school leader, and parent mediated each interview, each conversation, and informed each move I made throughout this qualitative study (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). However in order to establish trustworthiness and build a thick description, I triangulated the interview data I collected through structured conversations with members of the NAIS executive staff, who are responsible for institutional research and leadership development programs and initiatives. Additionally, formal interviews were completed with two sitting heads of school and two executive search consultants, all of whom possess specialized knowledge pertaining to independent school leadership attainment. Lastly, a review of documents published by schools represented in this study, as well as school websites, was used to
identify both affirming and dis-affirming evidence, and was incorporated into researcher memos.

Two interviews were conducted with each of the 12 participants who are currently serving in formal leadership roles other than head of school. The second interview served as a member check, providing each participant the opportunity to comment on and/or expand on information obtained in the previous interview.

While conducting this study I was a participant-observer at three independent school professional development events that addressed women’s leadership development.

- NAPSG Women’s Leadership Seminar (October 7-9, 2011);
- North Carolina Association of Independent Schools (NCAIS) Women and Leadership Workshop (June 18, 2012);
- NCAIS Biennial Teacher Conference (November 2, 2012) Leading from the Middle/Prospects for women, Pat Bassett President of NAIS.

The field notes that were kept during each of the events were incorporated into researcher memos.

Finally, I included the practice of maintaining a research journal into the design of this study. This journal has been used to record my reflections on the research process and serves as an unofficial audit trail. Keeping a reflective journal has allowed me to capture my own lived experience throughout this study and has provided me with a place of return, where I have been able to re-visit and re-assess my sense making (Guba and Lincoln, 1985).
Limitations

The purpose of study was to explore the lived experience of women serving in a range of formal leadership roles in independent schools and to build upon a body of research that employs the lens of post-structuralist feminist theory to examine the intersection of gender and leadership within a defined organizational setting. This study was limited to 14 women (African American and White) who are currently serving in formal leadership roles in an independent school setting and 2 female executive search consultants. It is important to note that the most recent leadership report published by NAIS indicated that 31% of heads of independent school are women (NAIS, 2010). The report does not, however, speak to the intersectionality of gender and race, nor does it offer statistical information regarding women in leadership roles beyond the head of school. Due to the lack of available quantitative data describing the actual number of women serving in independent school leadership roles, I used professional networks and a snowball sampling method to identify women to participate in this study.

The size of the study limits the representation of different types of NAIS members schools, e.g., co-ed, single-sex, boarding school, day school, religious affiliation, etc. Relatedly, although participants vary geographically, 7 of the 14 school-based participants in this study are located in the Northeast.

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry was to explore the lived experience of women serving in a range of recognized leadership roles in independent schools and to build upon a body of research that employs the lens of post-structuralist feminist theory
to examine the intersection of gender and leadership within a defined organizational setting. This study is the outgrowth of a pilot study (Feibelman, 2011), which employed a post-structural feminist stance to examine the ways that White, bi-racial, and African American women are mentored for leadership roles while working in independent schools, and is informed by research in the area of gender and school leadership, which focuses on the experience of women within public schools, e.g., superintendents, assistant superintendents, and secondary and elementary principals.
Chapter 4:  
FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

Similar to staffing patterns in public school systems, the majority of faculty employed in the 1,174 National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) member schools is women. Current NAIS demographic data indicate that school leadership pipelines are filled with female faculty, along with middle and senior-level administrators who consistently demonstrate their leadership capacity. Yet women remain unable to achieve access to the most influential leadership positions at a rate equal to their male colleagues (NAIS, 2010). Through the lens of post-structural feminist theory, this phenomenological study examines the gendered nature of leadership roles in independent schools and the ways in which this cultural phenomenon acts to inform the strategies used by women to prepare for and enact positions of leadership within this environment. The specific research questions used to frame this study were:

- How do women, who self-identify as aspiring school leaders, understand the strategies they use to prepare for and enact leadership roles in independent school settings?
- Do these women seek out mentor-protégé relationships, networks of support, and/or sponsorship from “recognized” independent school leaders; if so, then how does this work?
How does gender influence the strategies women use to prepare for and enact independent school leadership roles?

Utilizing qualitative research methods that build upon a pilot study (Feibelman, 2011), which examined the ways that women (African American and White) are mentored for leadership roles within independent schools, the analysis and findings are derived from semi-structured interviews with 14 participants whose narratives are grounded in their lived experience as independent school leaders, as well as 2 women (African American and White) who work as executive search consultants and whose clients include independent schools. Correspondingly, an examination of school publications and school websites for the women who participated in this study and field notes from conferences sponsored by the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), National Association of Principals of Schools for Girls (NAPSG), and the North Carolina Association of Independent Schools (NCAIS) serve to inform the findings presented in this chapter.

Faithfully enacting a feminist interrogation of the cultural context that informs women’s leadership preparation (Olesen, 1994, 2003), the study engages women in multiple levels of conversation to illuminate points of tension between settled and unsettled periods in the lives of aspiring women leaders, and explores the strategies of action (Swindler, 1986) used to negotiate the points of discursive disjunction (Chase, 1995, 2003). This chapter presents the results of the data analysis for the indicated research questions.

---

31 Chase (1995) defines *discursive disjunction* as the intersection between women’s narratives that describe their professional work and talk about their personal experiences with inequality (Chase, 1995, p. 11).
This chapter provides a detailed discussion of the findings and analysis, and is organized in the following manner: (a) an overview of the participants, (b) conceptual framework, (c) culture, (d) leadership, (e) strategies of action, and (f) discursive realms.

**Overview of Participants**

**Biographical Sketches of Participants in the Study**

Interviews were conducted with 14 women who serve in formal leadership positions ranging from a recently appointed department chair to two sitting heads of independent schools. Additionally, to triangulate the data, two interviews were conducted with female search consultants employed by different firms that conduct executive searches for independent schools (see Table 1, Demographic Data).

Irrespective of their current affiliations, 14 participants have worked as either classroom teachers and/or occupied formal leadership roles in 40 different independent schools, which enables them to draw upon a deep and broad range of experience as independent school educators. Five participants in this study have worked at 4 or more independent schools, while the average number of schools a participant has been affiliated with is 2.9. Only 3 of the participants are presently employed at the independent school where they began their career, and 2 of the 14 participants have spent their whole career in single-sex, girls’ schools. Although the preponderance of women in this study

---

32 **Elizabeth Strong** is White and in her forties. With more than twenty years of executive search experience she works for a small firm that specializes in leadership searches for higher education and not-for-profit organizations. **Julie Watts** is African American and in her sixties, and now a senior search consultant with a firm that works with independent, private, and charter schools. Prior to working as a search consultant, Julie was the founding director of an independent school consortium and an independent school administrator and classroom teacher.
are currently working at single-sex (girls) schools (9), the majority of participants has multiple years of experience as educators in co-ed institutions. Two of the participants had previous careers outside the field of education; whereas the other 12 women began their careers as teachers in an independent or public school. Only 1 of the search consultants began her career in education, occupying multiple instructional and leadership roles in independent and public schools.

The following biographical sketches provide a preliminary discussion of each participant’s leadership history. The confidentiality agreement signed by participants provided that the study would maintain her privacy, and actual names, school names, and other identifying information have been changed to assure confidentiality. However the independent school world is quite small, making it impossible to predict whether real anonymity is actually possible to maintain. Attending a national conference, a regional workshop, participating in a job search, or conducting a reference check often underscores this reality. Operating within such a close-knit environment informs my approach to presenting each participant’s life story, revealing the tension I have negotiated as both researcher and trusted confidant. On several occasions, participants offered comments about the therapeutic benefits of an interview, while others expressed pleasure with having an opportunity to share a leadership story with a “sympathetic listener.” These feelings of collegial intimacy are most certainly an outgrowth of qualitative methodology, but they also represent, from my perspective, the

---

33 School enrollment data, historical information about each school, and school missions were gathered from the schools’ websites (see Table 6).
unselfconscious desire women have to develop purposeful relationships with other female leaders in the independent school world.

Jill Breton is White and in her early thirties; she and her husband hope to start a family some day, but for now she is focused on her career. Currently the assistant middle school director at the Carter School, a single-sex (girls) day and boarding school located in the Northeast. Jill comes from a family of educators and is an independent school graduate. Her father has been the head of several independent schools and her mother has worked along side Jill’s father in school admissions and advancement. In addition, both Jill and her brother have chosen careers in education. The culture of independent schools has shaped her family life for as long as Jill can remember.

Growing up on campuses where her parents worked and for three years attending a school led by her father has offered Jill a front-row seat from which to observe the enactment of formal leadership roles. She recalled that even now, conversations around the family dinner table often focus on school life and leadership, and she continues to rely on her father’s mentoring while she pursues increasingly visible leadership roles. Currently an assistant middle school director at a single-sex (girls) school, Jill observed that the relationship she has with her father has allowed her to ask questions about conducting her next job search that she might have been more hesitant to ask of the head of school.

Jill’s proximity to someone who has years of experience as a formal leader distinguishes her from other participants in the study. As such, when describing leadership characteristics she perceives as critical to her own success, Jill reflexively
draws upon childhood memories regarding the ways her father performed the functions of a school leader. Recalling a time when her father moved into a new leadership position, Jill makes a point to emphasize how independent school leadership extends beyond the boundaries of the campus and into the greater community.

The first summer I can remember before sixth grade, we were at a different family’s house just about every week to meet a group of people or go have ice cream with this family…particularly in school leadership you're usually moving into a new community when you take on a leadership position and there's a lot to learn and there's a lot of history and culture and you just have to sit back and let it all sink in (J. Breton, personal communication, May 21, 2012)

Her childhood memories also include living in a family apartment in a boys’ dormitory, where slightly older male students surrounded her. According to Jill, her strong sense of self-confidence resulted from the way her parents created opportunities for her to believe that she was able to compete on a level playing field with those boys.

I never once grew up thinking that I was any less qualified or that boys were simply better than girls. And I think that carried with me into middle school. And I never thought that I shouldn’t do something simply because I was a girl. There were plenty of times where the boys just drove me crazy—like student government elections and the boys would win because there were more boys to vote for the boys. But I think that just made me even more determined. So I think there are a lot of little pieces that have added up over the years. (J. Breton, personal communication, July 10, 2012)

Jill came to realize during college, while she was coaching a 5-year-old boys’ ice-hockey team, that she wanted a career in education. Beginning as a teaching fellow at a single-sex (boys) school immediately after graduating, it was during those early years that she benefited from peer mentors who supported her development as a teacher. Jill had the opportunity to hone her instructional skill set, while becoming fully immersed in school life beyond the classroom, e.g., committee work and coaching at the girls’ school
across the street. Dissatisfied with the school’s location and questioning how well she fit into the culture of a highly traditional boys’ school, she chose to enroll in a graduate program in educational leadership, and used continuing her education as an exit strategy. Beginning a master’s program just happened to intersect with an unanticipated opportunity to begin a full-time teaching and coaching position at another single-sex (girls) school.

Jill’s determination has prompted her to pursue leadership roles that will advance her career. Since joining the faculty in 2003, she has moved from classroom teacher to assistant director of the middle school. In the last two years, she has begun interviewing for middle school division head positions and has augmented her search by actively recruiting female mentors that can offer her projects to work on and leadership experiences that will fill out her resume.

Although Jill’s self-confidence and forthright ambition were easy to discern in both interviews, there were poignant moments when her personal narrative got tangled-up in the lines where gender and leadership intersect. An off-handed comment that attending the NAPSG conference in October (2011) made her realize that it was okay to “brag” about her achievements contrasted with the self-assuredness that underscored her description of applying for a leadership position at Carter—

The school was looking for a permanent director of middle school to replace the interim, I did put my name forward and expressed an interest. At that point I had not finished grad school yet, it was probably a little early for me but I thought well, it can't hurt 'cause I'm here and I'm not gonna leave if I don't get it. (J. Breton, personal communication, May 21, 2012)
Although she was not offered the position, she benefited from having expressed interest in taking up a leadership role. Five years ago, when the previous assistant middle school director announced that she was leaving, she knew that Jill would be interested and gave her a heads up before she making an official announcement. She was the only internal candidate and, after a brief search, the head of school offered her the position. Although little has changed in terms of roles and responsibilities over the past four years, Jill has benefited from mentorship offered by the head of school.

Now having gone through a number of interviews for different positions over the last year and a half, Jill has determined that in order for her to be perceive as a competitive candidate, she needs more responsibility supervising faculty and staff. She half-heartedly described her experience with interviews during which she perceived that her gender and/or girls school experience is viewed as insufficient preparation for the leadership demands that come with a co-ed school setting. Jill is somewhat hesitant to question whether a man would face similar scrutiny as a candidate for a comparable position.

When it comes to women’s leadership and we've certainly seen it with some teachers this year, and that's just the role of family and the role of kids. Because for as confident and prepared as I was for some interviews, I did walk out of some interviews going I wish that the whole family conversation could be a little bit more transparent and that schools who are doing the hiring weren't bound by certain restrictions. I don't have kids right now but certainly in the back of my mind I'm thinking okay, is this school wondering if I'm gonna have kids in the next couple of years or what will that do to my commitment to the school. So I think that does put female candidates at somewhat of a disadvantage, sort of the elephant in the room. (J. Breton, personal communication, May 21, 2012)

Jill wrestles with the apprehension she has felt when having to negotiate the subtle and not so subtle ways that her marital status, her husband’s support of her career, and their
plans for having a family have crept into these interviews. Thinking aloud, she suggests a justification for this line inquiry, proposing that because independent schools often employ school leaders who live on campus, it is important for them to consider not just candidate’s qualifications, but also her family composition. But in the end, she remains conflicted about her explanation and wonders,

Am I being judged fairly and just on my own merits as a leader, or if I'm up against a male candidate, does that put me at a disadvantage—someone wondering whether or not I'm gonna be taking time off for making a family and how does that impact my role as a leader. (J. Breton, personal communication, May 21, 2012)

Paradoxically, when Jill describes her mother’s professional career, she casts her in a supportive role, playing the spouse who followed her husband from school to school and often working closely with him, in a subordinate leadership position. Commenting on the relationship between her parents’ professional and personal roles, Jill depicts her mother as an unsung hero who made significant contributions as a school leader, but has never been perceived as having the same degree of gravitas as her father. It is this same dichotomy that Jill is facing as she wrestles with the ways that her gender and the culture of independent schools intersect as she seeks out a new leadership role.

**Connie Burr** is White and in her early fifties, now in her third year as the lower school director at the Cliffs School, a single sex (girls) day school on the West Coast. Connie began her career in independent schools as a physical education teacher and athletic director.

It is easy to be impressed by Connie’s outgoing personality, genuine warmth, and sincere professionalism, yet she is distracted by an end-of-year performance evaluation
that has visibly shaken her self-confidence. Revealing more vulnerability than she had intended, Connie appreciates having a chance to talk about the challenges she has been facing. Without a dependable network of support, Connie has had to rely on her ingenuity and ambition since becoming division director.

Raised in the Northeast and the oldest of five children, Connie was never expected to attend college, much less build a career as a teacher and independent school leader on the West Coast. A life-long athlete, wife, and mother of a teenage son, she reflexively references these roles when describing the professional choices she has made throughout her career. But it is her innate ability on the playing field that figures prominently in our first interview as she recalls the nickname she earned as an athlete—the “Burr Blaze”—which she explains is emblematic of her enthusiasm for whatever she takes on.

Connie’s desire to teach maps back to her childhood and earning her undergraduate degree in elementary education was part of the plan, as was being a school leader. She said, “I was always a leader in all things that I’ve done in my life. Whether it be in undergraduate school being an R.A., or being a captain of sports teams that I was on” (C. Burr, personal communication, June 21, 2012). This sense of herself as a natural leader guided her long-range career planning. When a tight job market for elementary teachers prevented her from securing a teaching position, she began a graduate program in administration, thinking this would help to prepare her for the day she became a school leader.

Her desire to lead serves as a recurrent theme as she describes with pride the
leadership roles she had in grammar school, during college, and in athletics. Seemingly at the heart of Connie’s plan for career advancement has been her ability to map out each of her moves. Volunteering to take on special projects, working extra hours in an admissions department, and completing coursework to become a learning resources teacher illustrate the intentional effort Connie has made to be recognized for her leadership potential. She recalled,

I knew that I wanted to do this and I knew that I didn’t think I was ready at the time. I had hoped I would use the degree later and there were times in that time frame between when I got that degree and when I was hired where I would question whether I would ever get there… (C. Burr, personal communication, September 1, 2012)

Absent from her narrative are examples of the networks of support she has created or the mentoring she has received from formal school leaders who have invested in her future. Instead, two narratives emerge as she describes moving from one school to the next. Sticking to the script she has practiced, Connie explains her move from one school to the next as a matter of personal agency and all along positioning herself to step into a visible leadership role. But her description of working at one school for ten years and repeatedly being overlooked when leadership roles became available suggests a second storyline. This one is punctuated by the experience of being made to feel invisible by a male supervisor. Still wrestling with her past experience of bias, Connie remarks, “Whether it was who I was as a person at that time, or who he was and his reaction to women my age, I have no idea. I can only tell you what my experience was and I didn’t feel supported” (C. Burr, personal communication, June 21, 2012).

The desire to have reliable support systems that encourage her leadership
development serves as a reoccurring theme throughout her personal narrative. Talking specifically about the self-doubt she has started to experience since becoming the lower school division head at Cliffs School, she draws a connection between her waning confidence and the revolving door in the head of school’s office (at the time of our interviews, Connie was preparing in her third year to work with the third head of school). This situation has only been compounded by a strident faculty, which resented the quick appointment made by a departing head of school at the end of her first year.

I wonder sometimes if I was given the position because the head of school was leaving and they need stability. It definitely undermines me, and I’m, and this place, it’s a wonderful school, and process is really important. There are faculty members who are my age who have kind of moved beyond it, but there is, remember I told you earlier one of my students, you know, who knew me as a PE teacher she is on the staff here. And I think that she has a hard time seeing me in a different role than being a PE teacher, and so I think, I feel that comes up for me sometimes. Like how did I get here, and I can feel it undermine my confidence. (C. Burr, personal communication, June 21, 2012)

Surrounded by constant change, Connie realized that she could not expect to find a mentor or a network of support at Cliffs School, so she used her personal agency and professional associations to identify an executive coach with whom she could work with outside of the community. In our second conversation, she is eager to talk about what she has learned and the benefits of having created a dependable support system. Having a mentor has enabled Connie to develop a wider array of effective leadership strategies. In particular, this relationship supports her efforts to closely examine specific challenges and to identify approaches that she can use in her work.

**Siobhan Carroll** is White and in her late thirties. In her fourth year at Woods School, a single-sex (girls) day school in the Northeast, Siobhan is the director of
enrollment and lower school admissions. There is an unmistakable feeling of sturdiness about Siobhan, which she attributes to being the only child of older parents. She describes childhood as a mixture of public school rough-and-tumble that was followed by a privileged independent school education, which allowed her to find her passions and become a student leader. Siobhan takes particular care to portray this time period as one filled with losses as well as gains. Losing her father at an early age, she is still able to recall the ways he instilled in her the values of social justice before his death. Her mother’s efforts to teach her the habits of perseverance continue to shape both personal and professional choices she makes.

Beginning her career as a lower school associate teacher at a co-ed day school, Siobhan described her first independent school community as an incredible place to work because “[teacher] associates were really valued…you taught, you got a lot of hands-on experience” (S. Carroll, personal communication, May 24, 2012). But it was her summer involvement while in college, working with inner city youth attending an academic enrichment program, that captured her imagination and set her on a career path as an educator. For Siobhan, teaching and social activism are interrelated, and she frequently references her strong feelings about issues of social justice and describes the ways she works to foster an inclusive independent school community. Married to an African American man, and the mother of two bi-racial children—a boy and a girl—who have attended independent schools, Siobhan’s membership in a racially diverse family personalizes the point of intersection between independent school culture and her commitment to promoting the values of racial, economic, and cultural diversity within a
socially privileged school setting.

Recognized by her colleagues as a highly successful school leader, Siobhan noted, “if I persevere I can generally get what I want. I don't generally get what I want the first time around. But I really do stick with things and it has certainly paid off for me” (S. Carroll, personal communication, May 24, 2012). Her robust involvement in the life of several different independent school communities offers a crisp example of how she has used this personal agency, frequently taking on roles that have increased her visibility as an informal school leader. While an associate teacher, Siobhan lead a SEED (Seeking Educational Equality in Diversity) group for fellow teachers, which offered participants a chance to examined their own personal stories and how their lived experiences inform their pedagogical choices in terms of race, gender and sex, and socio-economic status. When she moved into a full-time teaching position, Siobhan was asked to take on special projects in admissions. At a third independent school, she continued her practice of taking on high-visibility projects while teaching in the lower grades. Each of these career moves offered Siobhan the opportunity to explore the cultural similarities and differences among independent schools.

Earlier in her career, Siobhan felt like she was sought out for leadership opportunities that gave her a “big voice” and lots of visibility. But recently she was disappointed about not being made director of admissions and started to question why she was never able to achieve the same degree professional gravitas that she had enjoyed at other schools. Siobhan used this experience as a catalyst to begin a deliberate search for a formal leadership role, sending her resume to other independent schools in the town. She
commented, “I’m sort of a person that wouldn't give up on something like that, so I applied to other schools with similar positions” (S. Carroll, personal communication, May 24, 2012).

Since arriving at the Woods School, Siobhan has valued the opportunity to work closely with a head of school that has taken an active interest in her leadership development. This relationship has provided her with the chance to both expand her role and to pursue professional development opportunities, like the NAIS Aspiring Heads Program, which will prepare her for leadership roles that carry greater influence and authority. Siobhan also recognizes that having the head’s sponsorship has made it possible for her increase her professional visibility as a leader without having to once again enter the job market. Siobhan emphasizes the importance of her mentor-protégé relationship by referencing recent feedback she received from the head of school, talking about how she was praised for her ability to push people out of their comfort zones without pushing them so hard that she pushed them away. Her obvious satisfaction with the description of her leadership style frames an interesting contrast in Siobhan’s leadership development.

Her efforts to describe what she perceives as her positive habits of perseverance and speaking with a passion are unsettled by contrasting examples of her self-proclaimed lack of confidence. Siobhan acknowledges,

I think I’m beginning to take on, in my own life as a woman, the messages that I’m talking about that we want to girls to take at Smithson School. Because I’ve taken all these risks recently, and I’m trying to embrace rather than be made terrified by it and I don’t think that would have happened for me if I were still at a co-ed school. I don’t think it ever would have been my thought process. (S. Carroll, personal communication, May 24, 2013)
Siobhan confided that she does not often feel comfortable asking for help. Fearing that she would be perceived as insufficiently prepared for her new leadership role at Woods, she avoided asking “how to” questions. Siobhan says,

Probably I still don’t ask people how to do things a lot. But I definitely ask for feedback on things I do, so if I write a letter I will send it to someone else to just look at. Or I don’t feel bad about that, or, or question doing that, but I’m, I’m resistant for people to think I don’t know something or sure. (S. Carroll, personal communication, June 7, 2012)

The threads of her personal narrative define the conditions under which Siobhan’s visibility as a female leader has flourished and when she has needed to translate childhood lessons of perseverance into socially acceptable leadership practices.

