

HANCOCK, JULIE. Ed.D. Leadership Practices That Build a Positive School Culture. (2021)
Directed by Dr. Kathy Hytten. 138 pp.

Serving as an elementary school principal has given me the unique opportunity to shape the culture of our school. Serving as a woman in a school leadership role has also made me curious about how other women lead to improve school culture. Are they investing in a positive school culture and seeing the benefits in student achievement? Typically, human capital management is not a focus offered to principals when they are asked to consider different avenues to improve student outcomes. We know carrot-and-stick accountability plans are not working and not motivating anyone. Focusing more attention on school culture could be one way to alter this trend.

In this basic qualitative research study, I used data from interviews with five female elementary school principals nominated for their strengths in building school culture and analysis of artifacts to examine their experiences in shaping the cultures of the schools they lead. I also examined the role gender played in creating this kind of supportive and caring school environment. I identify and report the specific strategies and practices that these principals are using to impact culture related to trust, professional development, communication, collaboration, care, and celebration. Additionally, I report the specific areas related to gender that presented a challenge to these leaders as they worked to build and maintain a positive school culture. I also include advice for future leaders and what needs to change in the way women are leading for them to continue to experience success.

Finally, I share recommendations for superintendents, district level administrators, and universities/colleges about what it is important to help other future leaders and specifically the support women aspiring to be school leaders need to be successful. The results indicate that

current female leaders are doing amazing work despite the challenges they face and the little support they receive.

LEADERSHIP PRACTICES THAT BUILD A POSITIVE SCHOOL CULTURE

by

Julie Hancock

A Dissertation

Submitted to

the Faculty of The Graduate School at

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Greensboro

2021

Approved by

Dr. Kathy Hytten
Committee Chair

© 2021 Julie Hancock

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by Julie Hancock has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair

Dr. Kathy Hytten

Committee Members

Dr. Craig Peck

Dr. Carl Lashley

October 19, 2021

Date of Acceptance by Committee

October 14, 2021

Date of Final Oral Examination

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, thanks to my heavenly father for showering me with strength and blessings throughout my research to complete this work successfully.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Hytten, Dr. Peck and Dr. Lashley for serving on my committee and taking interest in my work. Your support and guidance helped me grow as a researcher. I am especially thankful to Dr. Hytten for your support as my dissertation chair and for wanting me to successfully complete this program. Your meaningful feedback and encouragement made a difference.

I am extremely thankful to my two children, Millie and Will who have been on the front lines with me while I completed my dissertation. I am grateful for your love, understanding, and continued encouragement to complete this research work. I am blessed to be your mom and appreciate you cheering me on to the finish line.

Finally, to my late husband David Hancock, who believed I could do this before I believed it myself. Your excitement to see me become Dr. Hancock was contagious and motivated me to begin this work. I will always be grateful for your belief in me and for always being my biggest fan.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	ix
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Researcher Positionality	2
Statement of the Problem	7
Purpose of the Study	8
Research Questions	8
Background Context.....	9
Description of Methods	11
Conceptual Framework	12
Definition of School Culture	12
Criteria for a Positive School Culture	14
Significance of This Study	15
Overview of Chapters.....	17
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW	18
Trust	18
The Principal's Role in Building Trust	20
Leadership Practices That Impact School Culture	22
Promoting Teacher Professional Growth and Development	23
Collaboration	24
Communication	25
Care.....	26
Celebrations.....	27
Summary.....	28
Gender and Leadership.....	29
Challenge One: Professional Identity	30
Challenge Two: Judgment.....	32
Challenge Three: Mentorship	34
Gender and School Culture	35

Conclusion.....	38
CHAPTER III: METHODS	40
Pilot Study	41
Research Questions	43
Methodology	43
Sample Population.....	44
Detailed Personal Profile of the Participants.....	45
Data Collection Methods.....	47
Data-Analysis Strategies	48
Trustworthiness	48
Member Checking	49
Peer Debriefing.....	50
Ethical Considerations.....	50
Limitations	51
How I Report the Data	52
Summary	53
CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS ON SCHOOL CULTURE	54
Participant Profiles	56
A Principal with a Positive School Culture is People-Centered.....	56
A Principal with a Positive School Culture is a Community Builder	59
A Principal with a Positive School Culture Practices Distributive Leadership.....	62
A Principal with a Positive School Culture Practices Servant Leadership	65
A Principal with a Positive School Culture is Supportive.....	68
Leadership Practices that Impact Culture.....	71
Trust.....	71
Professional Development.....	73
Collaboration	74
Communication	76
Care.....	78
Celebrations	79

Challenges Principals Faced in Building a Positive School Culture	82
Staff Turnover	82
Bureaucracy	83
Parents	84
Taken Advantage Of.....	84
Intentional, Authentic and Strategic Female Leaders	85
Summary	88
CHAPTER V: FINDINGS ON GENDER.....	90
Advantages	91
Disadvantages.....	92
Challenges	94
Professional Identity	96
Judgment.....	97
Mentorship.....	99
Advice for Future Female Leaders	100
What Needs to Change?	101
Summary	104
CHAPTER VI: ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	105
Answers to Research Questions	106
Research Question 1	106
Research Question 2	107
Research Question 3	109
Research Question 4	110
Discussions/Implications.....	111
School Culture	111
Theme 1.....	111
Theme 2.....	112
Theme 3.....	113
Theme 4.....	115
Theme 5.....	117

Gender	119
Professional Identity.....	119
Judgment	120
Mentorship	120
Limitations	122
Recommendations for Practice.....	123
Recommendations for Future Research	125
Final Thoughts.....	127
REFERENCES	130
APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW QUESTION GUIDE	135

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Participant Criteria.....	55
------------------------------------	----

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

“Culture eats strategy for breakfast” is a quote originated from Peter Drucker and made famous by Mark Fields, the former CEO of Ford Motor Company. In the business world, this phrase highlights the importance of including cultural considerations alongside business strategies when making decisions. Tony Hsieh, CEO of Zappos says,

Our number one priority is company culture. Our whole belief is that if you get the culture right, most of the other stuff like delivering great customer service or building a long-term enduring brand will just happen naturally on its own. (as cited in Ryssdal, 2010, para. 4)

A former CEO of IBM Lou Gestner says,

Until I came to IBM, I probably would have told you that culture was just one among several important elements in any organization’s makeup and success—along with vision, strategy, marketing, financials, and the like ... I came to see, in my time at IBM, that culture isn’t just one aspect of the game, it is the game. (as cited in Vandehey, 2019, para. 1)

Each of these successful businesses has a recurring theme in their company and it is not about the bottom line. Typically, it is quite the opposite. It is about the culture and the people.

“Contrary to common misconceptions, in business, one thing is crystal clear: *the culture of an enterprise plays a dominant role in exemplary performance*” (Deal & Peterson, 2016, p. 2). Have these businesses identified a key ingredient for success? If we want high performing schools, is there a lesson for educators in these models of success? As a current school leader, I would argue yes.

As a principal working with the current model of high stakes testing and accountability, I know schooling has to be about more than just measuring results. I believe educators would be wise to take a close look at these successful business models that offer culture as a powerful starting point for success. I believe it is a mistake to focus only on accountability measures and not consider the impact a positive culture can make for our schools. Researchers in the field of education also understand the importance of culture in educational contexts. Deal and Peterson (2016) remind us of this importance by stating, “the point is that education seems to be following or learning the wrong lessons from mediocre businesses that focus only on making a profit and using measurable short-term financial goals as a beacon” (p. 4). Schooling has to be about more than a test score or a letter grade.

Our current model of schooling, often based more on political and legislative agendas related to competition and standardization, as opposed to sound educational decision making, is leaving many educators frustrated and feeling inadequate. We are ignoring a key ingredient of what makes businesses successful, which is a positive culture, and instead have accepted a model of increased testing and legislative mandates. How can schools provide this key ingredient of culture that these prosperous business leaders point to repeatedly? I believe there is a way and it starts with the school leader. In order for a school to be effective, it takes a school leader who can create a positive environment for students and staff. Then, high-quality teaching and learning can take place. This is a lesson I learned from reading the scholarship around leadership, but even more, from my own experiences.

Researcher Positionality

My first experience that sparked an interest in school culture came when I was serving as a Kindergarten teacher. As a teacher, I was fortunate to work on a strong team. We began as a

team of three and gained an additional team member. We worked so well together it was hard to tell if there was a weak link among the group. At the time, we had a principal who appreciated each one of us equally. As a young, new teacher, the encouraging words that were offered to me and the potential this principal saw in me had a significant impact on my performance. Our principal encouraged the collaborative efforts as well as promoted our team and our professional growth. Eventually the principal left to advance to another position, and we began the school year with a new administrator. Suddenly there were lots of changes, and it was obvious this new leader had a different way of handling things. The new administration quickly identified the tenured team of teachers and invested only in them. Everything became about singling out a select few teachers, and there was no longer a spirit of collaboration. This was a pivotal moment for me. I remember thinking there has to be a better way to lead people. At the time, I did not think I would be a school leader but I was sure there was a better way to build school culture. In my many years as an educator, a number of my colleagues have shared similar experiences of struggles with leaders who create negative cultures in their buildings.

After working with our new principal and trying to adjust to a different leadership style, I eventually left the classroom for a different role as a curriculum lead teacher. It was in this role where I met my mentor. Little did I know this relationship would be one that still carries over today. I still call on this retired administrator for wisdom and advice. As I worked for this principal, I was encouraged to pursue my masters in school administration. It was under this principal's direction that I observed a wonderful example of a school leader who knew how to impact school culture in a positive way. While the school served an impoverished community and faced a variety of challenging issues, I saw the staff thrive under a positive school leadership style. Within the first six years of my journey as an educator, I had worked for three different

administrators. These experiences certainly helped shape my idea of a school leader and I felt like the lessons I learned both on what to do and what not to do were equally powerful. These experiences left me knowing that when I had an opportunity to be a school principal, a focus on building a positive school culture would be important to me.

Fast forward a few years and I gained an opportunity to be a school principal charged with leading an elementary school of over 500 students and 60 staff members. This was my chance to begin building a positive school culture. My thought process was rather simple: I knew I could not control how much money teachers make, but I could work together with my colleagues to create an environment where they want to work and a place they want to come to each day. My hope was this focus would ultimately impact student achievement. I began to read books about school culture and recall the following from Connors (2000):

Successful administrators feed their teachers continuously to make sure the students are not eaten. Meaning, the best leaders focus on providing a climate where teachers are encouraged to take risks and act as coaches-guiding students through journeys of success. Effective leaders ask, guide, delegate, communicate, encourage, and take risks. They make it abundantly clear that people in the building are important; and they'll do whatever it takes to say thank you for winning efforts. (p. 12)

This idea of “feeding teachers” made sense to me and aligned with my own experiences as a teacher. I also recall these words by Whitaker et al. (2009):

As soon as you walk into a school, any school, you can sense the level of excitement, energy, or lack thereof, in the building. The same is true when you venture into a classroom, or a hallway of a school. What is it that differentiates the places that are exciting to work from those that lack energy and excitement essential to a high-

functioning school? One factor is the morale and motivation of those who work at the school. (p. 3)

These comments about the feel of a building resonated with me too and I knew culture was a factor that I could control. So, I continued to move forward with new ideas hoping I would begin to see the school culture evolve and flourish. Each year as I gained more confidence in my abilities as a school principal, I felt more courage trying new things to keep my staff motivated and the culture positive and affirming. I listened to the words of Connors (2000) and tried to apply them in my own school:

To ensure that teachers are supportive of all students, we must create professional, safe, secure, and encouraging environments where everyone feels appreciated, listened to, and respected. Hence, the role of the administrator is the crucial element in determining the morale and climate of any given school. (p. 12)

This was affirmation to me that not only was the school culture a factor I could control but also, I was instrumental in the change process.

In my ninth year as a school principal, I have seen a shift in the culture, certainly for the better. I had one staff member who works in schools across our district write to me and say, “The little stuff makes a big difference. I travel all over the district and it’s always good to come back, open those front doors and come inside. Having coffee and doughnuts is just really nice. Coffee and doughnuts may seem like a little thing but it can make a big difference.” Receiving this note made me think that perhaps if that morning providing this treat helped a great teacher get to work, and made them look forward to being there, then maybe I was successful. The dilemma for me is I also feel the pressure of accountability and ensuring our students show growth. I know

the measures the state is using to assess whether teachers and schools are successful, and I know they have nothing to do with coffee and doughnuts.

Additionally, while serving as an elementary school principal for the past ten years, I have observed the changes occurring in the field of education. The talent pool for new teachers is smaller, teachers are not staying in the profession, and parent support has decreased, all while students' needs have increased. These changes have made me question what needs to be done to change the horizon for education in order to prevent our students from being negatively impacted by these losses. As a principal, my desire for improvement and success has been consistent; when standards require more from us, when parents challenge us, or when students' needs are greater than our skill set, I hope our teachers will have the perseverance to stick it out because of the school's culture. I also believe the interactions with students will only be as great as the adult interactions. If I could create a positive environment for teachers that would retain them then, it would directly impact our students and their achievements.

Several other factors in my experience have influenced my interest in studying school culture and its intersection with gender. In my time as an educator, I have only worked directly for two women leaders. Also, when I began my journey in education, I set out only to be a teacher. I never saw myself as a leader of a school building. This experience makes me think of Sally Ride who said, "You can't be what you can't see" (Clinton & Clinton, 2019, p. 10). At the time when I started teaching, most of the school leaders in my district, including my principal at the time, were men. Now after being a school leader for over ten years, I have the opportunity to work alongside many women leaders. These experiences have shown me that women often underestimate their abilities and do not give themselves enough credit for the powerful work they do, especially in cultivating welcoming school cultures. My own experiences as a female leader

have led me to this dissertation topic and why I studied female elementary school principals. I decided to seek out women leaders, share their stories, and celebrate the positive school cultures they have established and the challenges they have encountered and overcome along the way. As Gloria Steinem said, “I am not giving up my torch. I’m using it to light others. That’s the only way there can be enough light” (Clinton & Clinton, 2019, p. 12).

Creating a positive school culture has been a priority for me as a school leader. I have had the opportunity to share my ideas with other school leaders across our district and even with some future leaders. Each time I share my practices, the audience is always appreciative of the opportunity to learn how to develop a positive school culture in practical ways. As I began my research study, I recognized that my experiences may both enable high-quality research and at the same time create limitations. I thought it was easy for others to open up to me about this topic, but it was also important for me not to discuss my own efforts too much, filter what I heard in interviews through my own experiences, and/or ask leading questions. To help keep myself in check, I kept a reflexivity journal to help manage my own biases.