Angela Charles is African American and in her forties. Recently, she has returned to school to complete a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership and Policy. According to Angela, her research is one more way that she expresses her commitment to promoting equity and justice for all learners. Since 2004, she has worked as the director of admission and advancement at the Sage School for Girls, a single-sex (girls) school on the West Coast, and it is easy to appreciate how natural the fit has been between Angela and this independent school community. As Angela narrates the details of her career, she unconsciously blends her personal and professional spheres. Explaining that she “inherited” her position as admissions director from a close friend, who after announcing that she was leaving the position at Sage, asked that she consider meeting with the head of school about the job. Although she was coming from a career in higher education, Angela was already familiar with the school’s mission and knew it closely aligned with
her personal and professional values. Now approaching her tenth year at the school, Angela has begun to prepare for the next leadership role.

I definitely think it’s my responsibility to be as prepared as possible for whatever opportunity comes my way. That means, you know, always engaging in a process of reflection, always engaging in a process of self-improvement, always honing my skills. I consider myself ambitious…I like to be a little bit of a free spirit, [but] I want to be able to choose my next thing. (A. Charles, personal communication, September 4, 2012)

Grounded in the belief that it is important to practice being a leader in a variety of settings, Angela has served on non-profit boards, including the local Junior League, and is president of the alumni chapter of her sorority. She thinks, “Practicing your leadership in different places helps you figure out where you can refine, where you can be better, how you can be a better servant, all of that” (A. Charles, personal communication, July 23, 2012). But Angela believes that while careers are defined by a combination of hard work and individual talent, it is equally important that she honor a spirituality that keeps her connected to an inner voice. At times, that inner voice leads her to what she calls her “wisdom circle,” for mentoring and advice, describing the circle as a loosely connected network of people who she turns to when making a big decision. The network includes both men and women that she has a personal connection to and whose professional skill set she admires.

The dual themes of ongoing professional growth and personal preparedness run throughout Angela’s narrative. Yet preparedness and career planning are placed at odds when she describes her lack of intentionality regarding future leadership plans. She believes her focus should be on equipping herself for the next opportunity and the rest will take care of itself. But Angela’s “wait and see” stance is also informed by her
experience as a woman of color working in the world of independent schools. “I’ve seen a lot of people of color get cycled through independent schools, and every situation is different, but it is not easy to be one of the only ‘fill in the blank’ in a school” (A. Charles, personal communication, July 23, 2012).

The uniqueness of her current school setting further serves to distinguish her leadership narrative. With an enrollment of a little over 100 girls and an activist parent body, steadfastly committed to giving their daughters an opportunity to develop into confident, academically ambitious young women, the school community is pledged to fostering a culture of economic, racial, and cultural diversity. According to Angela, this has enabled Sage to create an independent school environment that more accurately reflects what the broader world looks like. In addition to having a significant number of women in leadership roles, the Sage School’s leadership team is more culturally and racially diverse than other independent schools. Angela values being surrounded by this degree of diversity, which includes a head of school who is a Hispanic male and a former teacher at the school. Angela describes him as a steady and disciplined academic leader, and as someone she looks to for counsel and feedback. Their peer mentoring relationship allows her to benefit from his leadership experience without the risk of being censured.

When elaborating on her leadership practice, Angela naturally draws upon her professional experience, which has taught her the importance of having a well-developed sense of personal agency, because “Knowing who you are is probably the number one thing [and] independent schools are still not super diverse in leadership” (A. Charles, personal communication, July 23, 2012). Angela does not believe she has anything to
prove, but is mindful of the inherent risks that come with being seen as “the other” in a predominantly White and economically privileged independent school setting. She expresses a hope that whenever she does take on a new school leadership role, the position will continue to honor her whole self.

I want to be able to surround myself with pictures of family and friends, without people making assumptions; I want to be passionate without being considered angry; I want to be expressive without people being afraid of that. (A. Charles, personal communication, September 4, 2012).

But she worries the next school could be a place where inclusivity is not the norm and the tough conversations that come with formal leadership roles will be much more challenging to participate in as a woman of color. Mustering the stamina to negotiate a less-inclusive environment seems to weigh heavily on Angela, keeping her rooted in the Sage community for the immediate future.

**Helen Cooper** is African American and in her mid-forties. Since 2010 she has been the middle school division head at the Summerfield School, a Pre-K through grade twelve, co-ed, day school located in the Northeast. In July 2013 she will become the first African American head of a pre-kindergarten through grade 8 independent school in an adjacent community. Speaking about the qualities that make her an effective leader, Helen begins by talking about her childhood.

I think my leadership qualities come from my childhood and my family position, and the way I was nurtured in that way, from early, and then grew as I went through my own schooling. [I learned] from watching the leaders in my life, beginning with my mother, and then as a professional watching the people who were my direct supervisors, and taking notes on what worked and what didn’t, and then at a certain point in my career having the guts, the whatever you want to call it, to step up and say to people I want you to teach me about leadership, that’s how I’ve learned to be a leader. (H. Cooper, personal communication, March 4, 2011)
After completing her undergraduate studies, Helen began her teaching career as an assistant teacher at a single-sex (girls) school in an urban setting. “I didn’t even know independent schools existed until I was applying for a job through Carney, Sandoe and Associates, a placement agency that worked with independent schools” (H. Cooper, personal communication, March 4, 2011). But she went from knowing nothing about independent schools to being part of an elite girls’ school that she described as being so far from public transportation that she had to walk twenty minutes, through a neighborhood that was completely white, to reach the school.

During this time, as part of a fellows program, she became acquainted with people in other independent schools in the area, and she benefited from the program’s executive director’s assistance with networking. It was these relationships that led to her next teaching position at a storefront school in a racially and economically diverse community in the city. In this setting, she was a head teacher and felt meaningfully connected in the community, but Cooper also noted that she learned a lot of lessons about how not to be a leader, emphasizing the lack of relational trust between the adults in the community. She remained at the school for only two years before moving to a progressive day school, where she as a lower school classroom teacher. Ultimately sensing that she would never be perceived by the head of school as worthy of his mentoring, Cooper relocated to a fourth independent school after the birth of her first child. In this fourth school, over a dozen years, leadership opportunities presented themselves, e.g., department chair and diversity practitioner. Concurrently, Helen continued to hone a repertoire of leadership strategies that she would use to advance her career goals.
Always observing and looking for the opportunity to take on leadership roles, Helen explained how the culture of each of these schools served to inform how much access she might have to leadership roles, prompting her to seek and create opportunities beyond the restrictive structures of a single independent school community. Co-founder of a diversity consulting team, as well as a member of both regional and national independent school diversity committees and a trustee for a pre-K-8 independent school, Helen observes,

There isn’t a system of you get to a certain level in your career and then there’s a mentorship, you know and here’s how you get into it, and you can see it as you come up and you can choose it or not. I feel like some of us at least have to create that on our own, and it’s hard to know that you have to create that on your own, so it takes time for that, that you have to ask for it, what are you asking for? (H. Cooper, personal communication, March 4, 2011)

Helen speaks with authority about the intersection between race and gender in her personal and professional life. Her attentiveness to social identity has played a prominent role in her ability to make sense of how leadership in independent schools is defined and distributed. Yet at the start of her career, Helen said she was told to “calm that down; really that’s so touchy; people don’t want to talk about race; you’re putting it in peoples’ faces too much; you’re beating them over the head with it” (personal communication, March 4, 2011). She chose not to take their advice and, as a result, she has experienced some “hard knocks” that made her efforts to become a school leader much more challenging. By the mid-90s, as NAIS began to actively encourage the development of more inclusive independent school communities, Cooper found increased support amongst women attending the annual NAIS People of Color conference. According to Cooper,
There were those women who were always there but who I would only see at this conference. I couldn’t even tell you where they lived in the country, but they were the same faces in the same place, and were just as welcoming every time. They would sort of bring us over and talk to us and help us if we were having a hard time and say, “You call me if you need something.” Or just [be] somebody to sympathize [with] and say, “God I know that’s hard. You let me know if you need some help.” They knew who I was. Those were leaders who helped me to keep up my energy and to figure out where I was going to go and how I was going to do it. They would stand up to answer a question in the audience [at the People of Color Conference] and say something awesome that showed that they were strong; they knew where they came from; they were proud of their race and they were not taking any nonsense. Then there were lots of other leaders along the way too. People who I ended up working with who would take me under their wing(s) and say, “Look, you’re not alone. Maybe we can work together on that,” or “Let’s have dinner.” I don’t always listen to that right away because I like to do it by myself sometimes, but those kinds of influences really helped to keep me going. (H. Cooper, personal communication, March 4, 2011)

In the spring of 2010, Helen was appointed the middle school division head at a neighboring independent school. She recalled speaking at a student assembly where she was asked to introduce herself to the middle school students she would be working with in September. Helen remembers saying:

Hi. I’m going to be your new middle school head next year and I was thinking, as I was coming over here, what things would you want to know about me. I’m an African American woman, I’m in an interracial marriage, [and] I have three bi-racial kids. (H. Cooper, personal communication, March 4, 2011)

Helen purposefully used one of her first opportunities as a formal independent school leader to talk about her social identity in order to publicly align her experience as a woman of color within a historically White, privileged independent school culture, and to acknowledge the role “personal” agency has played in her leadership development.

**Michaela Curry** is African American and in her late fifties. Since 2009, she has been the upper school division head of the Mayfield School—a Northeastern single-sex (girls) day school, founded in 1892 and presently serving 658 students in grades 3
through 12. One of Michaela’s most distinctive characteristics is her speech, which conveys a youthful enthusiasm when narrating tales of personal adventure—moving to Paris when she was five years old and her brief stint in the corporate world following college—and risk-taking, as a young French teacher, venturing into the independent school world from public school.

Michaela is a spectator of sorts and this characteristic is underscored in the anecdotes she draws upon to illustrate her strategies for becoming a formal school leader. While she has worked purposefully to become a leader in a number of different independent school communities, she shares that she has begun each journey as a keen observer. The first ten years that she spent at the Mayfield School are filled with instances of how she approached learning about the school’s culture and went about recruiting peer-mentors who could answer her questions. Michaela would then initiate a high-profile project of her own creation and use her accomplishment as a springboard for pursuing another formal leadership opportunity that could increase her influence in the school. But not until returning to Mayfield in 2010 as the upper school division head has she had the benefit of a formal school leader who is invested in mentoring her professional growth.

In addition to starting her independent school teaching career at Mayfield, Michaela served for six months as the interim upper school division head. It was Michaela’s diversity initiatives—designing new courses and sponsoring student organizations—at the Mayfield School that initially positioned her to be tapped when an interim division head position opened up in the mid-90s. But once in the role, Michaela
lacked the head of school’s sponsorship and was left to rely on peer-mentors for advice and feedback. Mayfield was not yet ready for an African American woman to lead its upper school and ultimately, Michaela was counseled by the school’s head to pursue leadership opportunities at independent schools that were more receptive to diverse candidates. As a result of this advice, Michaela’s career path has taken a circuitous route, leading her to occupy a variety of leadership roles in independent schools on both coasts.

The daughter of an African American mother and a German Jewish father, at the age of five, Michaela and her younger brother immigrated with their parents to France in an effort to escape the racial bias “interracial” children would inevitably face in the United States. Michaela describes the formative experience of the move, emphasizing how it demanded that she re-establish her sense of self within an unfamiliar culture. She also regards her childhood in Paris as having informed her ability to create a professional life in independent schools because they felt very much like the school she attended as a girl. But just like her Parisian childhood as an “ex-pat,” Michaela knows she is always susceptible to being perceived as an outsider in an independent school community.

Although there have been a number of peer mentors who have shared their “job knowledge” with Michaela, before returning to Mayfield, she had not benefited from mentors or sponsors who recruited her to head-up high profile projects or encouraged her to pursue new leadership roles that would give her a chance to develop new skills or increase her self-confidence. Previously it had been her ambition as a classroom teacher and the ability to successfully negotiate the challenges as an African American woman working with a predominantly White faculty and administration that had fueled her
Now having once more taken on the formal leadership role of division head at Mayfield, Michaela has been forced to reexamine the culture of independent school leadership and to begin to build a theory of practice. In our first meeting, Michaela described her leadership style as messy,

It's creating something new. I'm not interested in what it was like before, because it has nothing to do with me, or there was no role in it for me; so I'm looking for different ways of doing things. (M. Curry, personal communication, May 9, 2012)

Steady mentoring by the head of school has encouraged her to reflect on her leadership strategies and she expresses appreciation for the guidance and feedback she has received from a well-respected and highly experienced leader. However as Michaela talks about her leadership style, feelings of self-doubt emerge. She asserts,

The gender piece is easier in a girls’ school—because there’s so many women here, that I don’t think twice about the fact that I am a woman in a leadership position. A woman of color, I do think about that. (M. Curry, personal communication, March 22, 2011)

She continued, “Why do people want to listen to what I have to say? That's the question I always say to myself. Does anybody really want to listen to this?” By vocalizing her questions about racial identity, positionality, and organizational fit, she offers a complex frame for thinking about the strategies she has used to prepare to be an independent school leader.

In the space between our two conversations, a full year passed and Michaela has continued to work closely with her mentor. She speaks with greater confidence about her work during this second conversation, but her depiction of leadership as an agentic endeavor reflects her reliance on the strategies she has been using for decades:
One of the things I know about me is I don't have much patience. If I say something twice, I don't wanna have to say it a third time, I'm just gonna go ahead and do it myself. I do get pushback and criticism from the faculty. But part of my mission is to look at the upper school, what's working, what isn't working and make changes. And I try to have as many voices involved in the process. But sometimes I'm going to make a decision on my own because it just works better that way. (M. Curry, personal communication, May 9, 2012)

Her agentic leadership style maps back to her childhood in France when she was forced to develop strategies that allowed her to effectively mediate the demands of an unfamiliar culture and are further reinforced by her years of experience as an African American woman attempting to exercise her personal agency within independent school cultures that have historically resisted promoting women of color into leadership roles.

Susan Davis is White and in her fifties. She is currently in her nineteenth year at Ivy Hall, a co-ed day school located in the Northeast and is the acting interim dean of faculty and academic affairs. But Susan’s career has included being a grade dean, department chair, and classroom teacher, and her longevity at Ivy Hall has enabled her to work in each division—lower, middle, and upper—and to establish her self as a respected and innovative educator. Also a writer and mother of two school aged boys, Susan enjoyed a sabbatical in 2009, which was devoted to working on a novel and spending more time with her family. In addition, the year gave her a respite from the emotional and physical demands of being a dean of students.

Returning to the campus in the fall of 2010, Susan discussed her renewed sense of energy for her work with both students and teachers. Mindful that having taken a more dynamic approach to being a dean felt disruptive to some members of the community, she noted, “When I came back, I was definitely refreshed and recharged and sort a bull in
a China shop in some ways. I kept doing things that were not really part of my job
description” (S. Davis, personal communication, May 30, 2012). This enthusiasm lead
Susan to interview for a leadership position at another independent school—high school
division principal—but she was not ready to leave Ivy Hall and withdrew her candidacy.

I came back here feeling a little confused because I felt I was getting too big for
my britches or bumping against the ceiling or something in the position that I was
in. I didn't see anywhere to go within the school exactly so I was just left with
more questions. (S. Davis, personal communication, May 30, 2012)

Although she decided to stay at Ivy Hall, she also adopted an inquiry stance on
her practice, exploring new leadership practices, asking more questions, and inviting
teachers, students, and parents into problem-solving conversations. The generative nature
of her work further fueled her interest in taking a larger leadership role and ultimately led
her to approach the interim head of school—a woman in her 70s—for career advice.

Susan recalled the relational connection—

I really responded to her, in that she seemed very firm, clear and principled but
also very generous and warm. I thought that was an interesting combination
because my experience of someone before as a head it felt like its more raw in
some ways and defensive and that they had more difficulty being principled,
strong and warm, I found that very interesting in working with her. (S. Davis,
personal communication, May 30, 2012)

The advice she received was specific and strategic—she needed more experience
hiring and supervising faculty, being dean of faculty would be a good stepping stone to
becoming a principal; but she would eventually need to leave Ivy Hall because it would
be hard to move up within the organization. Shortly thereafter, a series of leadership roles
became available and the position of interim dean of faculty was one of them. The acting
head of school asked Susan to accept the position, claiming that the school needed some
stability and her long career at Ivy Hall, coupled with her interest in a more visible leadership role, was a good fit. As a result of her pre-disposition to seek out a growth-fostering relationship with the interim head of school, Davis positioned herself to be recruited for a high visibility leadership opportunity at Ivy Hall.

At the end of her first year as the interim dean of faculty and working alongside a newly-named, Hispanic male head of school, Susan described her relationship with him in vastly different terms from those she had used to depict her work with the female Interim Head—

It’s interesting. I really do feel he’s one of those push someone into a river and let them swim kind of thing in that he does give me a lot of authority and then insists I take it on, and talks to me a lot about… (S. Davis, personal communication, May 30, 2012)

Nevertheless, at the time of our first interview (May 2012), Susan expressed her confidence in the relationship and felt that she had received consistent support. Our second interview took place in early September (2012) and at that time her confidence in her relationship with the head of school had changed. Referring to his agentic leadership stance as a point of tension, she had lost the benefits of a growth-fostering connection and her leadership aspirations were at risk of being de-railed. Although Susan had taken up a highly visible leadership role, when her relationship with the head of school began to erode so did her confidence in her own leadership ability.

I felt like during the school year, last year, I could do no wrong with him and this summer he found something he was disappointed in me for and it was around the NAIS Report…He then increased my anxiety by saying, “If this is the work that you are doing there is no way this could be a permanent job for you.” I really reacted to that and I reacted to it by feeling very vulnerable and frightened and threatened… You know maybe a man would be motivated by that kind of threat;
that wasn’t my first response. (S. Davis, personal communication, September 5, 2012)

In response to changes in their mentor-protégé relationship, Susan has been focusing more of her efforts on building networks of support with women leaders at other independent schools in her area, attending leadership development workshops offered by regional independent school associations, and working with an executive coach.

**Pam Jackson** is White and in her early forties. In June 2012, she was appointed to the position of department chair at the Franklin School, a single-sex (girls) day school located in the Northeast. Having first taught at the college level, Pam’s entire independent school career has been at Franklin. The mother of two school-age girls, she began teaching at Franklin while pregnant with her first daughter. The on-site childcare made the school an appealing place to work and woven throughout her narrative is the desire to maintain a balance between work and family life. As she considers taking on the role of department chair in the coming year and its impact on family life, she observed, “women have those trade-offs about children and that limited time you have with them starts to factor in” (P. Jackson, personal communication, May 17, 2012).

Pam has constantly negotiated her work-life balance, with informal leadership opportunities such as participating in committee work, including a faculty advisory committee to the head of school. She has also been involved with developing and co-leading international travel opportunities that have expanded the school’s academic program. Although her engagement in the daily life of the school has increased Pam’s informal leadership presence on the campus, it was not until the head of school encouraged her to apply for the position of dean of faculty in 2011 that she began to
consider pursuing a formal leadership role. Pam explained, “When your head asks, you should apply” (P. Jackson, personal communication, May 17, 2012). Yet the selection process was driven by the political culture of the school, and as the interview process unfolded, Pam was unprepared for hearing members of the selection committee scrutinize her résumé and critique her contributions to the life of the school. Pam noted that a male administrator in the group went so far as to criticize what he perceived as her lack of commitment to professional development, although she had recently presented an academic paper at a national conference.

This experience prompted her to reflect more intentionally on the relationship between the school’s culture and how formal leadership is enacted. According to Pam, people have to trumpet their own achievements or they are not readily recognized for their informal leadership roles. Although she speaks animatedly about how, when, and where she could become a visible, formal leader at the school, Pam is clear that she needs mentoring. Drawing from her experience as a graduate student, she describes the benefits of a mentor-protégé relationship, and recalls that mentors gave her clear, specific directions about how to advance her career and did not wait for Pam to ask for their guidance. Instead, her mentors in graduate school were always thinking about what they could do to promote her visibility. Thus far her mentor-protégé experience at Franklin School contrasts sharply with graduate school, although her desire to increase her visibility is similar.

Bounded by her belief that the culture of a girls’ school should emulate the habits of a healthy workplace for young women, Pam is particularly critical of the explicit ways
that males are preferred for leadership positions at Franklin. Pam explained that the female head of school has written a series of blog posts about women’s leadership strategies, but has also appointed a cadre of men to key leadership roles. Pam noted,

… If we’re this school about women and women’s leadership, then we really need to be doing better modeling, and I said to her, “You know, your senior administration is now primarily male…You now have three men and yourself and one other woman”, and if we’re not doing it here, then where is it going to happen? (P. Jackson, personal communication, May 30, 2012)

Pam’s narration of her leadership experience is free flowing and serves as a cathartic break by offering her a “safe place” to examine the culture and habits she has to negotiate to become a visible school leader. Without a network of support or mentors on Franklin’s campus, she finds herself left alone to map out strategies that will prepare her to take on a more visible role as department chair in the coming school year.

**Regina Kunstenar** is African American and in her fifties. Since 2005, she has been the assistant director of admissions and coordinator of diversity and multicultural affairs at the Shaver School, a co-ed day school located in the Northeast. Her office wall is lined with degrees and Regina speaks with modesty and affection about her college days and her work as a doctoral student in clinical psychology. Before stepping into her current leadership role, Regina worked in the mental health field and as a consultant in higher education. Yet her description of graduate fellowships, post-doctoral studies, and opportunities for professional advancement are problematically aligned with anecdotes about her family life. It is apparent the two are woven tightly together as she explains that for many years, her husband’s ambitions and the work of raising their two children usurped her professional identity.
Regina describes this period as “filled with professional starts and stops,” as her husband changed jobs and moved the family from place to place to promote his career goals. With each move, she placed her professional plans on hold. Although their relationship informed all of her choices about work and family, when the marriage ended, Regina grew more confident about exploring opportunities where she could fully utilize her skills as a psychologist. This newfound self-assurance made her visible to leaders in the independent school community where her children were students.

I was very involved as a parent volunteer. [I took on] a lot of initiative and some of the administrators saw that, and so one day, they said, “Ya’ know, there’s this position opening, and you’re always here, anyway, so, why not?” And it was perfect. I’m newly divorced and needed to have a job, and fabulous. And it was perfect because everything that I had been doing for all these years just came together in this way. (R. Kunstenar, personal communication, May 1, 2012)

Regina finds that her work as a diversity practitioner has neatly aligned with her formal training and her experience as a person of color orients her thinking about the relationship between social identities and leadership within the context of independent school culture. While she seemed somewhat hesitant to discuss the ways in which gender and race have shaped her work as a school leader, Regina was quick to note the significant mentor-protégé relationships she has had have been with White men. Uncertain as to what drew these mentors to her, first in graduate school and now at Shaver, she believes her passion and engagement were part of the attraction.