Statement of the Problem

Serving as an elementary school principal has given me the unique opportunity to shape the culture of our school. I know the steps I have taken to build a collaborative, positive space for our teachers and students. Based on my own experience, I know a positive school culture can make a difference in student achievement, but going into this study, I wanted to know more. Serving as a woman in a school leadership role has also made me curious about how other women lead to improve school culture. These personal experiences led to my interest in school culture and made this research compelling to me. I was curious to hear from other female school leaders. Are they investing in a positive school culture and seeing the benefits in student

achievement? Typically, human capital management is not a focus offered to principals when they are asked to consider different avenues to improve student outcomes. Also, there are not enough examples of principals on the ground doing the work of establishing strong, positive school cultures.

We know carrot-and-stick accountability plans are not working and not motivating anyone. In fact, we are seeing these approaches have the opposite effect as teachers are resigning positions and retiring early. Districts and school leaders are experiencing firsthand the shrinking pool of highly qualified teachers. Focusing more attention on school culture could be one way to alter this trend.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to investigate how school leaders work to improve school culture. I studied the specific practices and skills that school leaders use in order to establish a positive school culture and, equally important, sustain it. I explored how principals who have created a positive school culture have seen this environment directly impact student learning in their building. Another purpose of my study was to consider how women in school leadership positions have established a positive school culture and the role gender played in creating this kind of environment.

Research Questions

An overarching research question with three sub questions guided my study:

- What are the experiences of female school principals in shaping the cultures of the schools they lead?

Three research sub-questions were:

- What practices help female school principals to create a positive school culture?

- How do female school principals understand the role of school culture in student achievement?
- How have female school principals navigated challenges related to gender that they faced as women leaders in their work to create a positive school culture?

Background Context

For decades now, educational institutions have been bombarded with a variety of reform initiatives. Most of these began with good intentions to make schools more advanced, efficient, and productive, and ultimately functioning similar to successful businesses in providing measurable results (Deal & Peterson, 2016, p. 4). However, many teachers and administrators believe that the idea that schools should run more like a business is slowly killing schools and the people in them. Instead of schools being happy places where learning is fun and teachers are given opportunities to create and design instruction, they are places that are constantly adjusting and shifting to the latest legislative decisions and where teachers and administrators are spending more time assessing than teaching. There is more gathering of data and using it to dictate a school's success rather than using some of the data in a meaningful way to meet the specific needs of the students these schools serve. I think the most disheartening repercussion of an obsessive focus on measurable results in education has been to watch the consequences of these changes in education. As a principal I have seen exactly what this looks like. Deal and Peterson (2016) describe the troubling educational reality when they say, "we see the public as losing faith in schools and educators losing faith in themselves" (p. 5).

What happens when educators start losing faith in themselves? They leave the field of education all together. Deal and Peterson (2016) also report, "In many states there is a growing shortage of teachers, often because of rampant criticism of the profession and a focus on testing

not learning” (p. 6). Again, as a school principal I have observed this phenomenon firsthand. Every year we have fewer student teachers to work with from area colleges. We have to market our schools to compete with neighboring private and charter schools in order to hire teachers. The teacher applicant pool seems to be getting smaller every year while teachers are choosing to retire early. It is not surprising that “seasoned teachers are leaving the profession early because of the negative climate, and others are telling their students and their own children not to go into education” (Deal & Peterson, 2016, p. 6). For someone who knew they wanted to be a teacher from an early age, the current climate for education is discouraging and sounds the alarm for me that we have to do something to change these outcomes.

Where do we start? There is growing evidence in the business world that culture is an important factor in success. “In business, culture stands out as a strong predictor of financial results” (Deal & Peterson, 2016, p. 10). “Many management consultants and theorists have asserted that ‘strong cultures’ are desirable as a basis for effective and lasting performance” (Schein, 2004, p. 393). Lessons from the business world can be relevant to education, especially in terms of a focus on culture. However, it appears that when educators chose to learn from the business sector, they learned the wrong lessons by focusing on businesses that only centered on gains and losses. This focus has left educators feeling like they are no longer making a difference and not measuring up. Instead, we should look to better models that recognize schools must include the human factor where people feel connected emotionally. Michael Fullan (2020) highlights this key factor when he states, “If you asked someone in a successful enterprise what caused the success, the answer almost always is ‘It’s the people.’ But that’s only partially true: It is actually the *relationships* that make the difference” (p. 63). High quality and supportive relationships are something many of our schools are in desperate need of now. There is also

evidence that shows culture can have a positive impact on student achievement. Flip Flippen, author of *Leadership Blueprint: Building Relational Capacity & High Performing Teams* (2014) shares the following research:

The October 16, 2002 edition of Education Week cited professional research documenting a specific “missing ingredient,” without which schools stand little chance of significant improvement. The missing ingredient the researchers identified was an important element of school culture: a strong bond of *trust* among the various members of the school community. The authors went a step further, providing a wealth of data to support the concept that there is a strong correlation between a school’s trust level and its students’ academic achievement. (Appendix 5)

Description of Methods

In this basic qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I highlight the work of female school leaders and how they are building positive culture in the schools they lead. For this study, I interviewed five female school leaders who are currently serving as principals and who are known for their work in creating positive school cultures. I describe the criteria for selecting these participants in chapter three. I initially planned to interview participants face-to-face, though because of current health concerns related to Covid-19, I wound up conducting interviews with two participants virtually using Zoom, a video software platform. I listened to their stories and recorded their experiences and ideas. I interviewed each participant two different times. Doing so allowed me to dig deeply into their experiences and focus each interview on different issues. I was also able to share the first interview transcript with my participants for review before the second interview, which allowed them to check for accuracy and elaborate on any topics we discussed in the first interview. In addition to the interviews, I

asked each principal to provide some artifacts that are representative of the school's culture. I analyzed these artifacts for further information on how a positive school culture is established.

After I finished collecting data and having the interviews transcribed, I analyzed this data to identify themes and practices these leaders use to build a positive culture in their schools. I used this data to answer my research questions. Creswell (2016) notes that qualitative research proceeds "by collecting and analyzing data gathered from people who can help answer the question" (p. 3).

Conceptual Framework

Positive school culture was the conceptual framework that I used to structure my research study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) offer that a conceptual framework will "draw upon the concepts, terms, definitions, models, theories of a particular literature base and disciplinary orientation" (p. 86). As part of this framework, I define school culture and how it is connected to school leadership.

Definition of School Culture

It is important to know the nature of school culture and how it is defined in existing research. In Deal and Peterson's (2016) research around school culture they discuss how schools have a distinct feel to them. They suggest, "Parents, teachers, principals, and students have always sensed something special, yet undefined, about their schools..." (p. 7). The question is how do you quantify or express this special feeling you sense when you walk in a school? "For decades terms such as climate, and ethos have been used to try to capture this powerful, pervasive, and notoriously elusive force" (Deal & Peterson, 2016, p. 7). Deal and Peterson (2016) believe using the term culture "provides a more accurate and intuitively appealing way to

help school leaders better understand their school's unwritten rules, and traditions, customs, and expectations" (p. 7).

There are actually a variety of definitions researchers offer for school culture. Deal and Peterson (1990) believe it consists of "the stable, underlying social meanings that shape beliefs and behavior over time" (p. 7). They also include this comprehensive definition originally from Schein (1985) in their work:

A pattern of basic assumption—invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with problems ... that has worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to these problems. (p. 8)

Engels et al. (2008) define school culture as the "basic assumptions, norms, and values, and cultural artifacts that are shared by school members, which influence their functioning at school" (p. 159). Peterson and Spencer (1990) define it this way: "deeply embedded patterns of behavior and shared values, assumptions, beliefs, and ideas that members have about their organization" (p. 6). Researchers Hollingworth et al. (2018) relied on Deal and Peterson (1998) to describe positive school culture as "a place where staff are committed to student learning, are collegial and supportive of each other, share a common vision and goals, and where student achievement, parent commitment and teacher innovation are celebrated" (p. 1016). In the book *The Secrets and Simple Truths of High-Performing School Cultures* (2012) the author, Cathay Lassiter, suggests that school leaders should:

Give people a challenge; allow some autonomy for tackling the challenge; and support and give praise for effort, dedication, and working together. All of these forces will build

a strong purpose culture and tap the intrinsic motivation that each human being brings to work. (p. 13)

Reading across these definitions, there are some common themes such as the basic assumptions held by a group of people, and/or the common values and goals held by a group that guide them on how to act. In simple terms, school culture is a network of meaningful things that impacts how people think and act.

Criteria for a Positive School Culture

If school culture is made up of the meaningful things that impact an organization, it is also important to understand what constitutes these elements. Deal and Peterson (1998) state, “strong positive cultures are places with a shared sense of what is important, a shared ethos of caring and concern, and a shared commitment to helping students learn” (p. 29). In order for a school to be a positive and meaningful institution where teaching and learning are the focus, it takes a school leader who can craft the culture to create a positive environment for students and staff. Deal and Peterson (1998) suggest school leaders shape culture in specific ways to create a place where:

- There is a commitment to teaching and learning.
- There is a collaborative and supportive environment.
- There is a common vision and goal.
- There are celebrations of teachers, students, and families. (p. 30)

With this conceptual framework of school culture, my approach for this qualitative study was to understand the specific leadership practices that principals use to create the positive school cultures they have established in their schools.

Significance of This Study

We know we will continue to see changes occur in education and many of these changes are out of our control as they are given to educational leaders as mandates from policy makers. School leaders are seeing the impact of these initiatives on their staff and outcomes for our students and their families. This impact is not always positive, especially when the changes get in the way of building a positive culture in schools. While educational leaders may not be able to change the practices that they have to adopt as dictated by policy makers, there are still two key factors that are in their circle of control that can be used to stop the unraveling that is taking place in our schools: culture and leadership.

The first key factor educational leaders can control is school culture. They can build positive school culture and “there is evidence that school culture, both its content and application, has an effect on students’ learning” (Engels et al., 2008, p. 160). Educational leaders need to focus on what they can control and the element of culture is key. Deal and Peterson (2016) state, “research on school improvement and change points to the central importance of the culture in enhancing curriculum, instruction, professional development, and learning – for students and staff members” (p. 13). There is evidence that focusing on school culture can impact all areas of a school and ultimately lead to improvement.

The second factor that can be used to impact the performance of students, and concurrently the culture, rests with the school leader. If we want schools to have a positive culture then we need dynamic leaders. Daniel Duke (2010) describes leadership this way: “Leadership is what enables followers to understand and commit to what must be done...” (p. 239). Duke points out that it is the school leader who sets the tone for what needs to take place in a school building. Researchers in the field continue to point to the work of the school leader in

impacting the culture. According to Fullan (2001, as cited in Engels, et al., 2008), “There is also a strong association between effective principals and school cultures that support learning” (p. 160). While principals face a variety of challenges, demands, and tasks to address in their jobs, Fullan (2001) argues that principals “should focus on transforming the culture of the school in order to ensure in an efficient way that teaching and learning functions effectively” (as cited in Engels, et al., 2008, p. 160).

By researching ideas related to positive school culture, I hope to demonstrate the important role school culture has on teaching and learning in this study. This information can help principals better understand why culture is important and highlight the skills they need to develop and implement with their staff in order to create a high performing positive school culture. I agree with Deal and Peterson (2016) when they said, “If a company can motivate employees to pour their hearts into selling coffee (or motorcycles, or cars), then schools should be able to motivate staff members to pour themselves into teaching” (p. 287). There may be principals who are implementing effective strategies for their students but who are still missing the mark on student achievement because they are forgetting an important component like motivating staff through a positive school culture. This information might prove to be helpful to principal training programs and to the professional development school districts offer to school leaders to help them continue to grow and develop.

This qualitative research study was significant because it focused on the intersection of leadership and school culture that can ultimately improve student achievement. Identifying the specific strategies that current principals are using to impact culture and learning how they lead may also have implications for college education programs and the professional development plans that are established for new principals.

Overview of Chapters

In an effort to better understand the specific practices that women leaders use to build a positive school culture in this qualitative research project, I studied information gathered from women who are currently leading schools as principals. By listening as they shared their experiences and reflected on their own practices and the challenges they encountered, I shared information relevant to current and future school leaders, both men and women alike, about how to impact school culture in a positive way and ultimately improve student achievement.

I provide a review of literature related to school culture and women in school leadership roles in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, I describe the research methods used in this research project and the specific qualitative research process. I share my analysis of the data collected from the principal interviews and artifacts in Chapters 4 and 5, followed by research findings and answers to the research questions in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I review research literature relevant to school culture and gender in school leadership. First, I examine principal trust as this topic comes up often in the literature and has proven to be a precondition to creating a positive school culture. I define trust and discuss the principal's role in building trust. Second, I describe in much more detail how a principal establishes trust by implementing specific leadership practices that current research shows impact school culture. This section helps the reader understand what a school leader needs to do to shape a culture. I discuss the following topics: promoting teacher professional growth and development, collaboration, communication, care, and celebrations. Finally, I explore the role gender plays in school leadership.

Trust

While there are a variety of responsibilities placed on school leaders, developing trust is recognized as an essential element to the learning environment by most scholars writing about school culture. Research shows there are a variety of ways a school leader can cultivate trust. Since trust can be complex, it is important to understand what trust means in this educational context. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015b) describe trust "as the willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the other party is benevolent, honest, open, reliable, and competent" (p. 257). Principals must create an open environment where teachers feel supported, cared for, and seen as competent individuals who are encouraged to grow their craft. In a longitudinal study of four hundred Chicago elementary schools, researchers spent over four years observing school meetings, conducting interviews and focus groups, observing classroom instruction, and analyzing surveys. From this intensive work, they found a correlation between

the schools with the highest relational trust and the improvement of student learning. Based on surveys with approximately two dozen questions related to trust, particularly assessing attitudes of teachers toward colleagues, parents, and school leaders, Bryk and Schneider (2003) showed how trust was a key factor that distinguished improving schools from those that remained stagnant or got worse.