I think they see someone who is driven, committed, passionate, hardworking, yeah. And I think that that’s kind of what they see initially, and then as we work together and kind of, push through things then they also see the vulnerable side, which, you know, allows me to hear feedback from them, to talk about feedback, to share concerns. So I think they’re also able to see that as well. (R. Kunstenar, personal communication, May 1, 2012)
While sharing her narrative, Regina explored the value these mentoring relationships have played in her leadership development and her descriptions also revealed an unexamined area of bias. For Regina, her mentors are White men, and women of color serve in the role of confidant. As an African American woman working in a school that until 1970 was dedicated to boys’ education, Regina’s framework for understanding formal leadership and social capital occurs within this specifically defined context. When asked about the boys’ school legacy and the all-male class photos in the halls, she prefers to focus on how much the school had changed over the years with respect to racial, cultural, and gender diversity. “There was a time when those [issues] loomed large, I don’t know if that’s the case anymore; we certainly have talked a lot about it” (R. Kunstenar, personal communication, May 1, 2012). Yet, her descriptions of the cultural landscape are filled with examples of the role gender preferences continue to play in leadership positions, the way power is distributed, and power relationships are enacted.

It is interesting [to be] in an environment where the power is mostly white men. We have a lot of women who are teachers, but learning how to be a leader, and how to do this work, which is difficult in and of itself; it’s been a journey! (R. Kunstenar, personal communication, May 1, 2012)

Race and gender are knitted together as she talks about pushing herself to participate in school-sponsored social activities that would provide her with an entrée to senior, White, male leadership. She notes, “as a person of color you learn to move in and out of different settings. You know code shifting” (R. Kunstenar, personal communication, May 1, 2012). Her systematic approach to establishing a working relationship with the head of school has served to both advance her leadership objectives
as the school’s diversity practitioner, while providing her with access to his insights about independent school culture and consistent mentoring.

When talking about how she struggles to stay connected to other women leaders in the community, Regina comments that it appears easier for male leaders to support each other.

Something is going on that prevents women from connecting. The focus is still the man. Who has their ear, who has their approval; and so we’ll throw a sister under the bus to get that [approval]. (R. Kunstenar, personal communication, June 7, 2012)

By acknowledging the school’s patriarchal culture, Regina is unexpectedly faced with considering the negative impact a challenge to the status quo would have on her future leadership prospects.

I mean, I think we would have to look at these men in a different way. Because [at present] you try to find ways to bond with them and be connected to them because you’re working with them, but they’re men, and they have their agenda. Because everyone’s trying to get to the top, I mean, we’re trying to be recognized for what we do, and if these are the people that we have to rely on to recognize us, then what does that do if we see them differently? (R. Kunstenar, personal communication, June 7, 2012)

Regina has learned that her visibility as a school leader is conditional. As a woman and person of color, she feels she has to actively accept that “the men are in charge.” Furthermore, she shares that she understands that for a woman to be valued by others as leaders within this independent school community, they must accept this patriarchal leadership model.

Hilary Riley is White and in her thirties. Beginning her thirteenth year working at the Carter School, a single-sex (girls) day and boarding school in the Northeast, she has served in a variety of leadership positions. Beginning as the assistant director of
admissions shortly after graduating from college, her roles have included ninth-grade class advisor and founding director of a girls’ summer leadership program; currently she is serving as the interim dean of students. Like other participants in this study who purposefully chose education as their career, Hilary attributes her involvement as a high school student, teaching in a summer program for underserved teens, as being the spark that ignited her journey. As part of her undergraduate studies, she earned a teaching certificate while continuing to work with the summer program.

Hilary’s narrative is framed by episodes of self-doubt. Referring to being a high school student, “I was always trying to convince myself that I’m okay. But there weren’t that many people at school that I had that were mentors, or that really keep an eye out for me,” and even now, despite her experience as a teacher and school leader, she still questions her confidence (H. Riley, personal communication, July 11, 2012). Vocalizing her need to negotiate her lack of confidence and her desire to take on a larger leadership role, Hilary connects her adolescent self to her feelings of anxiety about what lies ahead.

I was accepted into the program, and I won’t forget getting the letter [laughter] and having this moment of terror. Like, oh my God. What am I getting myself into? I don't know how to teach. I don't know how I'm going to do [that], and being very self-conscious and definitely [feeling a] lack of confidence. And I tell you that in detail because it very much reflects even how I felt when they asked me to be the interim dean of students this year; [laughter] and one of the decisions that, when I was deciding whether to take this position, I said to myself, “Okay, you were absolutely terrified the first time that you opened up that envelope, and it was a turning point in your life in terms of what you wanted to do. So maybe this is gonna be another turning point [laughter], so you have to go for it.” (H. Riley, personal communication, July 11, 2012)

Although Hilary acknowledges that after coming to the Carter School, she quickly learned all there was to know about the role of assistant admissions director and was
ready to move on after her second year, her ability to talk about her desire to feel challenged professionally contrasts sharply with her self-described lack of confidence. It has been her participation in an exceptional mentor-protégé relationship that has mediated this dissonance. For over a decade, the woman who first hired Hilary has guided her leadership journey by sharing her knowledge of the independent school world and creating high-profile opportunities that have increased her visibility. In addition, Hilary has benefited from the support of two heads of school who have invested in her leadership potential. The previous head of school made it possible for Hillary to earn an advanced degree by providing her with campus housing. More recently, the new head of school has given Hilary the resources to develop a signature summer leadership program that has enhanced Carter’s national profile as a leader in girls’ education. The sustained support of three women leaders throughout her independent school career has shaped the trajectory of her leadership journey.

A significant part of this leadership development has concentrated on Hilary’s ability to effectively manage relationships with colleagues and supervisors. Appreciating Carter’s highly collaborative and relational culture, Hilary has needed to balance her desire to honor personal relationships with colleagues while still serving the needs of the larger community. In so doing, recently Hilary has needed to assert her personal authority and has sought out the head of school to discuss problematic leadership practices in her department. Although Hilary has been able to establish herself as a respected advisor to the head of school and is trusted by her colleagues, she often struggles to feel truly confident of her leadership ability.
Appointed in 2000 as Head of the Mary Childs School, a southern single-sex (girls) day school, **Ruth Saunders** is White and now in her sixties. A southerner by birth and a graduate of a single-sex (girls) school, Ruth describes herself as “a product of the times.” One of five children, she remembers her parents being supportive of her interests, but not always understanding her determination and drive.

My father was a surgeon, my mother a retired nurse. My father was first generation Italian [American] and my mother was very French, so it was a somewhat interesting clash of cultures there; but I would say my always “stepping out” was something they weren't used to women doing; it was not part of their world. (R. Saunders personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Active in high school as both an athlete and a leader, she was expected to attend the local college upon graduation but,

I didn’t want to live at home and I really pushed and pushed; I lived in the dormitory. I pretended like I lived really far away. The first time I went home in my freshman year was Thanksgiving. (R. Saunders, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Ruth attributes her independence to being the oldest child in the family and having grown up, “with people that just didn’t take [the] status quo. It happened to be the mix of girls and women in this particular [high school] class—we just always as a class took things to the edge” (R. Saunders, personal communication, May 31, 2012).

Although the first half of her professional life was influenced by a series of moves prompted by her husband’s career, she shares that it was her ability to exercise her own agency that contributed to her continued success.

I think, from the get go, I wanted to be in charge of something. I have always wanted to have influence in what I was doing. So in my generation being from the Deep South, women went to college to be one of two to three things, a teacher, a secretary or a nurse. So of the three, I was most interested in teaching. (R. Saunders personal communication, May 31, 2012)
She shared that each time her husband relocated the family, Ruth capitalized on the situation by re-inventing her career in ways that added to her list of accomplishments.

Prior to Mary Childs School, Ruth served as a head of school for two, faith-based, K-8 schools and she has had extensive experience as a teacher and administrator in public and independent school settings. Ruth noted, “You know I’m pretty good at my job. So I think I won respect because I knew what I was talking about and I didn’t play the card that I’m the female” (R. Saunders, personal communication, May 31, 2012. Crediting her well-developed emotional intelligence, throughout her career, Ruth has leveraged her interpersonal skills to forge partnerships that have helped her reach her goals. She observed,

That's why I can work with any trustees, male or female, cause some female trustees I worked with don't like the fact that I'm a woman; they'd rather have a man there. Some men you know want to take me under their wing and help me to grow; I mean I can work all those kinds of people. (R. Saunders personal communication, May 31, 2012)

The examples she draws upon in her narrative exemplify her skillful use of communal leadership practices and her ability to avoid problematic gender stereotypes that could have otherwise forestalled her career.

According to Ruth, leading a school for girls is a singularly significant opportunity to model women’s leadership practices for the next generation. “So it's that mindset of, if it's a girls school and you're talking about developing leadership then you have to model leadership with female leadership” (R. Saunders, personal communication, May 31, 2012). But Ruth is quick to point out that independent school leadership
opportunities prefer males candidates, which is why she is eager to promote opportunities for aspiring women leaders in single sex (girls) schools.

I think those girls schools that have developed the concept of female leadership and are committed to it for their students, for their girls, I think those are the schools that are looking for a female head of school. So it's a natural, if you are looking to be a head of school, that you're gonna have more opportunity to be success in a search in a girls school. I think unfortunately there are females; there are women who are in search in co-ed schools who were there so that the search committee can look like they looked at women. But it's an ole boy's mindset that the leader has to be male. (R. Saunders personal communication, May 31, 2012)

The most senior participant in the study—in regard to age and breadth of leadership experience—Ruth’s personal narrative focuses on the importance she has placed on women seeking out leadership opportunities. Based on her lived experience, Ruth believes that women must employ different leadership strategies because they face a different set of challenges than their male equivalents. So she draws upon her own experience in order to be a role model for others and to purposefully promote opportunities for women to hone the skills they will need for their next leadership role.

The founding head of the Sierra Hills School, a 7-12 coed day school on the West Coast, Judith Stein is the only Jewish participant in the study. Having just celebrated her 60th birthday, she was eager to talk about the milestone it represented in her life and what the future holds.

I felt grateful, and I just kind of used the whole weekend as an opportunity to practice not feeling so depressed. I mean school is hard. I just turned 60 [and] do I stay here for five more years, which is an option in terms of my board. Although every year the enrollment and financial situation is just very challenging, the demographics here do not support this kind of school really. And the accumulation of that stress has been considerable, so my mindset recently is stick it out, five more years. But that doesn’t seem like a very generative place to be. (J. Stein, personal communication, June 11, 2012)
Looking back on her professional life, Judith talks about having spent two decades on a boarding school campus, serving as a classroom teacher, dorm director, department chair, interim director of international programs, and dean of curriculum, and then at age 48, becoming the founding head of the Sierra Hills School. Beginning her career as a language teacher she explained,

The one thing I was serious about was teaching; it was important to me to be the best teacher I could; I just wasn't sure about the rest of it at that time. I never thought about being a Head of School, it was not something I was aiming towards at all. But I’ve always thought it’s better to run things, than not run them. (J. Stein, personal communication, June 11, 2012)

When the opportunity to run a dorm on campus arose, she jumped at the chance.

More importantly, her leadership journey has been shaped by a long-standing mentor-protégé relationship with a female colleague who eventually became the head of school. Judith noted, “I cultivated her, she cultivated me,” and these close ties opened doors, allowing Judith to develop a repertoire of leadership strategies and greater visibility in the school community. As Judith’s leadership capacity flourished, she was encouraged by her mentor to begin a head of school search. In preparation, she attended the NAPSG Women’s Leadership Seminar and turned to her network of independent school colleagues as a rich resource of cultural knowledge. Simultaneously, changes in leadership were taking place in her boarding school community and Judith became doubly motivated to begin looking for opportunities at other schools.

Stein described in detail her approach—first interviewing people in key roles at other institutions in order to better understand the responsibilities of each position, she then organized mock interviews in order to role-play what was to come. Feeling
confident about her preparation, her search resulted in Judith becoming one of two finalists—both women—for a head of school job in a nearby community. However the school had never had a woman head and the board ultimately determined it was not ready to make that cultural leap. Neither woman was selected for the job, so the search was re-opened.

Judith recalled that the next head season, I was invited to join a lot of searches. And this one (Sierra Hills) eventually panned out. But Virginia (mentor) was very key in saying, “Come on, you need to do this, you can do it.” (J. Stein, personal communication, June 11, 2012)

However her mentor’s encouragement did not prepare Judith for the uneasiness she felt leaving her child to finish high school on the East coast as she moved West with her husband. Nor did she feel adequately prepared to redefine her relationships with colleagues and community members. Stein observed that,

…Having to have more formal relationships, [meant] I had to separate myself [and] I had to figure out a new way of being creative and dynamic. That was one of the painful lessons…there really is an unfortunate amount of truth in the no pain no gain aspect to leadership and growth, at least for me. (J. Stein, personal communication, June 11, 2012)

Returning to what the future holds, Judith grapples with her impression that boards are looking for heads of school in their 40s with young families, not women with more than 30 decades of independent school experience. She calls it a kind of look: “The young family, with the Labrador dog, who is going to commit to our school, and come here with their family, and have their kids come to our school” (J. Stein, personal communication, June 11, 2012). However, as she paints a picture of what she perceives as an idealized independent school leader, she also expresses her deep-seated frustration.
Grounded in her experience, Judith asserts that attitudes towards gender and leadership in independent school have not changed, “We’re still [operating] within the box of a certain way of looking at women in leadership.”

**Anne Taylor** is White and in her forties. Since 2009, she has been the upper school division head at Mary Childs School, a southern single-sex (girls) day school. It was Anne’s head of school who recommended I talk with her. Despite the personal introduction, I discovered that more so than other participants, it was important to find ways to connect personally. Anne was demonstrably concerned about the confidentiality of our conversation and I came to appreciate that during both interviews, we were each negotiating the tension between her concern with confidentiality and our desire to have an authentic conversation about women’s leadership experiences in independent schools.

Fluent in multiple languages, Anne spent a decade in the world of international business, travelling extensively for her job, before she became a teacher. She explained, “It wasn’t that I was old enough to have a midlife crisis, but you know, I wanted more” (A. Taylor, personal communication, June 27, 2012). Anne’s network of business and personal relationships led her to interview for a position at an independent school in her area. Expecting to receive career advice, instead she was offered a teaching position, which rapidly turned into a series of leadership roles at the school. But when a new head arrived, Anne sensed that the culture of the school was changing and she would need to look elsewhere if she wanted to realize her full leadership potential.

In both interviews, Anne conveyed a confident, deliberate tone as she described the strategies of action she has employed to achieve her goal of becoming a head of
school. Identifying herself as a planner, she has taken full advantage of mentoring relationships that could offer an insider’s knowledge of independent school culture. Additionally, she has pursued professional development opportunities, including participation in the NAIS Fellowship for Aspiring Heads and the NAPSG Women and Leadership Seminar. Each choice has been part of a calculated effort to expand her personal network of professional relationships so as to better position her in head searches. As she talked about her process, Anne made a point of emphasizing, “I’ve always been really decisive, so it’s never been hard for me to make a decision, but usually a good bit of it is my gut instinct, but I’ve been able to identify the characteristics that are driving the gut instinct.” (A. Taylor, personal communication, June, 27, 2012). This decisiveness is one of Anne’s strategies for increasing her leadership visibility.

Married to a corporate executive and the mother of two school-age sons, three years ago, Anne and her husband chose to re-locate their family so she could advance her career. Believing that mobility was essential to her leadership development, she accepted the position of upper school division head at Mary Childs School. From Anne’s perspective, she was faithfully enacting her “five-year plan,” but when she arrived on campus without a husband, she was unprepared for the school community’s reaction to her temporary status as a “single parent.” Prompted by the rumors about her personal life, she felt compelled to explain to relative strangers that her husband was in the process of moving his career to the family’s new location.

Anne draws upon her experience in the corporate world when talking about independent school culture. Inferring that both corporate and independent school settings
share a set of common denominators, e.g., board of directors, privately held assets, etc., she frames her experience at the point of intersection between these two realms. Over the years working with international clients, Anne had become accustomed to being the lone female on a team. She had a proven track record for building productive business relationships with men whose cultural heritage preferred patriarchal systems. But her experience as a division head and as a candidate in recent head searches has led her to believe that more is expected from independent school leaders than leaders in the corporate world.

Read a position description for a division head, or for a head of a school. [Schools] want a cross between Mother Theresa and the Dali Lama. They want your children to be perfect, they want you to walk on water. I don’t think everyone else has these expectations. I am sure if you want to be the CEO of Google they expect a lot. But for the size of organization, the revenue, the number of employees, the expectations for a person and their family are pretty darn high. (A. Taylor, personal communication, June 27, 2012)

Still Anne’s aspirations are set on becoming a head of school. Drawing upon her combined leadership experience and being a candidate in several searches, she talks about finding the right fit.

In March 2013 I received an email from Anne:

I'm so sorry to have missed you at NAIS! I was looking forward to finally meeting in person. Missing NAIS was the only downside to my appointment. How are things there in North Carolina? Please mark down my new contact info as I hope we will stay in touch.

The personal tone of Anne’s note is reminiscent of the dissonance that framed our previous conversations. While her habit of building a network of professional contacts, e.g. “I hope we will stay in touch,” she refrains from expressing any personal feelings about having finally realized her goal to be a head of school.
An independent school graduate, **Pamela Young** is African American and in her forties. She worked in independent schools for more than 17 years and since 2005, she has been the director of admissions at Collegiate Preparatory School. Pam’s personal narrative is punctuated by her love of independent school education, her determination to become a visible leader, and a passion for promoting an inclusive school culture. Having served in an array of instructional and administrative roles, Pam’s narrative exposes a well-developed sense of her ability to see the larger independent school world.

Her capacity to take in the broader landscape is informed by the leadership roles she has played as a diversity practitioner. Describing her engagement with diversity work as “a passion,” it has connected her to a dynamic professional network of independent school leaders and established her leadership value outside the bounds of a single school community. Ongoing participation in this network has also given Pam greater visibility at Collegiate Preparatory School.

I think in my school, I was already visible. I think the fact that all of a sudden there was this value placed on me. [Like], “Oh gosh, who is this person? If she’s been invited to be the co-chair [of an NAIS conference], who is this person on my staff?” And it’s so interesting because I think then there were parents that said, “She’s great. If you don’t find a role for her in some other capacity, she’s not gonna stay here. She’s gonna leave. There’s no way that she’s gonna stay here doing what she’s doing.” (P. Young, personal communication, July 10, 2012)

Still Pam remembers that only a few years ago, she felt she had hit the glass ceiling when passed over for the director of admissions position at the Phelps School. With apparent affection for an early mentor, she explained that over the years at Phelps, the head of school had placed her in positions that offered her the flexibility to raise a family as well as return to graduate school. But according to Pam, the head did not “think
Eager to take on a larger role, Pam found herself recruited by a colleague to lead a new initiative at Collegiate Prep. Although she was raising three children and going through a divorce, Pamela accepted the job. She remembers,

[I] just knew that failure was not an option…it was an incredible year of transition. I worked probably the hardest I’ve ever worked in that first year and have just found really great success. (P. Young, personal communication, July 10, 2012)

As one of only a few African American people on faculty, Pamela is especially attentive to the ways her racial identity has set her apart from other members of the Collegiate Prep community. It is this awareness that also defines her relationship to other school leaders. When presented with the opportunity to hire a second woman of color to work in the admissions office, support from the head of school became a pivotal moment in their relationship. Pam explains, “She has been a mentor—I look up to her. She’s incredibly smart. Her style is very different than mine, but I respect that and I think she respects my style as well” (P. Young, personal communication, July 10, 2012)

At the heart of Pam’s leadership practice is the priority she places on being fully present in the lives of her children. This value is woven throughout her narrative. Pam makes the point that her, “most important work is that of my family and raising my children. And I’m not going to sacrifice [that]. I’m not that career-driven to sacrifice my children to climb any ladder” (P. Young, personal communication, July 10, 2012). She is candid about her priorities with the head of school, who is the mother of five children. “She understands…That’s one of the reasons why for me, I don’t want to be a head of
school. Not at this point in my life” (P. Young, personal communication, July 10, 2012).

But Pam’s talk about hitting the glass ceiling at the Phelps School and “failure not being an option” at Collegiate Prep introduces a dissonance into her personal narrative. Wrestling with ambition at this point in her career, the subtext of her talk reflects an ever-present tension between pursuing her leadership goals and honoring the priority she places on work-life balance.

For some, taking on a leadership role served as a form of social activism. Looking through a lens of equity and justice, Helen Cooper explained how her criticisms of the system served as the catalyst for taking on leadership roles. “I’ve done all this talking, what am I going to do to make this happen. And leadership was a clear choice for that” (H. Cooper, personal communication, March 4, 2011). Others described being drawn to careers in education because they felt passionately about making a difference in the lives of students.
Table 7  
*Participant Profiles*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jill Bretton</td>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Assistant Middle School Director</td>
<td>Single-Sex (girls) 6-12</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connie Burr</td>
<td>50-54</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Lower School Division Head</td>
<td>Single-Sex (girls) K-8</td>
<td>West Coast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siobhan Carroll</td>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Director of Enrollment and Lower School Admissions</td>
<td>Single-Sex (girls) K-12</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela Charles</td>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Director of Admissions and Financial Aid</td>
<td>Single-Sex (girls) 5-8</td>
<td>West Coast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen Cooper</td>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Middle School Division Head; Head of School elect</td>
<td>Coed PreK-12; PK-8</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michaela Curry</td>
<td>55-59</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Upper School Division Head</td>
<td>Single-Sex (girls) PreK-12</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan Davis</td>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Interim Dean of Faculty and Academic Affairs</td>
<td>Co-ed PK-12</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pam Jackson</td>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Teacher/ Department Chair</td>
<td>Single-Sex (girls) 8-12</td>
<td>Mid-Atlantic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regina Kunstenar</td>
<td>50-55</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Assistant Director of Admissions and Coordinator of Diversity and Multicultural Affairs</td>
<td>Co-ed K-12</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hilary Riley</td>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Interim Upper School Dean of Students</td>
<td>Single-Sex (girls) 6-12</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth Saunders</td>
<td>60-65</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Head of School</td>
<td>Single-Sex (girls) PK-12</td>
<td>South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judith Stein</td>
<td>60-65</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Head of School</td>
<td>Co-ed 7-12</td>
<td>West Coast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth Strong</td>
<td>45-50</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Search Consultant</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne Taylor</td>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Head of Upper School</td>
<td>Single-Sex (girls) PreK-12</td>
<td>South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie Watts</td>
<td>60-65</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Search Consultant</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pamela Young</td>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Director of Admissions and Financial Aid</td>
<td>Co-ed 7-12</td>
<td>West Coast</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked to recount their leadership journey, participants described in thoughtful detail a range of school leadership roles they occupied while still in the classroom, as well as those they took up while transitioning into a formal school
leadership position. Throughout this study, my reflexive analysis of each personal narrative is informed by the principles of post-structural feminist theory, which invites researcher and participant to jointly reframe the discourse that has come to characterize independent school leadership.