In a multiple case study of principals at four different schools, building trusting relationships was found to be one of the first ways leaders create a positive school culture. Hollingworth et al. (2018) studied individual principals who were identified as excellent leaders by the state's Department of Education and the school district superintendents. Data was collected through observations, document reviews, and interviews with key stakeholders. While the principals included in this study used a range of different strategies, the school leaders were "observed using the following leadership practices: (1) they cultivate trust from their staff; (2) they know their staff well; and (3) they engage in explicit and purposeful communication" (p. 1021). In all four of the schools included in this study, trust was key in the development of a positive school culture. Deal and Peterson (2016), in their book *Shaping School Culture*, also recognize the important element of trust. They point out that trust between principals and teachers impacts the rest of the school community. If trust is present in a school, the teachers will let others know them as people too, not just in their role as educators. This creates opportunities for everyone to come together for non-school related events (e.g., basketball games and picnics). Peterson and Deal state, "Trust is easy to damage, hard to establish, but it remains one of the most important elements of parent community ties" (p. 216). The trusting relationship between administrators and teachers also works toward creating a climate of trust for parents too.

Bryk and Schneider (2003) suggest trust is the glue that holds successful schools together and ensures students thrive. They describe trust this way:

Relational trust is the connective tissue that binds individuals together to advance the education and welfare of students. Improving schools requires us to think harder about how best to organize the work of adults and students so that this connective tissue remains healthy and strong. (p. 45)

Connective tissue is everywhere in our body and found between other tissues in our body. In the same way, these researchers have made a strong case for trust being an essential element that correlates to a positive school culture and impacts all parts of a school community. In this next section, I explore the specific role of the principal in building trust with stakeholders.

The Principal's Role in Building Trust

The principal is the catalyst for transforming the culture of the school in a positive manner and building trust, thus improving student outcomes. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015a) researched faculty trust by collecting survey data from over three thousand teachers within two different school districts. In their study, they assessed faculty trust and teacher perceptions of principal behaviors using a Likert scale and discovered key features that are important for a principal to build trust. In order to build trust, the researchers indicated a principal must be honest as they interact with their staff. This not only includes telling the truth but also relates to demonstrating integrity. Teachers trust the principal when they believe they are fair and know a principal does not play favorites among the staff.

Another way that school leaders develop trust is to be competent. “When principals demonstrate the ability to get the job done, whatever that job may entail, teachers are more inclined to trust in the principal” (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015a, p. 70). In this same study

of faculty trust in the principal, the research showed when a school leader demonstrates trust and competence, there is a natural development of “both collegial and instructional leadership” (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015a, p. 70). Collegial leadership is demonstrated when the principal shows support to teachers by being considerate, helpful, and genuinely concerned about their well-being. Instructional leadership occurs when the principal works alongside teachers to improve instructional practices. This research reiterated the importance of developing collegial and instructional leadership practices together. Before a school leader can impact the instruction in a school building, they must first be a trusted leader who the staff believes cares about them first. Once this level of trust and care is in place, teachers are willing to work with school leaders to ensure the best instructional practices are being implemented. The researchers in this study tested this idea to see if perhaps one principal behavior was more important than the other. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015a) wanted to know if it was more important to teachers to have a friendly, approachable, principal or to have a principal who was deeply engaged in curriculum and instruction. The answer turned out to be ‘yes’ both were important in nearly equal measure. Teachers desire to have a principal who cares and who understands instruction. When this desire is met and teachers feel they have a trusted leader, it leads to a positive staff perception. Teachers view their colleagues as cooperative, supportive, competent individuals who are committed to their jobs. The conclusions from this work indicated a trusted, caring instructional leader is key to leading a school where academics are taken seriously.

In Michael Fullan’s (2014) book, *The Principal Three Keys to Maximizing Impact*, he also discusses the importance of building trust. He says as a principal, “You name trust as a value and norm that you will embrace and develop in the organization; you model it in day-to-day actions; and you monitor it in your own and others’ behavior” (p. 130). In another study

(Cranston, 2011), principals' perceptions of professional learning communities were analyzed over a period of six months as part of an interview-based study of twelve principals, two thirds of whom were females. From the data, five themes emerged that were shared among all participants, and relational trust was the common element. "Trust was seen as an essential element in successful school improvement initiatives in the professional community, especially if teachers were to follow and support a principal's efforts to improve student outcomes school wide" (p. 67). The research indicated that trust coupled with other leadership practices is a way of achieving what is most important, student learning. In this next section, I share the specific leadership practices of principals that continually show up in research on building trust, and consequently, promoting a positive school culture.

Leadership Practices That Impact School Culture

In this section, I identify the leadership practices required to build a positive culture and how they impact a teacher's perception of their work environment. Teacher turnover continues to be a challenge for public schools. "Nationally, 16% of public school teachers leave their schools annually" (Burkhauser, 2017, p. 126). In a study using four years of data collected from the North Carolina Teacher Working Condition Survey, Burkhauser (2017) explored the relationship between four measures of their working conditions and their principal. The research suggested that if a principal can provide feedback to teachers, address concerns, and develop an environment of mutual respect and trust, these actions could reverse a teacher's decision to leave the profession. This is important for school leaders to know, understand, and implement in their school buildings to retain teachers. Research shows that the principal has a key role in how a teacher feels about their working environment (Burkhauser, 2017). A principal influences the culture of a school and they need the skill set to create a positive climate for teachers and

students alike. If districts want to recruit and retain strong teachers, a good starting point is to look at the principal who is essential in shaping and improving the working conditions. Effective principals build trust, communicate, improve, and grow teachers, develop connections that allow for collaboration, and remember to celebrate, and build high performing positive cultures.

“Leaders who invest the time to do this work well will have engaged teams who are prepared and eager to tackle the ever-increasing demands of educating America’s children” (Lassiter, 2012, p. 14). Where does a principal start in order to create this positive culture of high performance? As I noted in the previous section, research indicates in order to have a positive school culture, it is important for a school leader to first develop trust. Trusting leadership takes time to grow and cultivate. It is a definite starting point for school leaders. In addition to this idea of trust, and along with other leadership practices, there are a range of other principal behaviors that researchers indicate influence school culture and are instrumental in building a positive school culture that impacts student achievement. These elements are promoting professional growth and development of teachers, communication, collaboration, care, and celebration.

Promoting Teacher Professional Growth and Development

When principals offer their teachers professional autonomy, it leads to a more positive environment. Principals who make professional learning a priority for their staff encourage their teachers to try new strategies, and make them feel it was okay to not get everything right on the first try. In a multiple case study of four US state-recognized high-quality principals chosen by the state department of education and district superintendents for their implementation of change initiatives this was a key leadership strategy, Hollingworth et al. (2018) explained, that teachers were allowed to fail. Also, the principals encouraged their staff to grow professionally by providing professional development opportunities. Additionally, the learning was not just for the

teachers. “The leaders make explicit that learning is not only for their students and teachers, but also for themselves” (Hollingworth et al., 2018, p. 1022). Ongoing professional development by principals sends a powerful signal to teachers that improving teaching and learning is a shared responsibility and the principal is a trusted and competent leader who is invested and willing to learn alongside them. Hallinger et al. (2019), who used a comparative study of principal leadership in China and Thailand, also explained that principals who develop strong and supportive school cultures create conditions that support the professional development of teachers and model collaboration and collegiality when they participate in these professional learning activities with their teachers. This research highlights the important leadership practice of promoting professional learning.