Applying a Conceptual Framework to Explicate Leadership Attainment for Women in Independent Schools

Between the second and third waves of feminism, which ushered historic numbers of U.S. women from the domestic sphere and into the work force, and the establishment of Title IX, which established equal educational opportunities for women, feminist scholars began engaging one another in a compelling discourse concerning the construction of a systematic theory of “gender and organization” (Acker, 1990). Claiming that gender is used as a sorting device that enables organizations to assign and replicate roles, ascribe authority, and reinforce a definitively patriarchal culture, feminist scholars examined how the enmeshed nature of the relationship between gender and organizations was further complicated whenever scholarship assumed a default position that interpreted organizational phenomenon as gender neutral (Acker, 1990; Flax, 1987; Harding, 1987; Ibarra, 2004). Similarly, research in the field of educational leadership experienced its own gender awakening as scholars employed critical theories, such as a post-structural feminist perspective and feminist standpoint theory, to construct new epistemologies that encouraged a broader interpretation of how leadership is enacted in an effort to unpack

Gender is defined by Scott (1986) as, “a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power” (Acker, 1990, p. 85).
the masculine/feminine normalization of leadership that is reflected in the disproportionate number of women ascending to formal school leadership roles (Adkison, 1981; Estler, 1975; Hyle, 1991; Lather, 1992; Shakeshaft, 1989; Skrla, 2003). This stance has served to unsettle “our taken-for-granted assumptions of what leadership is, what it can be, and what purposes it ultimately serves” (Young & López, 2004, p. 341).

I have utilized these claims to examine the interview transcripts, field notes, archival documents, researcher journals, and memos that represent the body of qualitative data collected for this study. In addition, my own lived experience as a formal school leader in both public and independent school settings informs and shapes my understanding of each participant’s lived experience. It is with this knowledge in mind that, as a researcher-practitioner, I have invited the women in this study to join in the act of reflexive pauses to reconsider our mutual meaning making as central to the interview process. At times, these moments have been shaped by our capacity to create a counterspace to tell our leadership stories, which can be an all-too-rare opportunity for women who occupy formal leadership positions in independent schools.

Working from the position that each independent school’s culture reflexively prescribes a set of accepted leadership characteristics, which include gender preferences that reflect the androcentric nature of the community in which it is situated, my data analysis pays close attention to:

- The distinct culture of each independent school;
- The ways that leadership is represented within this context; and
- The strategies women leaders employ to continuously develop their leadership
capacity as a member of the school community

The conceptual framework I have employed for exploring these questions begins with an examination of the cultural context of independent schools and how it shapes the strategies of action available to women aspiring to leadership positions. This culture is given further definition through the broadly accepted beliefs and habits associated with the act of leadership. It is within this context that women develop cultural competencies through professional networks and growth-producing relationships. Lastly, utilizing a feminist standpoint to investigate women’s work narratives serves to disclose points of tension between settled and unsettled periods in the lives of aspiring women leaders (Brunner, 2000; Chase, 1995; Scott, 2003; Skrla, 2000; Skrla et al., 2000; Swidler, 1986). The organization and discussion of my analysis is paired with the conceptual framework that informed my research design and guided the data gathering process (see Figure 5).
Figure 5. Intersection of Theoretical Framework and Women’s Independent School Leadership

**Cultural Context**

For the purposes of this discussion, I define culture as a set of fundamental beliefs that act as the principal organizational framework for a group; these fundamental beliefs shape the habits of behavior, definition of knowledge, and interpretation of meaning for each member of the group and must be learned by new members in order to successfully function within the group. The fundamental beliefs of the group are not only revealed in the behavior of the individual members through traditions and rituals, but are also expressed through expressive symbols and the physical environment it inhabits (Schein, 1992; Swidler, 1986, 2002). Consequently, the cultural disposition of each school informs the strategies used by individuals to prepare for and/or attain and enact
leadership roles within a particular independent school community. According to Schein (1992), “Once cultures exist, they determine the criteria for leadership and thus determine who will or will not be a leader” (p. 15). The descriptions offered by participants of their particular school’s mission, values, and implicit beliefs served to define the landscape in which formal leadership takes shape. Furthermore, these narratives revealed the effort each participant made to employ her understanding in the service of developing explicit strategies that would result in her success as a formal leader.35

According to Jill Breton, an independent school’s legacy shapes the ways in which leadership is enacted:

You can't dismiss the history of a particular place, good or bad—I get the sense that the history of an independent school shapes the school more than in a public school, where it might be the history of the town and the larger community rather than the school itself that's shaping what happens. (J. Breton, personal communication, May 21, 2012)

Asked to describe the Shaver School’s culture, Regina Kunstenar talked about the strong sense of community and the celebrity status that some of the school’s alumni have achieved. Founded as a school for boys, the gendered legacy of the Shaver School is evidenced by the photos of all-male graduating classes in the hallways. But Regina focused on how much the school has changed over the years with respect to racial, cultural, and gender diversity: “There was a time when those loomed large, I don’t know

35 According to Swidler, “Culture has independent causal influence in unsettled cultural periods because it makes possible new strategies of action-constructing entities that can act (selves, families, corporations), shaping the styles and skills with which they act, and modeling forms of authority and cooperation. It is, however, the concrete situations in which these cultural models are enacted that determine which take root and thrive, and which wither and die” (p. 280).
if that’s the case anymore we certainly have talked a lot about it” (R. Kunstenar, personal communication, June 7, 2012).

Nine of the twelve independent schools (see Table 7) represented in this study were established between 1861 and 1920 and are characteristic of the reform-minded attitudes of the era. The sentiment expressed in 1878 by Ivy Hall’s founder embodies this perspective, asserting, “the ideal of the school is to develop individuals who will be competent to change their environment to greater conformity with moral ideals” (The school’s website).

Six of the seven single-sex (girls) schools represented in this study are an outgrowth of the first-wave of feminism, during which time women’s social and political equality became part of the public discourse, leading to the ratification of the 19th Amendment. This feminist legacy serves as a point of reference in the history section of school websites. For example, by recalling that in 1892 ten Mayfield girls—

…were among the first to benefit from [founder’s] firm belief that higher education for women was of paramount importance. The outside world of politics, the arts, and the community was embraced in her school and from the beginning …girls developed a keen sense of self-confidence and assumed their roles as significant members of the community. (The school’s website)

Or that Cliffs School, with its establishment in 1908:

The women who founded schools for girls were beginning a process of education that would, before the end of the century, lead to something like a level playing field in business, sports and the arts…At a time when “finishing schools” were the norm, [the founder] was an innovator of the most important kind. (The school’s website)

**Independent schools’ mission.** An independent school’s mission statement serves as a preface, introducing the school’s culture to those outside of the group and
establishing the school’s fundamental beliefs for members of the organization. Thus it creates a cultural framework that orders roles, defines relationships, and patterns for discourse among its members. For the purposes of this study, the mission statement offers a succinct description of the school culture in which each participant navigates as a leader (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Schein, 1992; Swidler, 1986, 2002). Although the 12 independent schools represented in this study, each has their own purposefully crafted mission statement. The statements share a vocabulary that includes words and phrases such as: character, academic, empower, passions, potential, lifelong commitment, individual growth, social responsibility, ethical, effective citizenship, inclusive, respect, service, inspire, courage, and leaders. This shared vocabulary suggests that from the outside looking in, these schools have more in common with each other than their locale, student bodies, and size suggest. According to Judith Stein,

Independent school culture, it’s kind of like what we’ve recently learned about the DNA—that human beings and mice share 90% of the same DNA. And, I think that’s when you [talk about] independent school culture, I think maybe 90% is the same, but boy does that 10% make a huge difference… So I, I think it’s that 10% that’s really most important to pay attention to, because every school is different. You know, there is a lot that’s the same in terms of hiring great teachers and putting students at the center of your school. And the pursuit of excellence, which to me is just about getting better and better all the time…But as a prospective Head of School you really need to figure out what the DNA is of that particular school that you’re going to, that you’re considering becoming a part of. (J. Stein, personal communication, June 11, 2012)

Similar to peeling back the layers of an onion, Judith’s observation emphasizes the view that effective leadership practices within any given independent school community rely upon a leader’s ability to make sense of what Judith calls “that 10% difference” (see Table 8).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCHOOL</th>
<th>REGION</th>
<th>FOUNDED</th>
<th>ENROLLMENT</th>
<th>MISSION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shaver School</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>1861</td>
<td>Co-ed K-12</td>
<td>Mission: The mission is to foster in students a lifelong commitment to intellectual exploration, individual growth and social responsibility by inspiring and supporting them to strive for academic and personal excellence with an ethical framework that places the highest value on honor and respect for others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summerfield School</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>1867</td>
<td>Co-ed Pre-k-12</td>
<td>Mission: Summerfield School provides a college preparatory program, serving students from Preschool through Grade 12. It is committed to educating each student intellectually, aesthetically, physically, and spiritually in a culturally diverse community. Guided by the Quaker principles of truth, simplicity, and peaceful resolution of conflict, Summerfield School offers each student a challenging education that develops intellectual abilities and ethical and social values to support a productive life of leadership and service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCHOOL</td>
<td>REGION</td>
<td>FOUNDED</td>
<td>ENROLLMENT</td>
<td>MISSION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivy Hall</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>1878</td>
<td>Co-ed Pre-k-12</td>
<td><em>Mission:</em> “The ideal of the school is to develop individuals who will be competent to change their environment to greater conformity with moral ideals.” <em>Founder of Ivy Hall.</em> The founder’s educational vision is as important today as it was when Ivy Hall was founded. To continue to realize that vision we embrace the following ideals: Ethical Learning; Academic Excellence; Progressive Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carter School</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>1881</td>
<td>Single-sex (girls) 6-12</td>
<td><em>Mission:</em> The Carter School is committed to fostering excellence in academics, the arts, and athletics within a vibrant, caring community. With emphasis on integrity, leadership, diversity, and service as well as on respect for self and others, Dana Hall provides its students with a unique opportunity to prepare themselves for the challenges and choices they will face as women and citizens of the world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayfield School</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>1892</td>
<td>Single-sex (girls) 3-12</td>
<td><em>Mission:</em> The mission of the Mayfield School is to educate girls and young women to the highest academic and personal standards necessary for responsible, effective citizenship and for the successful pursuit of higher education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franklin School</td>
<td>Mid-Atlantic</td>
<td>1901</td>
<td>Single-sex (girls) 3-12</td>
<td><em>Mission:</em> It is not just one characteristic, but rather a combination of key distinctions, which create a learning environment like no other. It is what we refer to as The Franklin Experience. Franklin is creating an educational evolution within a dynamic all-girl environment for the opportunity for girls to connect, engage, and inspire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Childs School</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>1902</td>
<td>Single-sex (girls) Pre-K-12</td>
<td><em>Mission:</em> Mary Childs School is dedicated to academic excellence and to the parallel development of mind, body, and spirit as it educates young women for success in college and for lives of integrity and responsible citizenship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCHOOL</td>
<td>REGION</td>
<td>FOUNDED</td>
<td>ENROLLMENT</td>
<td>MISSION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cliffs School</td>
<td>West Coast</td>
<td>1908</td>
<td>Single-sex (girls)</td>
<td>Mission: Cliffs’ mission is to educate, encourage and empower girls. Our school combines academic excellence with an appreciation for childhood so that students thrive as learners, develop a strong sense of self, contribute to community, and fulfill their potential, now and throughout life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woods School</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Single-sex (girls)</td>
<td>Mission: Woods empowers girls to discover their full intellectual and creative abilities, to pursue their passions and personal best, and to lead lives of consequence with character, compassion, and conviction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collegiate Preparatory</td>
<td>West Coast</td>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Co-ed 6-12</td>
<td>Mission: Collegiate Preparatory School is committed to developing each student’s potential to become an intellectually courageous, socially responsible citizen of the world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sage Girls School</td>
<td>West Coast</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Single-sex (girls)</td>
<td>Mission: Our mission is to inspire and develop courageous leaders who think independently, work collaboratively, learn joyfully, and champion change. Our passion is empowering each girl to live her potential. Our beliefs: empowering a girl changes the world; it is fundamental to understand and address issues of difference and oppression; an integrated collaborative curriculum challenges and engages students; middle school should be joyful, curiosity-filled, and safe and open to all voices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Hills School</td>
<td>West Coast</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Co-ed 9-12</td>
<td>Mission: Sierra Hills School calls its students to be creative, ethical, and committed to learning. The school nurtures inspiring teachers and engages with the surrounding community, and its students communicate across cultures as they prepare to become leaders in a dynamic world.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Organizational fit.** An examination of the relationship between women and independent school leadership requires an understanding of the cultural context that intentionally rewards a select set of leadership traits (Chase, 1995; Chase & Bell, 1990;
Shakeshaft, 1989, 2011; Skrla, 2003; Tallerico & Blount, 2004; Tooms, et al., 2009). These preferences, which represent “organizational fit,” are used to define the social power and status of members in the school community. Irrespective of the independent school’s student population—single-sex or co-ed—the intersectionality of gender and race is embedded within this framework (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010; Eagly & Carli, 2007; 2008; Chase, 1995; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Sherman & Wrushen, 2009; Skrla, 2003). The relationship between gender and leadership, which is referred to as a double bind, requires that women develop strategies for negotiating the behavioral prescriptions associated with gender and leadership.\(^{36}\) According to the work of Eagly and Carli (2007), “These expectations create a double bind for women. Highly communal female leaders may be criticized for not being agentic enough. But female leaders who are highly agentic may be criticized for lacking communion” (p. 102). Additionally, African American women are faced with mediating the intersection of racial and gender stereotyping, which produces an exponentially complex double bind (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Sherman & Wrushen, 2009).

The women in this study each occupy a position of leadership within an independent school and their narratives offer clear, cogent examples of the ways they have mediated the tension between the ascribed behaviors associated with their respective leadership roles and the leadership habits attributed to their gender and race. This

\(^{36}\) Eagly and Carly (2007) argue that mental models—unconscious connotations—associated with men and women shape social expectations of their respective behavior. “Communal associations convey a concern with the compassionate treatment of others. Women elicit communal associations of being especially affectionate, helpful, friendly, kind, and sympathetic as well as interpersonally sensitive, gentle and soft-spoken. In contrast, agentic associations convey assertion and control. Men elicit agentic associations of being especially aggressive, ambitious, dominant, self-confident, and forceful as well as self-reliant and individualistic” (p. 86).
dissonance manifests itself as a disjunction between the attributes the organization expects its leaders to embody and a participant’s social identity. It is at this discursive nexus that participants described the dynamic relationship between school culture and the habits of leadership.

Commenting on her return to Mayfield School in 2010, Michaela Curry observes, “I realized that if a school did not hire me, it’s because I didn’t fit their needs. It wasn’t about me not being good enough or not qualified” (M. Curry, personal communication, March 22, 2011). Michaela’s reflection is grounded in her experience at Mayfield in the mid-90s, when she had served as the interim division head, but was passed over for the permanent appointment.

So I did that [job] for six months and then Peter came back. He stayed one more year, became the head of [another] school and the job became open. I interviewed. I didn't get it. They brought in somebody else from the outside. I was crushed…I had more experience than this person, more qualifications. I just didn't look like her, and everybody kind of knew that it was, you know, maybe they weren't ready for a woman of color. So that's when I left Mayfield the following year. And I'll never forget the woman who was the head of school saying to me at the time that I would be better suited to one of the “Ridge-top” schools. And that was code for saying that's where the Jews are. So, you know, yeah, I just thought that they were ready for a person of color, but at Mayfield, here on the proper [side of town], we certainly weren't. (M. Curry, personal communication, March 22, 2011)

The degree of “organizational fit” between an individual and her first experience as an independent school educator can set the course for her leadership journey. So it is not just her ability to establish peer-to-peer mentoring relationships with colleagues or a mentor-protégé relationship, but rather it is the degree to which the woman is perceived

---

37 The post-structural framework developed by Tooms, Lugg, & Bogotch, (2009) to explore the dynamics of definition, application, and social context of fit as a term used to describe “who does fit and does not fit in school leadership,” provides another lens for examining Swidler’s concept of unsettled periods.
as having leadership potential that aligns with the school’s culture and mission.

For Anne Taylor, the 10% of the DNA that differentiated the culture of one independent from the next was particularly acute moving from the corporate world into independent schools. Describing her increasing visibility she said,

I came in and I contributed…when they needed things I did them, and I stepped up. And I think that’s what any good independent school is looking for. They’re looking for faculty to be engaged…so I kept being asked to do more things…so suddenly you end up becoming an administrator. (A. Taylor, personal communication, June 27, 2012)

Initially she took on more leadership responsibility at her first school, splitting her time between teaching and participating on the curriculum council where she was helping to shape policy, but opportunities to expand her leadership role were controlled by a newly appointed head of school and his sponsorship was not available to her. Aware that her leadership skills could stagnate, she sought advice from a female mentor who had been in a leadership role at the start of her teaching career. In that conversation, she was encouraged to explore leadership possibilities at other independent schools. Anne used this prompting to consider what more she wanted to learn about culture and leadership in her next position. Anne found what she was looking for in a new city, at a single-sex (girls) school, whose culture she believed blended innovation and tradition.

Leadership

The work of Heifetz and Laurie (2001), recognized for its innovative reframing of contemporary leadership practices, asserts that, “leaders have to ask tough questions…draw the issues out…challenge ‘the way we do business’…[while] protecting the voices of leadership from below” (p. 4). Fletcher (2004) claimed this “new
leadership” paradigm is “presented as gender and, to a lesser degree, power neutral” (p. 648). Arguing that, “the concepts are not gender, power, or sex neutral but instead are rooted in a set of social interactions in which ‘doing gender,’ ‘doing power,’ and ‘doing leadership’ are linked in complex ways” (p. 648). Eagly and Carli (2007, 2008) contributed to this discourse by depicting the work of women in leadership roles as equivalent to navigating a cultural labyrinth.

Leadership within an independent school setting is expressed through the intersection of position and organizational culture, allowing for a broad and varied understanding of the role. According to NAIS,

The head of today’s independent school must lead in multiple ways. This person is not only the tone setter but also the person who establishes the priorities as they relate to finance, physical plant, diversity, fundraising, marketing and future planning. (Batiste & Rivens, p. 4–5)

Thus, in order to develop this broad set of leadership skills, aspiring women leaders enact strategies of action that hone their cultural competencies, establish professional networks, and seek out growth producing relationships.

**Cultural competencies.** Participants frequently portrayed the head of school as acting in ways that served to safeguard, as well as re-orient, the school’s culture. A change in personnel at the top could result in palpable changes in the school’s culture. As explained by Anne, the arrival of a new head of school reduced her leadership opportunities.

So there were a lot of leadership changes, and under the first head of school that I worked with it was a very possible and appropriate, under the first division head it was very possible and appropriate [to have conversations about leadership practices]. As the school changed I found it not to be possible and appropriate. (A. Taylor, personal communication, June 27, 2012)
For Siobhan, the appointment of a new head of school signaled opportunities for innovations that invited her participation.

And then my second year, we had a new head. Much more innovative, the wallpaper came down, the curtains came down, artwork went up, and I had an incredible admissions year...We started a Diversity Educators Council. It's an administration-faculty staff that works on issue of diversity. And that spurred the other things that were happening...We have a long way to go, as in every school, but it's been really exciting to see how much has been done in one year. (S. Carroll, personal communication, May 24, 2012)

Within this complex architecture, women in this study sought access to the head’s knowledge and direction regarding effective leadership practices. Additionally, guidance and feedback from other school leaders and faculty served to reinforce their cultural competence.

But when access to school leaders was not available for Helen Cooper, she described having to figure things out for herself.

It felt like I was spying; like I was going to put this together for myself and I was going to keep my notes in my book, even if it didn’t involve a direct conversation with someone who was ‘helping me be a leader.’ (H. Cooper, personal communication, March 4, 2011)

Again, building upon her concept of being the “spy” who has to be resourceful, Helen portrayed the substantial cost of not having the benefit of guidance from an experienced school leader noting that “some of us have to create that on their own... and it’s hard to know that you have to create that on your own, so it takes time...you have to ask for it, [but] what are you asking for [sic]” (H. Cooper, personal communication, March 4, 2011).
Participants also expanded on the important role that self-knowledge can play when women (African American and White) pursue leadership opportunities in independent schools. Looking through the lens of their racial identity, Helen, Michaela, and Regina speak in reflective pauses about the implications of race and gender upon their career plans. Helen’s narrative exposes the double bind women (African American and White) must learn to mediate if they want to be thought of as having leadership potential.

So I think going in, women really need to know who they are and how they want to communicate with people and what their non-negotiables are. Because there isn't gonna be somebody looking out for them in that way. And I think women need to know a lot about, need to be very thoughtful and aware of how gender and race work in independent schools, especially in leadership. I think they work so that if you're female and if you're of color, you've got to play all kinds of games and jump through all kinds of hoops to establish yourself and really make it work.

I don't think you can just be who you are, be all of who you are as a woman or as a black woman in an independent school if you want to be a leader and you want to get mentoring and you want to keep building your leadership skills. You have to be measured, I think. (H. Cooper, personal communication, March 4, 2011)

Helen claims that before mentor-protégé relationships can be cultivated, women have to decode the fundamental elements of a school’s culture. Navigating this labyrinth can be a lonely experience for women of color pursuing formal leadership roles within independent schools, which have historically embraced a culture of White privilege.

Pushing into leadership roles from the margins, four out of the five African American women who participated in this study demonstrated their leadership potential while either serving in the role of diversity practitioner or by initiating diversity
initiatives as a classroom teacher. Each woman established herself as having specialized, desirable knowledge based upon her social identity, specifically as an African American woman working with a predominantly White faculty and administration. According to Romney, Ferron, and Hill (2008),

Independent schools have made a serious commitment to promoting diversity within their respective communities. As a part of this work, many schools have created a senior level faculty or administrative position—diversity director or diversity coordinator—broadly charged with the following responsibilities:

- Hiring and retaining faculty of color, and recruiting and supporting students of color (and, to a lesser extent, recruiting and retaining international students, and supporting women and GLB students);
- Creating an inclusive community that "celebrates and appreciates diversity";
- Educating the community about diversity.


Leadership literature that examines the distribution of power, position, and resources (Fletcher, 1999; Eagly & Carli 2007; Silva, Carter, & Beninger, 2012) within organizations speaks to the leadership double bind negotiated by women who are consigned to human-resources-type roles, such as diversity director (Hall & Stevenson, 2007). By taking up leadership positions that emphasize social identifiers, women (African American and White) automatically risk diminishing their access to future high-profile leadership opportunities (Bell & Chase, 1995; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Fletcher, 1999; Ibarra, 1997, 2004, 2010; Kanter, 1977; Silva et al., 2012).

---

38 The NAIS website states that diversity “is defined by “otherness.” Most obviously it is determined by race, gender, and culture. On a more subtle level, it includes class, sexual orientation, religion, ability, and appearance.” (https://www.nais.org/Articles/Pages/Diversity-and-Multiculturalism-147595.aspx, accessed, 12/22/2012).
Helen explained, “If you're female and if you're of color, you've got to play all kinds of games and jump through all kinds of hoops to establish yourself and really make it work” (H. Cooper, personal communication, March 4, 2011). This knowledge claim is supported by the work of Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010), which asserts, “Women of color in leadership roles may therefore experience triple jeopardy because of the multiple stereotypes associated with gender, race, and ethnicity that they trigger in others” (p. 174). The idea of triple jeopardy was exemplified in the narratives of African American women as they talked about the ways in which their use of language, expression of emotion, or physical presence shaped perceptions of their leadership ability. As Pamela Young explained,

I was told that it was…basically my responsibility to make them feel comfortable. Because I don’t agree with that… [The head of school] clearly said, “I know that it’s your passion, but essentially other people are—I don't know if it’s that they're scared or they're intimidated by…” I think oftentimes that I'm a young woman, a young black woman, who is confident and if I have something [to say] then I'm going to say [it]. I never have been inappropriate in my communications…Of course I said this to her...If I have [a] valid point to bring up, I should be able to bring that up and not worry about whether or not you're uncomfortable with the fact that I brought that point up, or that if I move my hands—I use my hands when I talk—that then you're uncomfortable. (P. Young, personal communication, July 10, 2012)

For the African American women in this study, mindfulness or self-awareness and observing others were frequently used as strategies of action for combatting the impact of triple jeopardy.

Regina Kunstenar speaks with the assuredness and self-knowledge characteristic of other African American women interviewed. Describing herself as an observer, as someone who relies on her professional training as a clinical psychologist, and as
someone who tries to remain open to opportunities as they arise, she then explained how these traits informed her strategy of action when forging a professional relationship with the white, male head of the Shaver School.

And one of the things I put in place after that was making sure that I had the headmaster’s ear on a regular basis. I went to him, and I said, “I think it’s time that I am one of the people that meets with you on a regular basis.” And he said, “I agree.” Because what I realized was he needed to hear things from me first. I needed to remove these filters. Because each filter distorts further and further. That has been life changing. But no one was there to suggest that to me, I had to figure it out on my own. (R. Kunstenar, personal communication, May 1, 2012)

The idea of “knowing who you are” first introduced by Helen Cooper, reappears when Siobhan Carroll explained that she knows what she believes and that she tries to be her most “authentic self.” Her self-reflection moves from a focus on speaking with confidence to a consideration of her personal sense of entitlement, which shapes her reality and enables her to take a stand—“I wonder how much entitlement or having a certain comfort makes you more comfortable in speaking out?” (S. Carroll, personal communication, June 7, 2012.) Siobhan’s direct question maps onto the unspoken sub-text conveyed by African American women, who consistently talked about their racial identities when describing the strategies they used to gain access to independent school leadership roles. When asked to consider gender as another significant social identifier, each of the women responded by describing the ways in which her gender was situated in relationship to being African American (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

I think the racial piece for me helps inform what I can see about the gender piece. And if I were white, I might not be able to see some of this and I may not have the same clarity and awareness as I am walking through life every day. But I didn't have a choice. I had to know it. I was taught to know what racism looked like and how that was going to inform how I used my voice, where I used my voice… It was a matter of survival. (H. Cooper, personal communication, May 6, 2012)
Further indication of the interplay between race and gender is evidenced by the unconscious way in which White participants excluded references to race as a social identifier when narrating their leadership history. Never did a White participant suppose that the relationship between her race and gender might have influenced the leadership pathway she pursued. However Judith Stein noted that her Jewish heritage contributed to her periodic feelings of marginalization during her 20-year tenure at a non-denominational, historically faith-based boarding school. Additionally, Anne Taylor talked about her family of origin and how their working class status made it easier for her to connect with parents whose children received financial aid in order to attend Mary Childs School. She also noted that teachers and fellow administrators at Mary Childs would be likely to assume that she came from a family of privilege based on the universities she attended and the professional choices she made early in her career.

If an amplified awareness of the intersectionality of race and leadership has been an essential part of the preparation of these African American women, for the White women in the study, there has been an evolving awareness of the junction between gender and leadership. The school’s culture can make a critical difference in a woman’s sense of her self as a leader and her capacity to express leadership ambitions (Skrla, 2003). Siobhan Carroll commented on her change in disposition since coming to Woods School.

I think I’m beginning to take on, in my own life as a woman, the messages that I’m talking about that we want to girls to take at Woods School. Because I’ve taken all these risks recently, and I’m trying to embrace… rather than be made terrified by it and I don’t think that would have happened for me if I were still at
a co-ed school. I don’t think it ever would have been my thought process. (S. Carroll, personal communication, May 24, 2012)

When asked to describe how she perceives the relationship between school culture and leadership, Anne Taylor used a metaphor to describe how school leaders must be able to adapt to the culture of a school. Echoing Schein’s (1992) framework, she described the interplay between culture and leadership,

I think that you are contributing to the culture, but really you’re soaking it up, you know, you’re helping to shape it. And you do that with others, and I think that’s what a leader does. I don’t think it’s the old military hey come follow me and off I go, and I think that’s the difference between men and women, you know, and I think that’s the difference between successful leaders and people who get things done. I think, I think early in my career, I think I could easily be mistaken for somebody who gets things done, because I get a lot of things done. (A. Taylor, personal communication, June 27, 2014)

Taylor’s description of different leadership styles intentionally employs gendered references as she reveals her preference for a more communal, collaborative approach to leadership. Yet she concludes with her own self-reflection that at times, she has been faced with the double bind of being female and results-oriented since stepping into her leadership role at Mary Childs School (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Fletcher, 2004; Skrla, 2003; Scott, 2003).

The challenges Susan Davis faced after moving into a new leadership position at Ivy Hall are framed by the intersection of her gender and the school’s culture. Susan reflected on the dissonance she experienced as the newly appointed interim dean of faculty in an independent school, with a newly appointed head of school. Historically, the culture at Ivy Hall has given the faculty tremendous authority, which is manifest in the
ongoing power struggles between teachers and administrators. Within this context, her experience in a new leadership role has been framed by the way that gendered expectations of leadership at Ivy Hall defined her positionality.

I felt really highly conscious of the gender piece...in part because a woman came to me and said "You know people are talking about you as having gone corporate." I've actually have [sic] lost a lot of weight in the past couple of years and intentionally exercise and diet by choice, therefore I have new clothes. Then she said, "It's very unfortunate that the clothes you've chosen to purchase at this time are so corporate looking. It's really a shame that you're choosing to wear high heels with these dresses and so forth because it's alienating the faculty." Well I've always worn heels, that hasn't changed. My clothes are a little more professional perhaps than they were as a teacher, but I think it’s polite to dress in this way when I'm in this role. Then she said "Well I wouldn't do it, I think you ought to bring it down a notch". (S. Davis, personal communication, May 30, 2012)

Gender-laden criticism of her leadership encouraged Susan’s own reflection on the nature of her leadership practice. Describing her use of reflexively communal habits as a strategy for both leading the faculty and appeasing her critics, she recalled—

I often said sorry. Sorry for this, sorry for that, sorry for asking; sorry I know you’re all so busy, sorry I asked you to do some more…

I have a wonderful assistant and before I sent out any email to the community I’d ask her to proof it and she wrote me back—this is sometime in October—she said that, “I took out all the sorries.” And I said “Did I have a bunch of sorries in there?” And she said, “You do it all the time. Susan, sorry is not inspiring.” And I thought, “Holy shit! Good point.” I had thought I was expressing empathy for the extra work everybody had to do for a [school-wide self study] and instead, I realized I was diminishing my own authority. (S. Davis, personal communication, May 30, 2012)

**Professional networks.** Approximately one-third of the participants in this study

---

39 Susan Davis defined Ivy Hall’s culture as privileging the individual, which has translated into a series of leadership challenges in recent years. The school takes great pride in having a strong faculty that delivers strong instructional programs. But Ivy Hall’s teachers are among the few unionized independent school faculties in the country, and teachers are strong advocates for leaders being promoted from amongst the rank and file members. Susan’s advancement from classroom teacher, to department chair, to dean of students, and now interim dean of faculty aligns with this cultural expectation. But as she began employing agentic leadership strategies—as a dean of students and interim dean of faculty—she faced direct sanctions from once fellow teachers.
have participated in the National Association of Principals of Schools for Girls (NAPSG) Women and Leadership Seminar. Attendees come from a geographically and culturally diverse set of independent schools, self-identify as potential school leaders, and are actively pursuing professional networks. Each of the women who attended a NAPSG leadership seminar talked about how much they appreciated having the opportunity to connect with other women who are in leadership roles. For some it was a chance to find a role model and for others it was an opportunity to describe achievements without having to qualify their encounters along the way with gender bias (CGO, 2012;Debebe, 2011;Ibarra, 1997). According to Connie Burr, “I really wanted to meet other women who were in leadership positions and to create bonds, and to hear about things that were going on, an how to kind of structure what we thought about” (C. Burr, personal communication, June 21, 2012).

Michaela Curry and Connie Burr also described the benefits of participating in a regional association or consortium that provided independent school leaders with a professional network of resources. When Connie decided that she would benefit from working with an executive coach, she found what she was looking for in the consortium of independent schools to which Cliff School belongs.

This year I asked for a mentor, and not somebody who is working here, but a coach. And so I was able to find one, and that’s been really helpful for me. And so during this school year, I was able to have a phone conversation once a week with someone who had been a lower school head at another school and has since retired. (C. Burr, personal communication, June 21, 2012)

Angela Charles belongs to multiple professional networks—not connected with independent schools—that she has used to advance her leadership ability and as a
personal network of support, which she dubbed the “wisdom circle.” The former has provided her with skills and strategies that enhance her role at Sage. The latter she portrays as a loosely connected network of people who she turns to, “when I have a big decisions to make, I will make sure that I consult a few strategic people” (A. Charles, personal communication, July 23, 2012). The individuals included in the circle are both men and women with whom she has a personal connection and whose professional skill set she admires.

Pamela Young also talked about her effort to encourage a network of African American women with in the Collegiate Prep community. According to Pamela, the women began eating lunch together in her office. While their intention was not to be exclusive, the expectation for participation was made clear:

We would say, “This is not a closed door thing, anybody can come. You just have to kind of leave your feelings at the door because it can get crazy in here and we might talk about anything and everything. And so you just have to be fine with that” (P. Young, personal communication, September 2, 2012).

Ibarra (1997) observed that high-performing women are not only more reliant on close ties, but that close relationships can be mutually beneficial and “may help women to counter the effects of bias, gender-typed expectations and contested legitimacy” (Ibarra, 1997, p. 99). Recently some members of Pamela’s on campus support network have begun making plans to leave the community. The possibility of a diminished set of close ties has left Pamela thinking about the potentially isolating impact it could have on her professional life and how that would change the way she feels about her positionality as an African American woman leader in the school.

After meeting at regional conference where they had participated in a discussion
about the intersection of gender and leadership in independent schools, Helen Cooper and Susan Davis launched a monthly meeting for women leaders in their area.

We agreed to a couple of things: we wanted to convene on a regular basis and we would pick something that would work for the four of us in the room and then everybody would try and invite one other person so it was a group of maybe 12-18… that we would regularize it and we picked the first Monday of every month and someone will host on their campus and then somebody else will facilitate what that discussion or reading of an article or whatever it is we want to have as a focus point be for each meeting…We thought it would be more useful to us to say let’s focus on reporting to a male supervisor and that is what this one is going to be and the next one is going to be our relationships with other women and the next one is going to be our supervising matter, different aspects, something like that and maybe we will look at articles and maybe we will use each other in sort of consultancy mode with protocol set up. (S. Davis, personal communication, August 30, 2012)

Four women attended the first meeting in June 2012, although twice as many had been expected. Davis attributed the lack of participation to the timing of the meeting, which made it difficult for women to break away right at the end of the school year.

Skirting along a discursive realm that reduces the importance of women-only networks of support while valorizing individual achievement, her justification offers a cogent example of the unresolved tension between leadership development that aligns with the principles of relational theory and an androcentric organizational culture that preferences heroic leadership, which exudes confidence and independence (Miller, 1986; Fletcher, 1999).

Speaking more directly about the need for networks of support, Pam Jackson—who was made a department chair in June 2012—questions how new school leaders build networks outside of the school.

I think administrators do form a rather tight circle, and if they’re not going to reach out and do it for you, then where exactly do you go to build that network?
And I think then a lot of us too with children and things like that, it’s not just as easy as moving to another school and starting over. (P. Jackson, personal communication, May 30, 2012)

Ibarra’s (1997) findings support Jackson’s concern, claiming that, “when women are underrepresented in managerial and professional ranks, homophilous ties play a key role in gaining advice from others who have faced similar obstacles and received similar psychosocial supports such as rolemodeling” (p. 99). Jackson’s observation also brings into clearer focus the dissonance that emerges when aspiring women leaders are faced with negotiating the competing demands of family responsibilities and professional ambition. Women such as Pam Jackson, Helen Cooper, and Susan Davis are seemingly left on their own to build networks in the margins between busy professional and personal lives.

For most women in this study, the absence of reliable, established, women-only networks of support were a significant hole in the fabric supporting their efforts to build and promote their leadership capacity. As a result, in order to further their career, women talked about how they sought invitations of support and guidance from their school’s leadership, e.g., head of school, division heads, etc.

**Strategies of Action**

Moving beyond a pilot study (Feibelman, 2011) whose scope was limited to an examination of the ways women are mentored for leadership roles, this interview study employed questions that explored the strategies used by women educators as they prepared to take up key leadership roles in independent schools. My analysis has been influenced by Fletcher’s work (1994, 1999, 2004) that considers gender differences
through the conceptual framework of relational theory and deconstructs the ways that social expectations associated with gender shapes the culture of leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Miller, 1986; Shakeshaft, 1989). At some point in their leadership history, each woman in this study benefited from the support, coaching, and/or sponsorship of formal leaders that possessed the social and political capital that would further her leadership aspirations. This section examines the strategies used by these women to be recognized—become visible—as high-potential leaders who deserve the support of and guidance from influential independent school leaders.

**Growth-fostering relationships.** According to Catalyst (Silva, Cartin, & Beninger, 2012), aspiring women leaders benefit from networking, mentoring, coaching, and engaging in other influential relationships, “but the opportunity to take on challenging opportunities to develop and practice leadership skills” (p. 2) features prominently into a woman’s successful career advancement. The women who participated in this study spoke in detail about professional relationships that have propelled them to the next phase in their leadership career, and often these anecdotal descriptions featured the discursive strategies they used to cultivate relationships, which resulted in leadership opportunities that furthered their careers.

Ruth Saunders, the most senior participant in the study in terms of her age and breadth of leadership experience, used her own story to emphasize the importance she placed on women asking for leadership opportunities. However examples of times that she asked for help were absent from her professional narrative, illustrating the discursive

---

40 Ruth Saunders is the only participant in this study who has served in both public and independent school leadership roles, which includes working as a curriculum specialist, junior high school principal, K-8, co-ed head of school, and K-12 single-sex (girls) head of school.
disjunction between her development as a leader and the strategies she used to negotiate
gender bias. Instead, Ruth emphasized her personal initiative and attributes the
purposeful sponsorship of an innovative male superintendent as providing her with the
opportunity to hone the strategies she needed to step into various leadership roles. Ruth
noted, “You know I’m pretty good at my job. So I think I won respect because I knew
what I was talking about and I didn’t play the card that I’m the female” (R. Saunders
personal communication, May 31, 2012) Referring to her well-developed emotional
intelligence, she describes her ability to negotiate with male leaders and forge
partnerships that allowed her to achieve her goals.

Being able to read and understand the people, the person I'm working with, or
working for having that EQ without the agenda of the gender agenda is really
helpful. That's why I can work with any trustees, male or female, cause some
female trustees I worked with don't like the fact that I'm a woman; they'd rather
have a man there. Some men you know want to take me under their wing and help
me to grow; I mean, I can work all those kinds of people. (R. Saunders personal
communication, May 31, 2012)

The examples she draws upon to describe how she employed her skills of negotiation and
emotional intelligence serve to exemplify her skillful adaptation of communal leadership
practices in the service of agentic leadership goals. By employing a more communal
leadership style, she was able to avoid problematic gender stereotypes that could forestall
her career (Eagli & Carli, 2007; 2008).

Given the opportunity to take on a leadership role, women are less prone to ask
for help for fear of revealing a lack of preparedness (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Estler, 1975;
Shakeshaft, 1989; Young & Skrla, 2003). With visible confidence, Siobhan Carroll
described how she had recently re-negotiated her leadership position and salary at Woods
School. Emphasizing the strong support she received from the head of school, Siobhan noted:

I've never had anyone be so openly supportive as she has. Most things I have asked for, I was given them... I went to her and I said I'm going to pursue K-12 admissions [positions] and that doesn't exist here so I'm going to look outside. And she said we want that here. I want you to do that here. So as that got worked out, I continued to pursue a job elsewhere and while waiting to see what they would offer me. She offered me the head and she offered the Women's Leadership symposium. Then, I said I'd also like to do this NAIS aspiring heads, and she said, okay! I think that you are going to accomplish great things and there's no reason why I wouldn't support you for doing that. So she's been incredibly supportive, really incredibly supportive. (S. Carroll, personal communication, May 24, 2012)

Yet her ability to express ambition and Siobhan's acknowledgment that, “probably most people wouldn’t know about me that I don’t ask for help a huge amount,” (S. Carroll, personal communication, June 7, 2012) reveals a discursive realm between ambition and a willingness to ask for support. As a result of the high stakes that can accompany leadership opportunities, women leaders are less willing to ask for help for fear of appearing less competent (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Siobhan describes herself as someone who has always persevered—it is a personal trait that she holds in high regard, “If I persevere, I can generally get what I want. I don't generally get what I want the first time around. But I really do stick with things and it has certainly paid off for me” (S. Carroll, personal communication, May 24, 2012). Her reflection establishes the connection between her persistence and ambition, which in recent months has built a growth-fostering relationship with a head of school who has invested in her potential, offering her the opportunity to take on highly visible projects.
Judith Stein reflexively frames the milestones along her leadership journey within the context of a growth-fostering relationship, narrating in fine detail the way she cultivated a long-term mentor-protégé relationship with a senior-level, female school leader during her years at Westbrook School (Fletcher, 1999; Silva, 2012). Aligning with Ruth Saunders’s proposition that aspiring women leaders should actively seek support and leadership opportunities, Judith’s own leadership narrative serves as a fitting example.

She was leading this really huge strategic planning initiative, and she developed a very ambitious, very forward thinking strategic plan for the time, …and so she put me in charge of working with the faculty on it, which was incredibly challenging and hard. …She decided to make that into a dean position, which meant that I went beyond the head staff. And this was the inner circle, they were kind of mythical, and… I was so frightened. You know, could I do this? So every step of the way, she just knew I could do things before I did, and, and then I said, “Okay I’ll do it.” And I did it; I did a great job. (J. Stein, personal communication, June 11, 2012)

The dynamic nature of Ruth, Siobhan, and Judith’s relationships with influential school leaders falls along a mentor-protégé continuum; they serve to illuminate how growth-fostering connections intersect with formal leadership opportunities. Set within a larger context that acknowledges the gendered nature of organizations and the androcentric preferences of independent schools, the value of growth-in-connection relationships serves to inform the strategies of action used by aspiring women leaders to negotiate the leadership labyrinth (Eagly& Carli, 2007; Fletcher, 1999).

**Mentoring.** Principally, mentoring within an organizational setting has been defined as a mutually agreed upon, dynamic relationship between two individuals for the primary purpose of fostering the professional development of the less-experienced
partner (Gardiner et al., 2000; Grogan & Crow, 2004; Noe, 1988; Ibarra, 2010; Searby & Tripses, 2006; Sherman et al., 2008; Sherman & Wrushen, 2009). Within the field of leadership development, a more nuanced depiction of mentoring has emerged. The merits of a more collaborative mentoring dynamic have invited descriptions of peer-mentoring, mentor networks, and a mentoring *mosaic* that re-frames mentoring as a learning process that involves multiple participants with varying degrees of expertise (de Jansz et al., 2003; Mullen, 2000, 2009; Searby & Tripses, 2006). For the purposes of this study, both traditional and progressive descriptions of mentor-protégé relationships are particularly relevant.

In the independent school world, where schools operate as stand-alone systems, mentor-protégé relationships are frequently nested within a supervision and evaluation framework. Yet in the absence or in addition to such pairings, mentoring surfaces as an outgrowth of professional relationships within a school community or through regional independent school consortiums and associations.

For the women in this study, growth-fostering experiences with mentors appeared in various configurations and fulfilled an array of roles—provided on-the-job professional development, career advice, introduced participants into career advancing networks, and encouraged protégés to take “the next step.” For some, utilizing a single, more traditional mentor-protégé relationships came with the risk that at some point, the quality of a mentoring experience would be compromised by the supervisory nature of the relationship, while others used professional associations to establish a mentor-protégé relationship outside their workplace environment.
Of the women who participated in this study, Hilary Riley’s mentor-protégé relationship is an exceptional one. The woman who hired her right after college to be the assistant director of admissions at Carter School has, for over a decade, guided Hilary’s leadership journey by sharing her knowledge of the independent school world, creating high-profile opportunities that have increased her visibility, and coaching her through successive career moves in the school community.

So I spent the next two years doing admission work as well as doing the ninth-grade class advising, and teaching forum classes, which is our health/life skills curriculum. And then my boss…sat me down the summer after my first year doing class advising…And she said, let’s have a year review or whatever.

She said to me, “You need to apply to graduate school.” And I had definitely been thinking about it. And I just didn’t know how to ask. So it was pretty amazing to me that she saw that in me and said you need to do this…

So that year, I took the GREs and I applied to graduate school. And she worked out with the head of school a deal where I could still live on campus and work in the admission office once a week. And I had gotten into Harvard, so I went and took my classes there. And they happened to be four days a week, which was convenient…and was able to take the year off. Not get paid, but have a place to live. So that was really great. (H. Riley, personal communication, July 11, 2012)

In contrast, Anne Taylor has strategically pursued mentor-protégé relationships that have resulted in a mosaic of mentoring relationships. This mentoring network has provided her with career guidance and introductions to other influential women leaders in independent schools. When Anne decided that she was ready to begin applying for division director/head leadership positions, she turned to one of her mentors for detailed information about how she should approach her next career move.

I reached out to one of those mentors, and I said, “Do be honest with me, do you think I should consider this?” I used to call it my three-year plan. “What steps should I take so that three years from now I’m ready for this next step?”
And she laughed at me, and she said, “You’re ready now, why are you waiting three years.” And I said, “I’m ready now?”

And she goes, “You’ve been ready. You’re ready, now go.”