Collaboration

Another leadership practice that research shows surfaces frequently in schools with a positive school culture is collaboration and teamwork. Susan Moore Johnson, a Harvard scholar of school cultures, studied fifty new teachers over a period of four years. In successful schools, “principals and teacher teams worked together in setting aspirational purposes, promoting shared learning, not lockstep execution, and providing a psychologically safe environment for teams” (Johnson, 2019, pp. 89-90). Similarly, in a study of how successful principals implementing change initiatives promote a positive school culture, researchers found that, “All four principals were observed to recognize and value staffs' expertise by providing space for staff to offer input and suggestions, and the teachers at the four schools seemed to appreciate this opportunity” (Hollingworth et al., 2018, p. 1026). Valuing teacher perspectives and knowledge is a specific practice that is highlighted over and over again in research on school culture. Other researchers also mentioned that the involvement of staff in decision making is important. In their

comparative study, Hallinger et al. (2019) explored the relationship of principal leadership and professional learning of teachers. They collected data from thirty-eight primary and middle schools in China and sixty primary schools in Thailand. The results confirmed the effects of strong principal leadership on the professional learning of teachers. The findings offer insight for practitioners. “School leaders foster teacher agency by involving teachers in making decisions on learning priorities and budget allocation” (Hallinger et al., 2019, p. 354). In another study based on forty-six principals who were able to create a school culture that promoted teaching and learning, Engels et al. (2008) reported “in schools with very positive school cultures we find principals with high achievement orientation, who focus on creating a flexible, stimulating, participative and supportive environment” (p. 170). This collaborative leadership practice of involving staff in the decision-making further develops trust among the principal and the teachers. “Principals also garner the trust of their faculty by being open in both information and control. Trusting principals invite faculty involvement in decision-making thereby fostering a sense of being valued by their teachers” (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015a, p. 69). Research on the specific leadership practices of principals who have established positive school culture indicated that while trust was established in different ways, overall “all principals in the study trusted teachers to be the experts in their classrooms and gave them opportunities to grow and lead” (Hollingworth et al., 2018, p. 1024).

Communication

Another common way school leaders influence the school culture in a positive way is through effective communication. In the case study of four principals who were identified to participate based on their reputation across districts and states for maintaining a positive school culture, Hollingworth, et al. (2018) found all four principals made communication with their staff

a priority. The principals in this study made themselves visible throughout the school and kept an open-door policy for staff, parents, and students. The principals also communicated through newsletters, emailed staff to let them know when they were out of the building, and recognized the hard work of teachers. This study of principals provides concrete examples of how these leaders interact with their staff. These behaviors are what shapes the performance and function of an organization and lead to a positive school culture. Another way principals communicate effectively is by being forthcoming with clear and accurate information. Moreover, these principals openly exchange ideas and thoughts with teachers.

Care

Another leadership practice that principals with a positive school culture exhibit is genuine care for their teachers. Research indicated that a principal's personality traits, attitudes and behavior not only impact the school culture, but also the behaviors of the teachers (Lee & Li, 2015, p. 3). The role of a principal in nurturing caring teachers is evident in a research study conducted in an award-winning school in Taiwan. In this context, schools receive teaching excellence awards for having an award-winning teaching team. The award is designed to recognize outstanding performance in teaching. Researchers studied an elementary school in Taiwan that received this award through observing and interviewing participants, analyzing documents, and collecting field memo data within the school. The purpose of the case study was to gain an understanding of the award-winning school's culture. The teachers interviewed reported that their principal possessed traits such as good communication skills, care for the staff, and encouragement. The teachers noticed a significant shift in the culture under one principal. One participant said, "The big difference comes from her sincere care for and consideration of teachers" (Lee & Li, 2015, p. 10). A retired teacher who was a participant in the study said the

following about the principal: “Mrs. Wang is so intimate, and she is often considerate of you! For example, she will buy a gift for me when she takes a trip abroad. She has won my heart. It seems trivial, but it is important for mutual caring!” (p. 10). Another teacher said the principal “encouraged teachers in public through positive comments or feedback (p. 10). Other researchers have also recognized the value of principals demonstrating care for all stakeholders. For example, Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015a) indicate that “first and foremost, for principals to earn the trust of their teachers, they must demonstrate genuine caring for teachers, students, and parents alike” (p. 69).

Celebrations

Creating a win-win environment where teachers are recognized and celebrated is also an important leadership practice to develop and sustain a positive school culture. By offering encouragement and recognition, the principal can create an upward momentum that will result in staff feeling appreciated and keep them motivated to continue to work hard when they feel tired. This value of celebrating achievement was also supported in the research of the Taiwan elementary school. In this study Lee and Li (2015) reported the following from an interview with the school principal:

Although teachers are usually mature adults, they are still very concerned about the principal’s emotional support and recognition. Due to the lack of momentum, some academic grade teams could be strengthened more. Even if they have not performed very well, I usually try my best to pick out some of their positive achievements for open recognition, as long as they are willing. (p. 11)

Recognizing staff and celebrating victories not only serves to motivate others, it can also be used to exemplify the qualities a school wants to promote and encourage for the entire school

community. A teacher from the Taiwan school said the principal “encouraged teachers in public through positive comments or feedback” (Lee & Li, 2015, p. 10). Specifically, “whenever the parents or community members were present, she would list each teacher’s merits and recognize the school teachers' effort” (p. 10). Deal and Peterson (2016) support this idea when they also suggest recognizing those who are making a difference in a school and putting forth the extra effort. “Just as businesses, hospitals, or military units recognize their finest role models, schools do this with words, pictures, plaques, photos, and videos, or special ceremonies" (p. 236). When school leaders take the time to celebrate the heroes and heroines that work in their school building, the benefits multiply. Richard DuFour (1998) states,

The research on what motivates people has offered a consistent finding: Individuals are more likely to believe their work is significant, to feel a sense of achievement, and to be motivated to give their best efforts to tasks before them when they feel that those efforts will be noted and appreciated. (p. 58)

Summary

The studies I reviewed in this section highlight recurring themes of successful and motivating leadership practices and provide examples of what constitutes a positive school culture. The elements of positive school cultures are directly related to how school leaders relate to their teachers. Through the research and studies included here, the importance of trust is made clear. One way this is made evident is through the variety of metaphors that researchers use for trust, including as the connective tissue, the lubricant, the key ingredient, the glue that binds, and the key that unlocks the door. It is crucial for school leaders to establish trust, particularly as researchers have identified it as a key element in a positive school culture that leads to better student outcomes. The studies I reviewed in this section also provided common and practical

ways school leaders build trust. For example, school leaders build trust when they are honest, competent leaders who provide collegial and instructional leadership. These are leaders who communicate effectively and can work collaboratively with teachers to make instructional decisions. Other practical ways to build trust are to invest in teachers' growth and development, demonstrate genuine concern for them, and celebrate achievements. Consistency was also key in building trust. Finally, it is important that a school leader is approachable in order to build a trusting, positive school culture.

If a school leader builds trust and combines it with a caring, collaborative environment where teachers feel valued and professional growth is encouraged, a positive culture will emerge. This positive culture provides the foundation that will allow staff to focus on what is most important, student achievement. One interesting topic that is under-explored in the research on school culture is the role of gender in developing and sustaining supportive, welcoming, and caring climates in schools. As part of this study, I was interested in whether gender influences how women principals work to build positive school cultures.

Gender and Leadership

In today's society, women who live and work in the United States are certainly better off than most have been historically. As Sheryl Sandberg (2019) says in her book *Lean In*, "We stand on the shoulders of the women who came before us, women who had to fight for the rights that we now take for granted" (p. 4). When I considered this thought and thought about my life compared to women around the world, I am grateful for the progress. However, this does not mean there is not still work to do, and knowing some progress has been made should not stop us from continuing to try and make things even better for women. In the world of education, it was the 1990s when we saw an increase in representation by women in school leadership roles.

Currently, “female principals in the USA now compose 52 percent of the workforce” (Murakami & Tornsen, 2017, p. 811). Additionally, “about 62 percent of these females hold master’s degrees and 10 percent hold doctorate degrees” (Murakami & Tornsen, 2017, p. 811). This data on female leaders in education is somewhat similar to women who work in corporate America. Women have steadily advanced, earning more and more college degrees, but they only occupy about 25 percent of executive positions (Sandberg, 2019). Whether you are looking at women in education or those in the corporate world, these inequities are important. Women’s voices are not being heard equally and there are still barriers that exist to advancement for women. This is evident in the 2011 McKinsey report, where it is “noted men are promoted based on potential, while women are promoted based on past accomplishments” (Sandberg, 2019, p. 8). With these obstacles still in play, could the real work women are doing in schools around the country go unrecognized? For the purpose of this research study, I am interested in what developing culture means to women serving in school leadership roles. In describing the research on gender and leadership, I highlight three challenges that continually surfaced in studies about women in school leadership roles related to professional identity, judgment, and mentorship. I then discuss the strengths women bring to the table that help naturally build a positive school culture.

Challenge One: Professional Identity

One issue that women in school leadership roles face is demonstrating competency as a leader while not appearing to demonstrate behaviors that are seen as either too masculine or too feminine. Murakami and Tornsen (2017) studied two female principals serving at the secondary level, focusing on a school in Sweden and a school in Texas. The purpose of the research was to study these leaders' professional identities and consider how equity issues in educational leadership impact their success. One of the female principals included in this study discussed

having a more collaborative leadership style but still described herself as having male-like qualities. The researchers discovered when female principals serve in a role as leaders in a profession that is numerically dominated by males, the tendency is for the women to alter their leadership style and even abandon some of their more traditionally feminine styles such as being collaborative and relational. For example, women principals tend to demonstrate a collaborative leadership style as they involve themselves more directly in the teaching and learning that is taking place in the school building. This type of active participation by women leaders is often in place of trying to control behavior. Since this collaborative behavior is often different from male leadership style, it is sometimes not received well. This experience causes women to change behavior which may come more naturally for them, and adopt a more socially accepted form of leadership. This is exactly what the researchers observed from the one principal who “guided her identity development by examples from male predecessors, and recreated male-like leadership” (Murakami & Tornsen, 2017, p. 820).

At the same time there is research to indicate that women have to display competency while still conforming to appropriate female behaviors. Eagly (2005) discussed this phenomenon in an article on relational authenticity in leadership. She stated, “adopting an identifiably masculine behavior style may yield dislike” (p. 470). Her research indicated that women can be at a disadvantage if they display a tough, direct, leadership style and behave in a manner similar to men. This style of “taking charge” by women leaders is not widely accepted and can lead to poor assessments of their leadership abilities by others. “Aggressive and hard-charging women violate unwritten rules about acceptable social conduct. Men are continually applauded for being ambitious, and powerful and successful, but women who display these same traits often pay a social penalty” (Sandberg, 2019, p. 17).

The research on women in leadership roles shows the conflict that sometimes exists for women as there appears to be a narrow range in which women have to operate and demonstrate leadership behaviors that are neither too feminine nor too masculine. In a case study of a principal serving a large urban elementary school, this same gender dynamic was also found. At the time of this research, the principal was in her third year leading the school and had served for twelve years as an assistant principal. She began her career in administration in the early 2000s and recalled feeling pressure to lead like a man. Now, as a principal she says she wishes she were a man. This principal's experiences have taught her that “men make decisions easily and are generally perceived as credible leaders, while women are forced to do a ‘dance’ in order to be perceived in a similar way” (MacKinnon, 2019, p. 20). This balancing act that women leaders have to do presents a significant challenge to women as they may feel like they cannot truly be themselves. This kind of labor can take a toll and make it difficult for women to stay in leadership roles.

Challenge Two: Judgment

In addition to juggling the right dose of feminine and masculine behaviors, women face another challenge of not being judged fairly even when they are effective in the work they do. The first challenge is about the conflicting expectations placed on women. It appears that when women leaders violate gendered stereotypes and do not act in the correct manner, the end result is they receive poor ratings and are seen overall as less effective than their male counterparts. This leaves women having to overcome yet another obstacle. Nicols and Nicols (2014) reviewed quantitative school climate survey data from thirty-three elementary schools to explore effective leadership and student achievement. Data was collected from teachers at each of these schools in regards to how they perceived the leadership of their school principal. The researchers

disaggregated the data based on the gender of the principal. Using a 5-point Likert-type scale with 15 items that teachers responded to, Nicols and Nicols (2014) discovered “Male principals were rated as more effective leaders overall when compared to their female principal counterparts” (p. 31). The alarming piece of this research is that student success was comparable even though the female principals received ratings indicating they were less effective. The research from this study indicated that women are certainly as capable of impacting teaching and learning as men in a similar role. Unfortunately, staff perceptions of these women principals means that women sometimes do not get the credit they deserve for being effective leaders.

Another similar example can be found in an experiment conducted to test the perceptions of men and women in the workplace. Two university professors used a Harvard Business School case study of Heidi Roizen, a real-life female entrepreneur in their class. The professors assigned half of the class to read her story. The other half of the class was assigned the same story with one change. The professors made the entrepreneur a male who was named Howard. Next, the professors polled their students about their ideas of these two individuals. While both entrepreneurs were seen as equally competent and students reported respecting both individuals, Heidi was seen as someone you would not want to work for or hire. Howard was rated as more appealing. The only difference in data was the gender. Sheryl Sandberg (2019) references the research of these professors in her book on women in leadership. She states,

This experiment supports what research has already clearly shown: success and likeability are positively correlated for men and negatively correlated for women. When a man is successful, he is liked by both men and women. When a woman is successful, people of both genders like her less. (p. 40)

This research points to the fact that stereotyping on the basis of gender still exists for women. It also further demonstrates that while women are recognized for their efforts and accomplishments, they are still often judged more harshly than their male counterparts, and overall can be given unfavorable ratings in contexts where they are actually effective.

Challenge Three: Mentorship

While women fulfill their leadership responsibilities as principals and navigate the challenges that I have discussed thus far, they are faced with yet another challenge. Women are frequently placed in school leadership roles without adequate mentoring, training, and in general, experience an overall lack of support. This challenge is even greater when these leadership roles are in schools that require a significant amount of reform.