And so in September of that year, I put my resume together, and she introduced me to a few people who reviewed my resume, she reviewed my resume, and I was off and running, and within 30 days I had some offers. (A. Taylor, personal communication, June 27, 2012)

Thus far in her career, Jill Breton has benefited from a series of mentor-protégé relationships. Unlike Anne, her relationships have not resulted in a mentoring mosaic. Instead, Jill describes a series of mentor-protégé relationships beginning with her teaching fellowship immediately after college. Appreciating the value she has derived from being mentored, Jill took the position that it was her responsibility to cultivate mentors. This stance speaks to the sense of personal agency Jill brings to her leadership aspirations and reveals a strategy of action she has chosen to employ (Mullen, 2009; Searby & Tripses, 2006).

Recently the Carter School appointed a new head of school, which Jill is particularly interested in developing as a mentor. Having applied for several middle school division head positions in the last two years, she believes the on-campus leadership opportunities the head of school can provide will make her a more compelling candidate for a leadership position at another school (Gardiner et al., 2000; Grogan & Crow, 2004; Sherman et al., 2008).

Having gone through a number of different interviews for different positions over the last year and a half, the one thing that kept coming up was that I didn't have enough responsibility in terms of dealing with adults. So I discussed that with Jane and [she is] providing me with some ideas and some opportunities to maybe get that experience next year. [For example] she'd like me to take on a greater role with working with the new teachers and guiding them. And then
Carter School also has two ancillary programs, a riding center and a music school. Because of some changes in positions in the upper school, she's also offered that I can work with the COO in the business office to do some oversight, staffing and hiring and finances of the riding center and music school. (J. Breton, personal communication, May 21, 2012)

Jill’s strategy for actively recruiting a high-profile mentor was mediated by practical concerns about how much actual mentoring time she could expect from a head of school who has a broad array of responsibilities that can consume her attention. But while carpooling to an event with the head of school, Jill described how she established her “unequivocal” desire to help Jill. Reflecting on the possibility for a growth-fostering relationship, Jill noted the head of school said, “I’ll even help you go through your wardrobe. We’ll figure out what you’re going to wear, and who you’re going talk to” (J. Breton, personal communication, July 10, 2012). Yet in the absence of a formalized mentoring program, the responsibility for defining the parameters of their mentor-protégé relationship resides with Jill (Searby & Tripses, 2006).

The personal interest expressed by Jill’s mentor, albeit ill defined, is worlds apart from Connie Burr’s experience with a mentor-protégé relationship. In her first three years as the lower school division head at Cliffs School, she has found herself in the unusual situation of having worked with three different heads of school. In response, she has intentionally established a mentor-protégé relationship with a retired female independent school leader. As a new division head, it was the unsettling nature of her revolving door relationship with whoever was the head of school that lead Connie to pursue a stable, growth-fostering relationship outside of the Cliffs School community.

Her mentor has helped Connie to develop different leadership strategies and
coached her through particularly challenging moments. In this latter role, her mentor serves as someone that supports her efforts to unpack what happened and suggests strategies that she can use in her school setting.

I think one of the best things I did for myself last year was I went out and got a mentor. She was a lower school head [from] elsewhere and retired. I talked with her weekly or bimonthly and that significant mentorship has been of great value to me.

Because it is one-to-one, I can go to her and say this is what I am wrestling with and she can pull it out and say okay let’s talk about what do you do here and how did you do it, when you think about this in the long term how are you framing it for yourself and to help me to have framework more temporal for things that come up. (C. Burr, personal communication, September 1, 2012)

Although the leadership landscape of the Cliffs School could easily be perceived as an anomaly, Connie’s decision to pursue a mentor-protégé relationship with someone outside of her immediate setting aligns with Anne Taylor’s strategy of action to pursue mentor-protégé relationships beyond the boundaries of a single school community. As Cliffs School struggled to stabilize its leadership at the top, Connie’s sense of personal agency allowed her to create the type of mentor-protégé relationship she needed in order to circumvent a professionally debilitating situation. Similarly, Hilary Riley, Anne Taylor, and Jill Breton each described the benefits they have derived from pursuing relationships with mentors who could serve as unofficial guides to independent school culture, offer career advice, and professional encouragement. This strategy of action—establishing a growth-fostering mentor-protégé relationship—is repeated across participant narratives.

For both Michaela Curry and Helen Cooper, there have been peer-to-peer mentors who have shared their “job” knowledge, but neither African American woman’s
leadership narrative includes examples like those of Anne Taylor, Jill Breton, or Hilary Riley of a mentor providing opportunities that lead to high profile projects or the chance to pursue a new and challenging leadership role. Instead, it was their ambition as classroom teachers and spearheading new initiatives of their own invention that made them visible to faculty and school leaders.

Michaela Curry’s diversity initiatives—designing new courses and sponsoring student organizations—at the Mayfield School positioned her to be tapped when an interim position in a formal leadership role opened up in the mid-90s. Once in the role, Michaela relied on peer-mentors for advice and feedback, but the absence of a mentor committed to investing in her success slowed her leadership development. According to Michaela,

In those days I don't think I really understood what it meant to be a head of Upper School. I just thought this is kind of cool. You know, you get to work with kids. You get to work with teachers. You get to set an agenda for a meeting. You get to run a meeting. I had no idea what it meant. (M. Curry, personal communication, March 22, 2011).

Although there were peer-mentors who have shared their “job” knowledge with Michaela, her leadership narrative was devoid of examples of mentors or sponsors who recruited her to head-up high-profile projects or encouraged her to pursue new and challenging leadership roles. It was her ambition as a classroom teacher and comfort with being an African American woman working with a predominantly White faculty and administration that established her as having specialized, desirable knowledge, specifically regarding topics of diversity and inclusivity.

The intersectionality of race and gender adds a layer of complexity for women of
color who aspire to leadership positions in independent schools. While each participant in the study readily described the benefits of having a mentor who could provide her with career advice and professional guidance, the degree to which participants benefited from their mentor’s social capital disproportionately advantaged White women over African American women. According to Haslam and Rayan (2008) as cited in Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010), “women of color, are typically more isolated, without mentors or a network of support, are less able to garner the help that they might need when facing extraordinary challenges” (p. 172).

In 2010, Michaela Curry returned to Mayfield School as the upper school division head. She works working closely with a school leadership team and head of school, who she trusts and respects. When asked to define mentoring, Michaela said,

I call a mentor somebody who [is] watching out, you know, your weak spots, the things where you need to learn, helping you with that. Also encouraging you to take risks to try something completely different. (M. Curry, personal communication, March 22, 2011)

For Michaela, this second time around at Mayfield is different because she is working with a head of school who encourages her growth as a leader through a mentor-protégé relationship that offers her feedback and support aimed at honing her leadership skills.

Helen Cooper speaks with confidence and passion about her social identity as an African American woman, but is skeptical that the culture of independent schools is ready to provide women of color with mentors that share their social identities. As a result, according to Helen, women like herself are left to their own devices for negotiating the leadership labyrinth at the points where race and gender intersect. Reflectiong on a previous mentor-protégé relationship with a White, male head of school,
Helen observed,

There needs to be some sort of open discussion and work around race as a leader. What does that mean, to be a leader of color in a predominantly white organization, and how’s that going to be different for me than it was for Adam Franks. I think he could know some of that stuff and have that be part of his mentorship, but what would be the impetus; there is none…what would be the reason? (H. Cooper, personal communication, March 4, 2011)

Cooper’s skepticism speaks directly to the discursive nature of mentoring and social identity within the context of independent schools. The preponderance of efforts to further greater awareness of the ways that gender bias may impact access to leadership roles in independent schools has traditionally been the domain of members of single-sex schools and attendant professional organizations like the National Association of Principals of Schools for Girls (NAPSG). It has only been in the past two years that NAIS has undertaken an intentional examination of the ways in which current leadership development programs and professional literature may serve to perpetuate a predominantly androcentric—White, middle-aged, male—leadership culture (NAIS, personal communication, June 8, 2012). Still these efforts have neglected to consider the issues of intersectionality highlighted in Helen’s observation.

**Discursive Realms**

I have employed the term *discursive realm* as defined by Chase (1995) to mean “the set of discourses—the network of meaning or ideas—that are culturally available for talking about professional work on one hand and inequality on the other” (p. 17). Chase (1995) argued that women’s talk about professional work falls into what Swidler (1986) referred to as “settled,” acceptable narrative, while discourse related to personal
experiences with inequality ventures into the terrain of “unsettled” discourse, where meaning-making edges towards an uneasy landscape at which point personal and professional lived experience intersect. According to Chase (2003),

In narrating their work experiences, successful professional women work at integrating two kinds of talk—two discursive realms—that do not usually belong together in American culture: talk about individual achievement and success, and talk about gender and racial inequality. (p. 284)

Woven into each of the life-story interviews is the unfamiliar discourse that interrogates the relationship between achievement and success as independent school leaders and individual experiences of gender and racial bias. In the absence of dependable, accessible professional relationships or networks of support, women leading in independent schools lack the means for investigating this dimension of their lived experience. As such, the troubling of these unsettled periods represents points at which the interview process was transformed into a collaborative endeavor between women willing to examine their lived experience.

Again, borrowing from Chase (2003), I began the first interview by asking each woman to talk about how she had come to arrive at her current destination. The stories followed plot lines each narrator viewed as important to her lived experience, emphasized themes that held personal relevance, and employed self-paced moments for reflective meaning making. The small, tightly knit nature of the independent school world meant that often there was less than six-degrees of separation between a participant and myself as practitioner-researcher. I have worked in the same independent school with two of the women in the study—Helen Cooper and Siobhan Carroll—and over time, our work lives have invited the opportunity for personal friendships to emerge. However my ability to
navigate the complex arrangement of dual roles—practitioner-colleague and researcher—required that I bring my own lived experience into the storytelling. This willingness to share my perceptions and describe my personal sense of vulnerability as a leader opened the space for unselfconscious talk to surface (Young, 2003). Britzman (2002) warned feminist qualitative researchers to resist the urge to settle into meanings, which are the domain of the narrator—“Residing between the real and the unreal sits the narrator who describes her lived experience and the listener who contextualizes the story with her own perceptions of the cultural landscape in which the story is set” (p. 28–29). This admonishment frames my analysis and informs my findings in this final section.

**Resistance to dominant meanings.** The present discourse concerning the relationship between gender and independent school leadership is informed by an androcentric culture (Acker, 1990; Adkison, 1981; Shakeshaft, 1989; Young & Skrla, 2003) that defines the habits of leadership as mission-driven, visionary, entrepreneurial, determined, authoritative, collaborative, tone setting, relational, and rational (NAIS, personal communication, November 2, 2012). Furthermore, women are positioned in relationship to a normalized leadership which preferences White males (NAIS, 2010; Skrla, 2003). Yet the participants in this study have contested this knowledge claim and purposefully resist dominant meanings by narrating their lived experiences leading independent schools. According to Fletcher (1999), “creating discursive space means dislodging the preeminence of those dominant meanings long enough to create, at least theoretically, a place where new things can be said and new social structures envisioned” (p. 24). Through a shared exploration of our lived experience, we opened the discursive
space between the private and public spheres that women negotiate in order to be perceived as creditable independent school leaders.

While previous independent school leadership studies (Bryans, 2000; Leonard, 1994; Scott, 1997) have identified the tension between the private and public spheres (Fletcher, 1999; Scott, 2003) as slowing women’s ascension to influential school leadership roles, I chose for the purposes of this study not to directly engage participants in discourse about the ways in which the private sphere of family life may affect aspiring women leaders’ strategies of action. I had no doubt that the two intersect, as that has been my own lived experience. Still, taking a post-structural feminist position, I believed previous exploration that examined the impact “double-duty” may have on a woman’s capacity to become a formal school leader served as a distracter from the a priori matter of the gendered construction of leadership in independent schools.

Nonetheless having taken this stance, as participants began narrating their leadership journey, the role of spouse—having to first consider her spouse’s career before her own professional ambitions—and parental responsibilities emerged as elevated features in the topography of the leadership labyrinth. While some narratives provided explicit examples of the competing tensions between the private/public split, more often women only alluded to the stresses and strains of raising a family and nurturing a career. Siobhan Carroll spoke matter-of-factly about not discussing with colleagues the competing demands of her husband’s chronic health problems and her career, implying that she had built a “Chinese Wall” between private and public spheres in order to be perceived as having leadership potential.
Because my husband has so many health issues, I have had to be out of work sometimes. And everybody I’ve worked for has sort of commented on in reviews or something about how impressed they are with my ability to remain sort of professional and focused in the midst of personal, you know, hardship… And I don’t know any other choice, I mean for me it’s like what, of course that’s such a given to me. But I’ve, I’ve always been struck that people notice that about me. (S. Carroll, personal communication, June 7, 2012)

Similarly, Pamela Young describes going through a divorce the year she became the director of admissions at Collegiate Preparatory School. Having to sell her home and relocate her three children was private information that she kept separate from her professional life. Pamela recalled, “Most of that first year, I don’t remember. I just knew that failure was not an option… Most people didn’t even know I was going through a divorce. You know selling my house, moving” (P. Young, personal communication, July 10, 2012). The choice both women made to separate private and public spheres was informed by an intuitive understanding of “the risk of being viewed as women first and administrators second” (Grogan, 2003, p. 15). In other words, because women are held to a higher standard of leadership performance than men, women are forced to establish clear boundaries between private and public spheres (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Judith Stein’s description of keeping these two spheres separate serves to illustrate the discursive nature of this culturally imposed phenomenon (Fletcher, 1999; Scott 2003).

I pretty much cried during the entire “new heads” camp thing. And the only thing that I remember was [Michael Thompson ] on the very last day talking about transference, and how as the head of school you are the transference medium, destination, you know, that people who have young male faculty members who have issues with their mothers, you become that mother. And people are projecting on to you, and working out a lot of their own issues… for me anyway, [it was] ego defining to have to separate myself and have just greater distance and more perspective all the time. I’m a very connecting person, and every single person I came into contact with was someone I was now meeting in my role as head of school. (J. Stein, personal communication, June 11, 2012)
Developing a new persona that isolated her relational self while putting forward a formal public persona created a steep learning curve for Judith. She went on to explain how she negotiated the tension between the relational nature of the head of school role, which draws upon the communal qualities of leadership and the agentic leadership traits associated with the position (P. Bassett, personal communication, November 2, 2012; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Fletcher, 1999).

I needed to create more of a formal distance, and, so some of the painful learning was really learning to put a bit of a, I used to think of it as an M&M shield over me. And just learning, I mean it’s a basic head of school lesson, but learning not to take things so personally. (J. Stein, personal communication, June 11, 2012)

For participants who were sharing in the work of raising a family, the tension between private and public spheres was ever constant. Of the 12 women leaders interviewed for this study, slightly less than half of them are single. Of this latter group, 3 women are divorced and are single parents. The 2 women who are single and do not have children talked about the benefit of not needing to consider a spouse or children in their career plans. Yet they each described the need to mediate the tension between a school leadership career that can be all consuming and having opportunities to meet a partner and eventually raise a family.

The question they raised regarding work-life balance links to NAIS research findings (NAIS, 2010), which noted that although heads of school report a high level of job satisfaction, they concede the role takes its toll on their personal lives. The study goes on to say that independent school administrators’ (not heads of school) perceive the job of head of school as “too stressful and too time consuming for parents with children at
home” (NAIS, 2010, p. 18). Similarly, recent scholarship on women in the U.S. workforce frames quality-of-life questions as having relevance for both genders. According to Aumann and Galinsky (2012),

The “real” opt-out revolution is not women leaving the work place when they have children, but the diminished desire among all U.S. employees for the traditional career ladder with its lock-steps pattern of advancement and its traditional definitions of “increased responsibility.” (p. 84)

After teaching for one year in higher education, Pam Jackson has built a career for herself at the Franklin School, a single-sex (girls) school in the mid-Atlantic. On multiple occasions Pam’s narrative describes her desire to maintain a balance between work and family life. As she considers taking on the role of department chair and its impact on family life she observed,

I think women have those trade-offs about children and that limited time you have with them starts to factor in. You know, I’m lucky. I have a very supportive husband and, but even still I go, “Hum, do I really want to lose summer?” I don’t know. I look forward to going to the pool with my kids every day for the rest of the summer and being mom. So, in any case, for right now, I feel like this is the perfect thing for me to do. I get a little bit of a taste of everything without having to leave most of what I love about right behind. (P. Jackson, personal communication, May 30, 2012)

During the two previous years, Pam had grappled with how, when, and where she could take on a larger leadership role and looked around the school for her own role models. Rooted in the belief that the culture of a single-sex (girls) school should provide students with role models amongst the faculty and administration, she raised her concern about a balanced life with the head of school, who was writing a series of blog entries about women’s leadership strategies on the school’s website.

… If we’re this school about women and women’s leadership, then we really need to be doing better modeling, and I said to her, “You know, your senior
administration is now primarily male...You now have three men and yourself and one other woman,” and if we’re not doing it here, then where is it going to happen? (P. Jackson, personal communication, May 30, 2012)

From Pam’s perspective, the ability of female school leaders to surgically separate personal and public spheres has meant that she has been unable to learn from their example as how to create her own work life balance.

Similarly, Pamela Young is acutely aware of the stresses. She manages as a single parent and director of admissions at Collegiate Preparatory School. Pamela’s professional life has been punctuated by her efforts to perfect the balancing act of family and career. Herself an independent school graduate, a woman of color, and a mother of three, she underscores the importance her mother placed on education as having shaped her choices.

When I was married I wanted to go back to school but I just didn’t know how I could fit it in. [My mother said,] “I’ll help you to do whatever. Because you know, once you have your education, no one can take it away from you. It’s yours forever.” (P. Young, personal communication, July 10, 2012)

After earning a master’s in Business Administration while working full-time and raising a family, Pamela went on to pursue an independent school leadership position. Now in her eighth year as Admissions Director, Pamela’s description is both articulate and poignant as she considers the ways she continues to negotiate balancing family life—“a working mother’s guilt”—with her career ambitions.

I don’t want to be a head of school. Not at this point in my life. Because I feel like I sacrifice enough both in time and energy, trying to balance the two of what I feel like is a demanding job, and raising my children. And the age of my children, I just can’t. I couldn’t see myself giving any more. (P. Young, personal communication, July 10, 2012)

Her reflections echo the NAIS findings (NAIS, 2010) concerning the perceptions senior administrators have about the head of school’s job.
Women who have successfully figured out how to balance family and career have also mastered the art of separating private and public spheres. As a result, women who are ascending to independent school leadership roles, unable to break through this “Chinese Wall,” are left to their own devices.

Search consultant Elizabeth Strong brings specialized knowledge to this discourse on women’s work life balance. A member of the only women-and-minority-owned search firm that works on executive placements in the “education space,” on average she conducts one or two head of school searches in a year. Based on this experience, Elizabeth observes work-life balance does factor into the trajectory of a woman’s career.

A good proportion of the women I will talk to will say, “I’ve decided that this is the year that I’m going to pursue headships. I couldn’t do it last year because my parent was dying. I couldn’t do it last year because my kid was in junior high school. This year I can do it because next year I will be an empty nester without aging parents in the midst of crisis and so I’m going full steam ahead and doing it this year.” Now some people who say that succeed and some don’t. Because there’s so much left to chance in those processes as you know. But I just hear that intention a lot more often from women. (E. Strong, personal communication, November 21, 2012)

Elizabeth’s observations bring to the surface another iteration of the leadership double bind women face when they prioritize family (private sphere) responsibilities and defer leadership (public sphere) aspirations. According to Elizabeth, this strategy has a direct impact on what women are in the candidate pool from year-to-year.

…If I’m looking for women candidates I have less of a stockpile from last year to draw upon for this year’s searches… Where there were many great female candidates three or four years ago chances are she’s become a head and she’s going to stay there and she’s no longer available to me. So it’s hard enough finding women who feel like they’re ready, willing and able, and this is a year I can do this. But I can’t hold on to that knowledge. It’s not helpful to me for very long because that person has disappeared from that market place the following year. (E. Strong, personal communication, November 21, 2012)
Strong’s insights suggest that more women make the choice to defer pursuing head of school positions until they can take up the mantle of the ideal worker norm. 41

In 2009, the NAPSG Annual Conference included a panel discussion organized around the theme of “Nurturing Leadership.” Facilitated by the conference’s program chair, Jeanne Whitman, the panel members included Pearl Kane, director of the Klingenstein Center at Columbia University Teachers College, Wanda Holland Greene, incoming head of the Hamlin School, a K-8 girls’ school in San Francisco, and Jerry Katz, head of the Park School in Boston. The panelists’ remarks were about the need for independent schools to be engaged in leadership development endeavored to address the importance of mentoring women (of color and White), and the principal message was focused on encouraging school leaders to purposely create leadership opportunities within their school communities. Kane noted, “You’re really training leaders all the time, and you can make a big difference in developing people for the future” (NAPSG Conference transcript, 2009, p. 16), but the panelists avoided using this discourse as an opportunity to examine the intersectionality of gender and race within the independent school culture. So when responding to questions about leadership development, the panelists located the discourse within settled, culturally agreed upon meanings. (Swidler, 1986)

I just want to share an impression and a concern that I have from hiring senior administrators and participating in [searches for] school heads for upper schools because we're having a hard time attracting women…what we're finding is for

41 Ideal workers are characterized as those individuals who work long hours and have few family obligations and women are perceived as being less capable of achieving this idealized norm. Even women without children are subjected to this cultural bias based on the belief that at some future point they will be mothers. (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Sanchez & Thornton, 2010)
upper schools...women are not willing to proceed with the interview process often...we're finding women won't move. They have this ridiculous notion that their lives should be in balance and that they want to commit themselves to family and children as well as to "a reasonably satisfying job where I am and I'm happy where I am. (C. Rhea—NAPSG Conference transcript, 2009)

...In our Summer Institute for Young Teachers, we now take 75 teachers. Two-thirds of them are female. When we move to the masters program for administration, there are definitely many more male applicants. We have a majority of males. We work hard to get that balance. We work hard to get diversity of all kinds. So that's absolutely true. It's still hard to recruit women who want to take on administrative roles. (P. Kane, NAPSG Conference transcript, 2009)

Running counter to the gender biases and stereotypes expressed in the NAPSG panel discussion, Anne Taylor’s choice to participate in the search process brought into sharp focus the double bind faced by women leaders when they do pursue job opportunities that result in the possibility of moving their family for a job.

So I felt like an equally great opportunity was not going to appear magically at the school down the street. So therefore if I was going to drive my career forward, if I was going to have interesting challenging work that was going to develop me as a person under a great leader, then I was gonna have to move my family across the country. All right that was the price I was gonna have to pay, and I certainly met people who thought that was an inappropriate price for me to pay. And it was interesting the rumors that were spread about me; people assumed that I was getting divorced because why else would I move? People assumed that I had been let go from my job, because why else would I give up my job to move; which I don’t think that they would say those things about a man. (A. Taylor, personal communication, June 27, 2012)

When she arrived at Mary Childs School, her temporary status as a “single parent,” prompted rumors about her personal life, which consequently required her to explain that her husband’s temporary absence was related to moving his career to the family’s new location. The school community’s attention to her private life blurred the lines between public and private spheres (Fletcher, 1999), requiring that she publically unpack her
personal choices, making them a part of her professional discourse and highlighting the recursive nature of the private/public split.

Tallerico and Blount’s (2004) findings ask students of education to examine how women’s individual agency maps onto formal leadership attainment by focusing specifically on the relationships between “geographic considerations” and strategies of action that lead to a successful job search for women in public education (Tallerico & Blount, 2004, p. 654). The influence the private/public split has on women’s career planning is an additional consideration that requires a more nuanced framing of this question for women who have self-identified as independent school leaders.

**Unsettled Periods.** Swidler’s (1986) re-consideration of culture as a theoretical framework asserted that “culture” is a dynamic “tool kit” that individuals use to construct strategies of action during settled and unsettled periods in time. According to Swidler (2002), the transmission of culture takes place through:

- **Codes**—that define the knowledge of what meaning an action holds for others.
- **Contexts**—that provide the immediate face-to-face situations that express ideas that are both coherent and have the capacity to systematically shape behavior.
- **Institutions**—that offer a framework, which defines the boundaries, rules, and beliefs of a culture and prescribes the actions of individuals within the institution.

Venturing into the terrain of women and leadership attainment disclosed strong images and sharp feelings tied to women’s lived experience as ambitious and successful independent school leaders. Frequently, women observed that individual merit is not a direct route to leadership attainment (Gilligan, 1982; Shakeshaft, 1989; Skrla, 2003).
Instead, the intersection of gender and race frame the career pathways available to them in independent schools.

Watts (J. Watts, personal communication, November 17, 2012) and Strong’s (E. Strong, personal communication, November 21, 2012) descriptions of working with independent school search committees underscores the tension between individual merit and social identity that women face when joining a head of school candidate pool.

I have heard that a school search committees say things like, “I don’t know if we’re ready for a woman yet.” Of course [that makes me] more determined to find those great women…and they will tell you that sometimes at the end of the search they surprised themselves by hiring a woman. And I find that very, very rewarding. But the fact that in 2012 we still hear such things, and they’re not, these statements are not just coming from men you know, women are saying that too, “I don’t have a problem with that but I know how some members of our community would feel.” (E. Strong, personal communication, November 21, 2012)

The search committee’s reinforcing of normalized attributes, embedded in the discourse of an independent school’s “readiness” for a woman to lead the organization, serves to preserve the preferred social identities and cultural norms (normalized) associated with independent school leadership (Skrla, 2003). The frequency of these normalizing events places women (African American and White) who are pursuing independent school leadership opportunities, traditionally occupied by White males, within an unsettled period. Skrla (2003) argued that the perpetuation of male superintendents in the public school arena is directly related to the normalizing of masculine characteristics ascribed to this leadership role. The transferability of this claim to the role of head of school and upper school division head within the arena of independent schools is supported by the disproportional representation of men and women who are at present holding these
positions (NAIS, 2010). The lived experience of women in this study offer further evidence of the disruptive effect gender and race have on this leadership discourse.

Anne Taylor’s narration of her experience as a head of school candidate resembles Elizabeth Strong’s description:

I’m in the semi-finalist round and it’s Skype, [and] the consultant calls me afterwards, and says, “Oh my gosh Anne you were amazing, you were the best interview I’ve seen.” He’s extremely complementary, and he’s starting to talk about next steps. Next thing I know he emails me back and he’s, he’s terribly embarrassed, and he’s like “I need to talk to you”… because they’ve cut me after he’s congratulated me. And I’m like okay what happened…and he says to me, “I’m so embarrassed,” and I don’t remember his exact words but it goes like this, he says, “a woman on the committee said, ‘we just hired another woman,’” and it was as a division head, “we don’t have to hire a woman.” And that was one of those examples that told me gender is playing a huge role in this game... (A. Taylor, personal communication, June 27, 2012)

Additionally, the private sphere and its impact on work-life balance moves into the realm of public discourse when women apply for leadership positions in independent schools (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Fletcher, 1999). According to Elizabeth Strong, “search committees want to know is she married, does she have kids, how is she going to do all of that, both of that, etcetera” (E. Strong, personal communication, November 21, 2012). Jill Breton’s described her experience with this phenomenon as a candidate for a middle school division head position:

In one instance there was a group of teachers… and someone actually said in this small group conversation, oh, do you have any children…

I think it's hard when you're dealing with independent schools where an individual is very much committed to the school, particularly in a leadership role. So many schools have their leaders living on the campus where you're visible and your family is visible. So I think that's one that I still have a little trepidation about in terms of conversations and interview scenarios. Am I being judged fairly and just on my own merits as a leader? Or if I'm up against a male candidate, does that put me at a disadvantage—someone wondering whether or not I'm gonna be taking...
time off for making a family and how does that impact my role as a leader. (J. Breton, personal communication, May 21, 2012)

How then does knowledge of this double bind—that one’s personal merit can be reduced by one’s gender and race—inform the leadership strategies women in this study have developed? Does having this personal knowledge inform the discursive disjunction that enters women’s narratives when talking about their confidence in their own leadership capacity and the belief that they are regarded as legitimate independent school leaders? Talk about personal confidence finds points of intersection with school culture, mentoring relationships, and access to professional networks.

For Siobhan Carroll, her self-proclaimed lack of confidence is jarring, and at first glance appears oddly misaligned with the role she occupies at Woods School. Having just re-negotiated her job description and a new contract with the head of school, she is now the school’s first director of enrollment. Siobhan states, matter-of-factly, that she has strong ideas about certain things and “I certainly do not feel shy about sharing them if I feel like they’re important…” Yet she also expressed concerned that her colleagues not perceive her as being pushy. “If I feel like I’ve been left out of something I might not [be] assertive about getting in there, because I feel self-conscious that someone didn’t think that I should be there” (S. Carroll, personal communication, May 24, 2012). Deftly navigating the double bind of communal colleague and agentic leadership, she talks about recent feedback from the female head of school that praised her for “pushing people, [but] not to the point of pushing them away…” Carroll explains,

I ask hard questions in meetings that further people’s thinking or their action. She said, “nothing slips though the cracks with you; you know, that if you say you’re going to do something, or you talk about you are doing something, I know you’re
going to do it. (S. Carroll, personal communication, June 7, 2012)

Yet when asked to consider how her perseverance and passion—two personal traits she holds in high regard—manifest themselves in her leadership role, narrative difficulties begin to emerge as she talks about her discomfort with confrontation (Chase, 2003). Siobhan explains her understanding of confrontation has to do with offering feedback about a person’s work, which she says is not something she feels passionate about, and goes on to say,

I am very outspoken in terms of my ideas. So what is the difference between not liking confrontation and sharing ideas? And I think it comes down to the fact that I’m definitely a very passionate person, always have been. Even as a student I remember my teachers saying that about me. So I feel no fear about saying things when I’m passionate about something. But you’re not generally passionate when you’re saying to someone I don’t like what you did. Or I need you to do this, or this has to be better. (S. Carroll, personal communication, May 24, 2012)

Siobhan’s explanation offers a reflexive organization of the moments in which she feels confident about speaking up or speaking out and the moments she experiences as difficult or uncomfortable; both groupings are framed by the relational attributes of power with versus power over (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011).

Siobhan’s interviews are filled with reference to her efforts to build inclusive independent school communities and her long-standing professional engagement with equity and justice initiatives. Referencing herself as someone who is “a very passionate person,” her examples were often connected to fostering a more inclusive school culture in which her speaking up or out was focused on issues of equity and justice in the community. Viewed from this perspective, Siobhan’s “confident speech” most often occurs on behalf of others, whereas when forced to speak up or speak out in the role of
school leader or supervisor, exercising power over, her confidence recedes. Siobhan explained that she is known for challenging people, but not pushing them away. “I have strong ideas and I voice them. But I also step back and like to see how that affects the group, or how the group takes that” (S. Carroll, personal communication, June 7, 2012).

Similarly, Michaela Curry stated, “I’ve never been scared to ask questions, because I figure you’re just going to tell me or ask something…but I’m going to learn something” (M. Curry, personal communication, March 22, 2011), and then later expressed self-doubt as she considers where her leadership journey might lead. Questioning whether she has the necessary gravitas to be a head of school, Michaela asked,

What would I have to say to people? … Why do people want to listen to what I have to say? That's the question I always say to myself. Does anybody really want to listen to this? …if I'm speaking and I watch people, they are actually listening. And then sometimes I hear myself quoted back. You know, well, “Michaela said.” And it's like, ooh, yeah, I did say [laughing] that and people actually do listen and it matters. You know, it just stuns me and pleases me. (M. Curry, personal communication, March 22, 2011)

Both Siobhan, who is White, and Michaela, who is African American, have differentiated speaking up or speaking out on behalf of self or others—power with—as something they are confident doing. However they feel less self-assured when speaking out or speaking up implies that they have power over others. For both women, their discomfort with taking an authoritarian stance reflects an unsettled period resulting from the uneasy alignment between normalized characterizations of leadership uneasily aligned with their own social identities (Eagly & Carli, 2007).
The dissonances between normalized feminine/masculine leadership traits and racial identity was an explicit feature of the lived experience of each African American participant. Angela Charles’ description of the unsettled nature of this discourse was purposefully disruptive.

Independent schools say that they want someone who’s innovative and someone who’s gonna bring a fresh perspective and someone who’s dynamic, and things that you might associate with the idea that independent schools as a whole are open to change. And open to doing things a little differently. What my gut tells me and what I sometimes see is that independent schools are perpetuating some of the very things that we report to want to overturn. I think that independent schools still by and large serve a privileged class and aren’t necessarily open to talking about or calling out what that privilege is. There aren’t a lot of conversations about white privilege, there aren’t a lot of conversations [about] internalized sexism, there aren’t a lot of conversations about internalized racism or other systems of oppression and how that might serve to benefit some and keep others down. And my suspicion is that everybody thinks that they want a more diverse and inclusive and open environment and they want a Head of School who’s gonna help usher that in, but when it comes right down to it, I think a lot of independent schools are pretty comfortable about keeping things the way there were …when I look around at some of the conferences and, oh gosh, the younger white men who are coming up along the ranks, resemble what Pat Basset (President of NAIS) probably looked like 30 years ago. I’m like “okay, do we want change, do we want something different, or do we wanna just get a younger version of what the norm is for school leadership?” (A. Charles, personal communication, September 4, 2012)

Angela’s knowledge claims contest the cultural beliefs that define independent schools while underscoring the relentless nature of the unsettled periods that women (African American and White) occupy as independent school leaders. Referring to multiple ways of knowing—gut feeling and lived experience—that her descriptions of patriarchy and White privilege are accurate, Angela uses this knowledge to frame her strategies of action in a manner that challenges accepted leadership beliefs and practices (Collins, 2003). Angela’s ability to speak up and speak out has been nurtured by the
growth fostering relationships she has formed with members of the Sage School for Girls. Founded in 2000, Sage’s mission “is to inspire and develop courageous leaders who think independently, work collaboratively, learn joyfully, and champion change” (The school website). For Angela, this means leading in an organization that encourages change and that embraces the belief that unsettled periods lead to personal insight and generative growth. As Angela thinks about her next leadership role, which will require her to leave the Sage community, she explores the costs of living within the discursive disjunction of success as an independent school leader and her individual experiences of gender and racial bias.

Swidler (1986) argues that new strategies of action emerge during unsettled periods, yet their capacity to “take root and thrive” is determined by context in which they are enacted. The lived experience narrated by Angela and participants in this study act to foreground discrete, unsettled cultural periods during which each woman emerged as an independent school leader. The strategies of action they employed created a brief ripple across the still waters of a patriarchy that continues to normalize the leadership of independent schools.
Chapter 5:

CONCLUSION

Purposes of the Study

Work by practitioner researchers to examine how gender bias impacts access to leadership roles in independent schools has primarily been the domain of single-sex schools and professional organizations such as the National Association of Principals of Schools for Girls (NAPSG). Only in the last two years has NAIS undertaken an intentional examination of the ways the Association’s current leadership development programs and professional literature perpetuate an androcentric leadership culture (NAIS, personal communication, June 8, 2012).

Building upon previous research that uses post-structuralist feminist theory to examine the intersection of gender and leadership in a public school setting, this phenomenological inquiry explored the intersection of organizational culture and personal agency to examine the experience of women who occupy leadership roles in independent schools. The following research questions served to frame the scope of this inquiry:

1. How do women who self-identify as aspiring school leaders portray the strategies they use to prepare for leadership roles in independent school settings?
2. Do these women seek out mentor-protégé relationships, networks of support, and/or sponsorship from “recognized” independent school leaders; if so, then how does this work?
3. Does gender influence the strategies women use to prepare for independent school leadership roles?

In order to explore the strategies women employed to negotiate leadership preparation within environments that preference male leaders and normalize patriarchal leadership practices, I employed a conceptual framework that utilized Swidler’s (1996) claim that during unsettled cultural periods when unfamiliar habits of behavior begin to emerge, new strategies of action start to surface and individuals are engaged in practicing these novel patterns of behaviors until they become familiar habits (p. 279). As the number of women pursuing independent school leadership roles increases, so does the need to employ strategies of action that interrupt cultural practices blocking access to these positions. Utilizing a feminist standpoint to investigate women’s work narratives, this study discloses multiple points of tension between the settled and unsettled periods in the lives of aspiring women leaders (Brunner, 2000; Chase, 1995; Scott, 2003; Skrla, 2000, 2003; Skrla et al., 2000; Swidler, 1986).

**Becoming Visible**

My lived experience as a woman leading in an independent school informs my dual role as researcher and practitioner. As such, my own wrestling with the subjective terrain of qualitative research methods found encouragement in others’ attempts to explore this analytical frame. Writing about the intimacy between participant and researcher, Richardson (2000) noted, “troubled with the ethical issues of doing research ‘on’ others, I wrote about my own life. I did unto myself as I had done onto others” (p. 156). Employing the analytic device of prefacing my study through the lens of personal
experience, I have chosen to conclude my research with additional personal narrative. By crafting an imaginary dialogue, I have purposefully linked participants to one another and magnified the uneven landscape traversed by women who have chosen to occupy independent school leadership roles. During this journey, women are confronted with negotiating:

- Cultural dispositions of independent schools;
- Negative perceptions of non-normative gender and racial characteristics;
- Discursive relationships between personal ambition and faltering self-confidence;
- Feelings of isolation in the absence of reliable networks of support;
- Scarcity of progressive models of mentoring and sponsorship.

As a result, in the absence of dialogue that explores the social power and status of women in independent school communities, the cultural phenomena that perpetuate the unequal representation of women in key leadership roles are attributed to the leadership habits and practices of women themselves (Gilligan, 1982).

*Interviewer:* When I talk about this study casually, and I don’t spend a lot of my time, you know, saying, “Let me tell you about my dissertation,” but invariably—what’s happening is people who find the study really interesting will say, “Well, you’ve got to talk to so-and-so.” So it’s just happening in this organic way. And, I think that’s also part of creating opportunities for mentoring and sponsoring, and the networks of support, is being able to invite women who are at different points in that narrative, right, to share stories, because for me, that information has always helped me to think more deeply—about, you know, how did you do that?—to have the opportunity to play around with and consider what parts of another woman’s story actually fit with my lived experience, because when I’ve had men tell me their stories, there’s very little I can relate to. And, probably some of it has to do with that balance between home and work.
**Participant:** Well let me ask you Susan, did I say anything that surprised you in any way?

**Interviewer:** You know, as I’m trying to begin to knit stories together it makes an enormous difference to have someone like a “Madeline” [mentor] in your life. I think what you talked about when we began this afternoon about creating that network of support, is very potent because that’s one of the missing pieces in this puzzle around women in leadership—how do we build networks of support of women mentoring and sponsoring other women?

**Participant:** A mentor of mine is a retired public school educator; she’s a sorority sister of mine. What I get from her is she really listens. I’ll call and I’ll say, “Shonda, I’m trying to trouble shoot through ‘xyz’”, and it’s usually more community related. I’ll say “I need to trouble shoot through ‘xyz’, this is what I’m thinking, what do you think?” Or I’ll say, “Okay Shonda, this year I’m really working on delegating and letting go”, and I’ll say “when you see me not delegating and letting go, I need you to call me on it and I need you to let me know that I made this commitment to myself that I wanna delegate and let go and remind me of that.” So I use her in much more action oriented and improvement related ways.

**Participant:** I did let Sandra [a head of school] know when I applied for a division head position too, and she said, “You know, great, let me know when you hear about an interview and I can give you some tips and some coaching.” So, you know, that was just great, but it didn’t get to that level because I think it would have at minimum needed a phone call to take me out of the batch and put me onto the table. The NAPSG weekend was great, and Sandra is wonderful, but she doesn’t know me from, you know—

**Interviewer:** Right, so it’s about creating, you know, networks where there’s a sustained relationship.

**Participant:** You carefully construct it.

**Interviewer:** How much of it is careful construction and how much of it is relational trust—that there's gonna be a moment in time where I'm gonna say it's okay, I'm just gonna tell you what I think and no harm no foul. But since I don't have a lot of practice vocalizing this, I keep it to myself.

**Participant:** But I would imagine that some of the keeping it in is self-protective, right? That it's like oh, I'm not goin' there. I'm stayin' right here 'cause this has served me well, stayin' right here. I don't wanna have to think about the other pieces of this. How's that gonna benefit me.
Interviewer: So how is it that you and I don't stay stuck there?

Participant: I haven't had a choice of not realizing this. I don't have the privilege of not being able to deal and I think the racial piece for me has forced that and helps inform what I can see about the gender piece. And if I were White, I might not be able to see some of this and I may not have the same clarity and awareness as I'm walking through life every day.

Participant: Realness is very, very important to me and you know, I think that goes from who has a seat at the table in terms of leadership, all the way down to what is the climate of the school? You know, what does the school feel like when you walk in. How are you greeted? How are you received? How, you know, what's the energy like in a building when you walk in? How are parents of color received?

Participant: I think especially in independent schools, if we’re trying to break out of the normal mold and hire more women in leadership positions, that your head of school, or board chair or what have you, is going to have to, to some degree, be open to taking what, you know, other board members or people in the community may see as a risk.

I know that people saw the head of school’s choice to hire me as a risk. There were certainly risks involved and lucky for her, and for me, it all worked out. But I do think that is a trait of a good leader. Is that they’re willing to taking some risks and try some new things too.

Participant: I wonder sometimes if I was given the position because the head of school was leaving and they need stability. So the interim head of school said, “I would never have made you division head like that. I never would have done that, I never would have done that.” And I thought well it’s done, I’m here, and so that can, that make me shake a little bit when I hear something like that.

There are times when I feel like I constantly have to prove myself. There are things that I do well, and then there are things to work on. But, you know, it’s hard sometimes. I’m game to hear about where I need to improve, and to come up with a plan on how to address it, but when I’m met with, “I wouldn’t have done this,” that makes me feel like oh my gosh can I really, am I really doing it? Am I really here? And I feel likes yes, I am and I’m going to do the best I can, but I have the ground shaking under me sometimes.

Participant: I mean what’s going through all those women’s minds when they say to me, “Oh you could do it with your eyes closed?” Like they’re thinking you’re not as confident as you should be.
Interviewer: I’ve been trying to, to think about how I’ve asked for guidance over the years, when have I gone to other women, or men; but mostly from women. And some women along the way have said, “If you need help let me know.” And then I would ask very specific questions, and I would receive vague answers. I feel very much like you; I don’t ask a lot of questions about how to do something.

One of the important stories for me as a young, young leader was, I was, it was a public high school principal. It was my first day on the job, as school opened in this big city school system, that was very hierarchical, and the culture was very much a “got you” mentality. Knowing this, I really wanted to make sure all of my T’s were crossed. So it is the first day of school all the associate and assistant superintendents fan out across the district to visit, to do drop in visits at schools. They weren’t showing up to say, “It’s the first day of school, a lot is going on, how can I help you?” They were there to see what you, what you weren’t getting done.

Participant: To make sure you didn’t need help.

Interviewer: No, it felt like I’m here just to, to find out that you’re not fit for the job. So this Hispanic woman walks into the principal’s office [my office], and I say, “Hi, how are you?” And she says, “How is everything going?” And I said to her, “Well as far as I know everything is going really well.” And she looked at me dead cold, and said, “As far as you know?” And I thought, right? You know, as of 10:05 this morning everything was good, it’s now 10:07, but I didn’t say that to her. I, I just made this mental note. Never say that again. The right answer is, everything is great, and you stop there. And that was the secret to my success, after, you know, after that morning was, I never let anyone know that I didn’t know something. Or that I had, that I was unsure. I kept my mouth shut, and I listened to everything that everyone was saying. And just made a gazillion mental notes. So that, that I could, you know, fake it until I learned, learned what it was that I needed to do.

So how do you build a more inclusive leadership community?

Participant: I mean women—we still have so much further to go. We really need to find ways to connect with one another and be solid. And I do think that something happens with the men that somehow, so I’m thinking about your statement earlier about the gender piece. And my sort of saying, “Oh, yeah, we deal [with] that,” but you know? Not at this level because something is going on that prevents women from connecting with women. The focus is still the man. Who has their ear, who has their approval. And so we’ll throw your sister under the bus to get that. So I do think there’s work to do there. Yeah. And that would be a tough conversation. Yeah.
Interviewer: What would make it tough?

Participant: Well, I think, what would make it tough? I mean, I think we would have to look at these men in a different way. Because you kind of try to find ways to bond with them and be connected to them because you’re working with them. But they’re men, and they have their agenda. And they need to be aware of what they do or don’t do that impacts this process, this connection. And it’s kind of having to see them in another light. Because everyone’s trying to get to the top, I mean, we’re trying to be recognized for what we do. And if these are the people that we have to rely on to recognize us, then what does that do if we see them differently?

The world of independent schools is small, and points of connection between and amongst schools are varied. Attending a national conference, a regional workshop, participating in a job search, or conducting a reference check quickly reinforces the reality that as school leaders, we operate within a close-knit environment with often fewer than six degrees of separation. Yet ironically, women have remarkably few opportunities to engage one another in actual conversations that encourage an examination of their leadership experience. As such, women leaders take enormous professional risks whenever they speak up or speak out about the inherent patriarchy of independent school culture. Offering an imagined discourse amongst women leaders provides an entry point for continued examination of our leadership experience and provokes us to question long-held beliefs about the unique nature of independent schools.

It is the privileged status of independent schools, located outside the restrictions of state and federally prescribed educational policy that offers each institution the latitude of self-determination. Yet given the range of organizational possibilities, leadership practices continue to replicate a culture of patriarchy that bounds the career pathways
available to women (African American and White) in independent schools. The key findings of my study explicate this reality and build a case for further research in the field.

**Key Findings**

The following is a discussion of the key findings from this study; these are linked to recommendations that offer direction for future research and implications for leadership practices. These findings address three key concepts—leadership potential and organizational fit; mentoring and networks of support; and the intersection of gender and race—and are based in an analysis of these 16 women’s lives as they speak to the existing literature on women and school leadership.

**Leadership Potential and Organizational Fit**

Each independent school’s mission statement serves to position the institution within the broader context of independent school education. In addition, mission statements offer a succinct description of a school’s culture, and thus prescribe the leadership characteristics valued by the organization. While there appears to be little variation among the mission statements for the schools represented in this study, it was the “10% difference in school culture,” referred to by Judith Stein that was essential for a school leader to understand (J. Stein, personal communication, June 11, 2012). This 10% difference in how each school concretizes its core values acts to define the instantiated beliefs and habits associated with school leadership and inform an aspiring leader’s ability to develop a robust skill set.

The women in this study consistently sought access to institutional knowledge
and explicit feedback regarding effective leadership practices from leaders within their proximate setting. Those participants, who formed growth-fostering relationships with formal school leaders at the start of their leadership career, conveyed a greater sense of confidence about their ability to realize professional goals. In the absence of access to this critical relationship, participants depended on their well-developed skills of observation and sense-making based on their cultivated knowledge to interpret the interplay between organizational culture and leadership strategies. Thus a participant’s leadership trajectory was determined by access to explicit cultural knowledge from established school leaders or through keen observation and her perceived “fit” with the organization.

**Mentoring and Networks of Support**

Participants shared that passion, perseverance, and personal agency characterized their approach to forming both one-to-one and progressive mentoring relationships. Each woman had a clear understanding of the ways mentoring provided greater access to leadership opportunities and took on the responsibility of cultivating mentors who could benefit her career goals. Additionally, the majority of participants had mentors who are women and/or are the same race, indicating that social identity is critical to the development of successful mentor-protégé relationships.

While mentoring relationships were frequently located within the participant’s organizational setting, to avoid role conflict and/or to hone specific leaderships skills not addressed by a school-based mentor, several participants purposefully cultivated mentoring relationships with women leaders from outside their school community.
Lastly, although participants talked about the important role networks of support played in their leadership development, they were troubled by the shortage of women-only options available. This consistent observation acts as a catalyst for reframing questions raised by NAIS regarding the disproportionality of women (African American and White) leading independent schools. Arguing for the creation of purposeful women-only leadership programs and professional networks designed to prepare aspiring women for leadership positions, it is incumbent upon NAIS, NAPSG, and regional associations to re-evaluate their leadership development priorities.

**Intersection of Gender and Race**

The lived experience of the women (African American and White) in this study foregrounds how the reflexive act of normalizing White, male leadership traits in independent schools has fostered a dual-consciousness among women who occupy school leadership roles.

I mean it is so out there and in my face that I can’t understand that it’s continued for this long, and there isn’t a clear way for me to do anything about that without sounding like the angry Black woman, the complaining woman, you know all those adjectives that go with those two identifiers, there’s no way, you know sour grapes…oh it’s because you didn’t get that position, you know whatever… There’s no way of doing it without having people dismissing me in ways, because it’s a hard thing to look at, and it’s tied to power and privilege, and who wants to look at that. It means you have to give up some of your power and privilege if you really want to look at it and do something about it. (H. Cooper, personal communication, March 4, 2011)

The discursive language used to describe their leadership practices revealed the pervasive quality of these unsettled periods. Work narratives provided clear, cogent examples of how participants mediated the tension between the assigned behaviors
associated with their respective leadership roles and the leadership habits the organization ascribed to gender and racial identity.

Although the ubiquitous nature of “whiteness” features prominently in the leadership experience of African American participants, an amplified awareness of the intersectionality of race and leadership is absent from the work narratives of White women. For this second group, there was no discussion about White racial identity or the intersection of gender and leadership. This same lack of awareness is mirrored in recent research studies sponsored by NAIS (NAIS, 2009, 2010). Based on the findings of this study, future research efforts regarding the disproportionality of women in leadership positions must address the intersectionality of gender and race in the research design.

Far less ubiquitous was a discussion of work life balance. While participants seldom volunteered a reference to a spouse, partner, or child during an interview, they frequently described the need to balance the demands being placed on their lives in both private and public spheres. Those participants who had successfully figured out how to balance family and career had also mastered the art of separating private and public spheres. As Helen Cooper noted in her first interview,

There's a school face and a home face for every leader in independent schools...and the way that sexism and racism have worked in our society men get allowances that women don't get and those systems create layers, [which] are an absolute part of existing in the world as a woman or as a Black woman. (Personal communication, March 4, 2011)

An instinctive awareness of being held to a higher performance standard than male colleagues led participants who were in the first five years of their independent school leadership journey to express specific frustration with the lack of guidance from more
experienced female leaders. As a result, these women were left to work without any discernable roadmap as they intentionally established clear boundaries between private and public spheres.

This finding suggests that women who are unable to conceal the challenges associated with negotiating the intersection of private and public spheres can be perceived by an independent school community as a less ambitious or reliable candidate for school leadership position. The subject of work life balance has too often been the sole domain of women and serves as a type of stereotype threat. It is incumbent upon the regional and national associations, as well as trustees, search consultants, and school-based search committees, to re-frame the gendered narrative that defines school leadership practices in order to begin cultivating a fully inclusive pool of prospective candidates.

**Implications for Further Research**

The findings from this phenomenological study call for further research thatexplores the relationship between gender, race, and how independent school culture normalizes leadership characteristics. More than half of the women who participated in this study are currently situated in a single-sex (girls) school whose mission statements describe the institutional value placed on preparing young women to compete academically and socially with young men. Yet their leadership experiences reveal the perpetuation of normalized masculine leadership traits within single-sex (girls) schools. This dichotomy requires that further theory-building research examine the anomalous relationship between organizational culture, school mission, and the enactment of formal
leadership roles. Additionally, the absence of research examining the experience of African American women serves to perpetuate a social construction of whiteness that normalizes independent school leadership (Collins, 2000; Frankenberg, 1993; Visweswaran, 2003).

While previous recommendations for theory-building research invite an academic rendering of the question, the final proposal argues for developing more “just-in-time” opportunities for engaging practitioners. The absence of formalized networks of support (CGO Insights, 2012; Ibarra, 1997) and progressive mentoring arrangements (Mullen, 2000, 2009) isolate women leaders and reinforces the invisibility of their efforts to be consistently regarded as high-potential school leaders. Efforts to respond to the troubling reality that in 2013 women (of color and White) independent school leaders are still reflexively referred to as “non-traditional” school leaders or that well qualified women are cast in supporting roles to round out candidate pools have been slow to materialize. Still the pervasive nature of these practices demands focused and purposeful action, such as the establishment of women-to-women networks that can function as dynamic communities of inquiry for aspiring women leaders? (CGO Insights, 2012; Coleman, 2010; Debebe, 2011) An essential aspect of homophilous networks is their capacity to invite women at different points in their leadership careers to share their lived experience in a peer-to-peer setting.

The opportunity to ask how did you do that questions allows me the opportunity to play around with and consider what parts of another woman’s story resonates with my own lived experience. When I’ve had men tell me their stories, there’s very little I can relate to and probably some of it has to do with that balance between home and work that I have struggled with on my own. (S. Feibelman and P. Jackson, personal communication, May 30, 2012)
As NAIS continues to promote the habits of inclusive school communities among its member schools, greater attention must be paid to the leadership development of women (of color and White) who have been marginalized by the current approach of the Association’s leadership development framework (see Table 1). Focusing NAIS resources on constructing homophilous leadership development networks, similar to the Association’s People of Color Conference and the NAPSG Women’s Leadership Conference, would serve to re-center the present state of leadership discourse in independent schools.42

**Researcher Reflections**

While conducting the pilot study (Feibelman, 2011), two phrases repeated across interviews. First, the notion of “becoming visible” emerged as a shorthand reference for the series of moments when a woman was first recognized by formal school leaders to have high leadership potential. The second was women talking about the fleeting moments in which it was acceptable to acknowledge the connection they felt with other aspiring women leaders. Similarly the participants in this study explicated the strategies they had employed to achieve their own visibility as independent school leaders and for some, women-only networks supported these ambitions. Whether it was by actively recruiting a mentor, volunteering to be on a committee that would enhance her cultural understanding of the organization, or associating with like-minded peers, which elevated

---

42 According to NAIS, “The mission of the NAIS People of Color Conference is to provide a safe space for networking and a professional development opportunity for people, who, by virtue of their race or ethnicity, comprise a form of diversity termed "people of color" in independent schools” (Accessed 2/17/2013 from occ.nais.org/Pages/About-Conference.aspx).
her social capital, their examples serve as a testament to each woman’s “wily” determination to succeed.

As Carol Gilligan (2011) observes, “Within ourselves we have the resources we need. However adverse the political climate, however bad the weather, they accumulate inside where nobody can take them away from us” (p. 180) Yet too often it seems that for women immersed in the work of negotiating the inherent gender and racial biases associated with independent school leadership there is little interest in purposefully examining the context in which leadership occurs. Perhaps it is because the professional risks can be quite costly for those who do question the patriarchy of independent schools? In response to this intransigent double bind I have deliberately employed the principles of post-structural feminist theory to frame this qualitative study. In this way I have expressed my own impatience with the present state of independent school leadership and have offered to others the possibility of creating a shared discourse that honors the potency of women-only networks and challenges the masculine normalization of “the interview” (Oakley, 2000). It is my sincere hope that the discursive nature of this study invites further theory-building research that will examine strategies used to resist normalized conceptions of masculine leadership and the patriarchal culture of independent schools as a means to building a more inclusive leadership practice within our communities.
### APPENDICES

#### Appendix A.

**Findings: Pilot Study Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Emergent Question</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| How are women mentored to take up leadership roles in independent schools? | How does a woman's first year(s) in an independent school set the stage for her capacity to take on leadership roles in the future?  
How does physical proximity promote mentoring relationships?  
Can women step into leadership roles before establishing a formal mentoring relationship? | Mentor (MENT)  
Head of School as Mentor (HOS_MENT)  
Personal Initiative (PER_INT)  
Kinship/Friendship (KIN)  
Models (MOD)*  
Leadership Role(s) (LR)  
Visibility (RECOG)* |
| What networks of support exist to advance the development of women who are interested in pursuing leadership roles in independent schools? | Do women step into leadership roles without waiting to be invited?  
What is the relationship between leadership and institutional culture; how do assumptions about gender roles inform this relationship? | Professional Development Programs (PROG)  
Models (MOD)* |
| Do female educators who are interested in taking up leadership roles in independent schools seek out mentoring relationships and/or networks of support? | How do the participants describe what they wanted/needed in a mentor-protégé relationship?  
Can a head of school be an effective mentor while simultaneously playing a supervisory role; what are the inherent risks in this mentor-protégé relationship? | Professional Goals (PROF_GLS)  
Personal Growth (PER_GRW) |
| How do social identifiers of race and age inform the mentoring experience of aspiring women leaders in independent schools | How do women learn the culture of independent schools and how does the diversity of independent school cultures shape their education? | Diversity Work (DIV_W)  
Visibility (RECOG)* |

*Note: * Some codes hold relevance for multiple research questions.
Appendix B.

IRB Consent Form

University of Pennsylvania
Office of Regulatory Affairs
3624 Market St., Suite 301 S
Philadelphia, PA 19104-6006
Ph: 215-573-2540/ Fax: 215-573-9438
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
(Federalwide Assurance # 00004028)

Sharon M. Ravitch
ravitch@gse.upenn.edu
Graduate School of Education
3700 Walnut St.
Philadelphia, PA 19104-0216
Attn: Susan Feibelman
feibelman.susan27@gmail.com

19-Apr-2012

Dear Dr. Sharon Ravitch:

The above referenced protocol and was reviewed and approved by the Executive Chair (or her authorized designee) using the expedited procedure not forth in 45 CFR 46.110, category 6,7, on 18-Apr-2012. This study will be due for continuing review on or before 17-Apr-2013.

Approval by the IRB does not necessarily constitute authorization to initiate the conduct of a human subject research study. Principal investigators are responsible for assuring final approval from other applicable school, department, center or institute review committee(s) or boards has been obtained. This includes, but is not limited to, the University of Pennsylvania Cancer Center Clinical Trials Scientific Review and Monitoring Committee (CTSRMC), Clinical and Translational Research Center (CTRC) review committee, CAMRIS committee, Institutional Bio-safety Committee (IBC), Environmental Health and Radiation Safety Committee (EHRS). and Standing Conflict of Interest (COI) Committee. Principal investigators are also responsible for assuring final approval has been obtained from the FDA as applicable, and a valid contract has been signed between the sponsor and the Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania. If any of these committees require changes to the IRB-approved protocol and informed consent/assent document(s), the changes must be submitted to and approved by the IRB prior to beginning the research study.

If this protocol involves cancer research with human subjects, biospecimens, or data, you may not begin the research until you have obtained approval or proof of exemption from the Cancer Center’s Clinical Trials Review and Monitoring Committee.

The following documents were included in this review:

- HS-ERA Protocol Application (Confirmation #: iihg4c) submitted 04/17/12
- Email Correspondence dated 04/17/12
- Reply Document uploaded 04/18/12
- Categorization of Participants and Data Collection Strategies uploaded 04/16/12
- Findings: Pilot Study Data (Feibelman, 2011) uploaded 04/07/12
- Interview Protocol dated 04/09/12
- Confidentiality Agreement uploaded 04/06/12
- Information and Consent Form uploaded 04/07/12
- Information and Consent Form for Discussion Board/Blog uploaded 04/16/12
When enrolling subjects at a site covered by the University of Pennsylvania's IRB, a copy of the IRB approved informed consent form with the IRB approved from/to stamp must be used unless a waiver of written documentation of consent has been granted.

If you have any questions about the information in this letter, please contact the IRB administrative staff. Contact information is available at our website: [http://www.upenn.edu/regulatoryaffairs](http://www.upenn.edu/regulatoryaffairs).

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator
Appendix C.

Information and Consent Form

University of Pennsylvania
Graduate School of Education
Research Subject
Information and Consent Form

Protocol Title: Becoming Visible: Strategies Utilized by Female Educators to Gain Access to Influential Leadership Roles in Independent School

You are being invited to participate in a research study.
Before agreeing to participate, Susan Feibelman, an investigator named above, will discuss the following points with you:

- Participation in the research study is strictly voluntary.
- There are a maximum of 14 participants in the study.
- The study will take place commence on or before April 30, 2012 and will conclude no later than March 31, 2013.
- Each participant will be given a copy of the research study questions and a summary of the study proposal.
- The findings from the study conducted will be submitted to Dr. Sharon Ravitch, and Dr. Dana Kaminstein of the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education and Wharton; as well as Dr. Linda Skrla of Texas A&M University’s Educational Administration and Human Resource Development and Dr. Jolley Bruce Christman of Research for Action, an independent educational research organization.
- The information gathered and the study conducted will not be used for any non-research purpose.
- The study will maintain the privacy of all participants; actual names, school names, and other identifying information will remain confidential.
- Susan Feibelman will conduct audio-recorded interviews, which will be destroyed following the completion of the transcriptions.
- Participants may be asked to contribute written comments to an computer mediated, on-line discussion board.
- Susan Feibelman will take all reasonable precautions to ensure that participants are in no way harmed or adversely affected as a result of participation in the study.
Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide not to participate, you are free to leave the study at anytime. If you have any questions about your participation in this research study, make sure to discuss them with the study investigator (Susan Feibelman). You may also call the Office of Regulatory Affairs at the University of Pennsylvania at (215) 898-2614 to talk about your rights as a research participant.

You will be asked to sign this form to show that

- The research study and information above have been discussed with you
- You agree to participate in the study

You will receive a copy of this signed form and the summary of the study proposal that will be discussed with you.

___________________________________________  ________________________________
Name                                               Signature                   Date

___________________________________________  ________________________________
Name                                               Signature                   Date
Appendix D.

Interview Protocol—Aspiring Woman Independent School Leader

How do women prepare themselves to take on influential leadership roles in independent schools? In what ways does the gendered nature of these leadership roles inform this preparation?

1. Would you take me through your work history that leads us to today’s interview? What do you consider to be particularly instructive life-stories that come to mind? Please explain.

2. How did you make the choice to work in an independent school? How many different independent schools have you worked in? Please describe each school (e.g. culture, location, demographics, mission, values, etc.)

3. Prior to your current position, what experiences and/or people have been vital to your development as a leader? (S-M-P)

4. In your current position, what experiences and/or people have been or continue to be vital to your development as a leader? (S-M-P)

5. What forms of support are available to you in this current position? What are some examples of how you make use of this support?

6. How have you asked for support and how have you developed your own support systems in order to attain your leadership goals? (F)

---

43 I have coded each question for purposes of identifying the study that it associated with:
F—S. Feibelman Pilot Study, 2011 (p. 26)
S-M-P—Sherman, W., Munoz, A. & Pankake, A., 2008 (p. 258–259)
7. What forms of support have been missing from your leadership development? How has this shaped the choices you are making as an aspiring leader? (F)

What is the relationship between leadership and an independent school’s distinctive culture? How do beliefs about gender and leadership inform this relationship?

8. What do you think is important for an aspiring school leader to understand about independent school culture? What are examples from your current school that you come to mind? How would you compare the culture of this school with other independent schools in which you have worked?

9. Is there a formal school leadership team at your school? If so, please describe the composition (e.g., race, gender, age, roles, years at the school, etc.) of the team.

10. How does the team make decisions? What role do you play in this process? What is an example of this?

11. Please describe your day-to-day responsibilities as a school leader at <INSERT NAME OF SCHOOL>? (S-W) What are some examples? Are these examples similar to or different from those of other leaders with comparable roles in the school? Explain.

12. Have you been encouraged to step into school leadership roles; who encouraged you? What are some examples?

13. Do you have a particular belief system about leadership that guides your decision-making in this school? (S-W) What are some examples of how this is evident in your work?
Do women who are interested in taking on leadership roles in independent schools seek out mentor-protégé relationships, networks of support, and/or sponsorship from “recognized” independent school leaders?

14. Do you have or have you had someone (mentors) who encourages or supports your career aspirations? Or was there anyone who particularly influenced your career development? (Tell me about them and in what ways they have supported you. (S-M-P)

15. How critical was this person (mentor) in helping you attain your current leadership position? What things did they do that were critical in assisting you to secure this position? What was/is the power or networking level of this person? (S-M-P)

How do the social identifiers of race, class and age inform their strategies of action?

16. Please tell me about your family background. How has this shaped who you are today? (S-W), e.g. tell me a story about yourself that helps to explain who you are today?

17. Which of your personal traits has most influenced your leadership style? How do you think these traits contribute to your leadership effectiveness? (S-W)

What are some examples that come to mind?

18. How do your friends describe your leadership style? How do you know this?

19. How do your colleagues describe your leadership style? How do you know this?
20. How would you finish this statement: “If you really understood my leadership ability, you would know____________.”

21. Is there anything else you would like to add to this interview?
Appendix E.

Interview Protocol—Woman Head of School

How do women prepare themselves to take on influential leadership roles in independent schools? In what ways does the gendered nature of these leadership roles inform this preparation?

1. Would you take me through your work history that leads us to today’s interview? What do you consider to be particularly instructive life-stories that come to mind? Please explain.

2. How did you make the choice to work in an independent school? How many different independent schools have you worked in? Please describe each school (e.g. culture, location, demographics, mission, values, etc.)

3. Prior to your current position, what experiences and/or people have been vital to your development as a leader? (S-M-P)

4. How have you asked for support and how have you developed your own support systems in order to attain your leadership goals? (F)

5. What forms of support have been missing from your leadership development? How has this shaped the choices you make as a head of school? (F)

What is the relationship between leadership and an independent school’s distinctive culture? How do beliefs about gender and leadership inform this relationship?

6. What do you think is important for a head of school to understand about independent school culture? What are examples from your current school that
you come to mind? How would you compare the culture of this school with other independent schools in which you have worked?

7. Is there a formal school leadership team at your school? If so, please describe the composition (e.g., race, gender, age, roles, years at the school, etc.) of the team.

8. How does the team make decisions? What role do you play in this process? What is an example of this?

9. Please describe your day-to-day responsibilities as the head of <INSERT NAME OF SCHOOL>? (S-W) What are some examples? Are these examples similar to or different from those of other leaders with comparable roles in the school? Explain.

10. Do you have a particular belief system about leadership that guides your decision-making in this school? (S-W) What are some examples of how this is evident in your work?

Do women who are interested in taking on leadership roles in independent schools seek out mentor-protégé relationships, networks of support, and/or sponsorship from “recognized” independent school leaders?

11. Do you have or have you had someone (mentors) who encourages or supports your career aspirations? Or was there anyone who particularly influenced your career development? (Tell me about them and in what ways they have supported you. (S-M-P)
12. How critical was this person (mentor) in helping you attain your current leadership position? What things did they do that were critical in assisting you to secure this position? What was/is the power or networking level of this person? (S-M-P)

**How do the social identifiers of race, class and age inform their strategies of action?**

13. Please tell me about your family background. How has this shaped who you are today? (S-W), e.g. tell me a story about yourself that helps to explain who you are today?

14. Which of your personal traits has most influenced your leadership style? How do you think these traits contribute to your leadership effectiveness? (S-W)

What are some examples that come to mind?

15. Is there anything else you would like to add to this interview?
Appendix F.

Interview Protocol—Experts in the Field/Search Consultants

How do women prepare themselves to take on influential leadership roles in independent schools? In what ways does the gendered nature of these leadership roles inform this preparation?

1. What are the competencies that school leaders are expected to possess? What are some examples?
2. How do aspiring school leaders acquire this skill set? What are some examples?
3. What if anything might hinder aspiring women leaders from acquiring these competencies? What are some examples?

What is the relationship between leadership and an independent school’s distinctive culture? How do beliefs about gender and leadership inform this relationship?

4. What do you think is important for an aspiring independent school leader or head of school to understand about independent school culture? Who succeeds as a leader in an independent school? Who doesn’t? What are some examples? Does social identity affect a head of school’s success?
5. Do you have a particular belief system about leadership that guides your decision-making as a search consultant? (S-W) What are some examples of how this is evident in your work?

---

44 The questions for this protocol employed interview strategies described by Fletcher and Meyerson (2000) in “How to Begin Small Wins” (p. 132).
6. In independent schools, what kinds of work and work styles are valued? Are there
types of work styles that are necessary, but invisible in the organization? Why?
Can you give examples?

7. How does your lived experience in independent schools inform your work as
search consultant?

How do the social identifiers of race, class and age inform their strategies of action?

8. How do you identify potential candidates for leadership positions? Take me
through the process? What are the strengths of this process? Are there any flaws
and if so, explain.

9. How is expertise and ability identified during the search process; what qualities
are evaluated during the hiring process?

10. What aspects of individual performance are discussed most frequently during this
process? Why do you think that is the case?

11. What do you think is the relationship between leadership practices and school
culture in independent schools; are there beliefs about gender roles that inform
this relationship? What are some examples that come to mind?
REFERENCES