Two African-American female principals leading change in small schools within an urban school district experienced this absence of leadership, mentoring, and guidance firsthand. Describing their experiences, Peters (2012) wrote “it was not enough to put capable leaders in place, but they must be supported” (p. 36). Peters conducted a case study with these two African-American principals with the purpose to understand the specific challenges of leadership they faced based on race, gender, and age, and the challenges of implementing small school reform. She collected data through interviews, observations, document reviews, and anecdotal comments from members of the school community. Both principals in the study indicated the different ways they lacked support. There was no mentoring offered to them, no human or financial resources, and no time for implementation of programs that their supervisors expected would have immediate results. “Both also indicated that they needed and desired mentoring to become effective leaders” (Peters, 2012, p. 33). As a result of their experiences, eventually both women

resigned their positions. This research highlights the need for support especially if we want to see an increase in women's leadership, including people of color and young leaders too.

This support must include training. Eagly (2005) suggests that leadership training should address the different problems women face and include how to effectively lead with a certain level of authority. Sheryl Sandberg (2019) says, "Mentorship and sponsorship are crucial for career progression" (p. 66). Unfortunately, women have a more difficult time finding this kind of support than their male counterparts. Sandberg (2019) discussed a study that shows men are more likely than women to receive mentors and as a result have more satisfying rates of advancement. These principals' experiences and the work completed by other researchers indicate the need to widen the circle of support offered to women leaders so they can experience success and remain in leadership roles.

Gender and School Culture

In studying the research on gender and leadership, there were some behaviors that emerged, rather organically, from female principals that helped build a positive school culture. While research has demonstrated that women leaders face a variety of challenges based on their gender, seeing practices such as collaboration, care, and even trust present themselves in women's leadership style is important to notice and study. It also demonstrates women have something to offer that perhaps comes more naturally for them than their male counterparts.

There were two studies that specifically highlighted women's abilities to be competent leaders, demonstrate care, and be collaborative. Shaked et al. (2018) compared leadership styles of men and women and discovered:

First, female principals seem to perceive instructional expertise as the source of authority of their instructional leadership, while male principals seemingly perceive their formal

authority and decision-making ability to be the sources of their authority and instructional leadership. Second female principals intertwined their perception of instructional leadership with that of the importance of maintaining positive relationships with teachers more often than did their counterparts. (p. 428)

Sebastian and Moon (2018) examined how principals allocate their daily time to see if there were gender differences in this area. At first glance the researchers found “no significant differences based on the principals' gender in the proportion of overall time spent working with others” (p. 11). However, when the researchers looked more closely at each specific area, they saw a different story in their findings. They realized “female principals spent a greater portion of their time working with others than male principals” (p. 12). Sebastian and Moon discovered “planning and setting goals is perhaps the most important area where principals can involve others in their work, and it is in this key area that there are significant gender based differences” (p. 12).

In other studies, researchers noted that there were specific areas that were strengths for women leaders and aligned with the leadership practices that can help principals build a positive school culture. Some of these practices were highlighted in the study of the two African-American principals who were left without support as they tried to manage the school's challenging conditions. Despite that fact, one principal focused on building relationships with staff and students, cleaning up the school's physical space, removing toxic staff members, and celebrating the positive behaviors of students. By the end of the year, “staff morale improved, student violence decreased, and the focus on teaching and learning intensified” (Peters, 2012, p. 29). There was also evidence of shared decision-making and collaboration as she engaged with her staff to determine school priorities and empower her school leadership team.

Other female school leaders openly discussed stereotypical perceptions of leaders and were comfortable showing compassion and even being emotional. “For these women, leading with compassion allows them to be more effective” (Wrushen & Sherman, 2008, p. 462). The principals felt their compassion and emotion was conveyed in their leadership and as a result they felt their staff had faith in them as comprehensive leaders. Another principal also spoke about leading with emotion and using that emotion to build connections with students, parents, and staff (MacKinnon, 2019, p. 20).

As researchers explored the themes in literature related to effective pedagogical leadership by principals, they pointed out evidence that this type of instructional leadership is best achieved when school leaders have a strong professional identity. In a thematic analysis of research related to professional identity and leadership, Cruz-Gonzalez et al. (2019) recognized that female principals sometimes have to reconstruct their professional identities due to the challenges they face. Female leaders reconstruct their identity with the purpose of exercising leadership successfully. As a result, they change professional practices too. “Female principals choose strategic responses that develop trust in their leadership skills” (p. 326). They promote “trusting and emotionally and professionally supportive relationships, and exercise distributed leadership based on leading *with* others rather than leading others” (p. 326). Cruz-Gonzalez et al. (2019) also noted principals who were instructional leaders were able to “develop a positive collaborative climate and establish team spirit through professional development” (p. 324). Another factor that contributed to successful leadership was a supporting and trusting environment (p. 324). This information combined with the sometimes natural strengths of women leaders indicates their gender may actually be an asset to building a positive school culture.

The studies I have reviewed in this section demonstrate some of the challenges female school principals face due to gender and the biases that still exist in the way their leadership is perceived by others. They also highlighted the important work of female school leaders. Could it be that we should be recognizing more women leaders in schools for the assets they bring to educational leadership? Would this further develop their professional identity for the better? Would it allow them to feel like they can lead naturally without conforming to someone's preconceived ideas? Sheryl Sandberg (2019) highlights an important thought in her book *Lean In* when she says, "The more women attain positions of power, the less pressure there will be to conform, and the more they will do for other women" (p. 8). Not only is more research needed on the effectiveness of women as school leaders, we need more women stepping up to lead.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I reviewed the relevant literature on building a positive school culture and issues of gender and leadership. I discussed how principal trust is foundational when building a positive school culture. I also highlighted through research the key leadership practices that contribute to building a positive school culture. I discussed how these leadership practices, when implemented by school principals result in a positive, high performing culture that can focus on what is most important, student achievement.

In this chapter, I also reviewed literature related to the role gender plays in school leadership. I highlighted the challenges that women face in leadership roles. Additionally, I discussed how the gender for female school leaders can sometimes work to their benefit, particularly how collaboration, caring, and personal attention can help grow organically a positive school culture.

Based on the research I have included here, there are certainly scholarly conversations that currently exist about school culture. Through this dissertation research, I desired to learn more about how other principals work to impact school culture. I hoped to uncover additional strategies used by female principals known for establishing positive school cultures that impact student achievement and demonstrate how managing human capital is an important focus of school improvement. Additionally, as part of my study I wanted to explore the experiences of female school leaders and how they perceived their gender plays a role in the shaping of the culture. The literature reviewed here indicates that biases still exist for females who are navigating the principal role. Also, with more women taking up school leadership roles, there is a need for more research in this area. With this study, I show that there are women serving as school leaders who are making a real, positive impact on the educational outcomes for students in their schools by building a positive school culture. I highlight this work in hopes of championing and promoting these women in order to demonstrate what we could learn from the work they are doing.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

The purpose of my study was to research how female school principals improve school culture. I wanted to know the specific skills a school leader needs to possess and demonstrate in order to establish and sustain a positive school culture. There are many avenues for principals to pursue when it comes to increasing student achievement in their school building. As part of my study, I also wanted to know how principals who have created a positive school culture have seen this environment directly impact student learning in their building. Another purpose of my study was to consider how women in school leadership positions have established a positive school culture and what role they perceive gender to play in creating this kind of environment.

Based on my review of the research on this topic, I know the important role school culture has on teaching and learning. Learning how successful female leaders have created positive climates in their schools can help other principals understand the skills they need to develop and implement with their staff in order to increase student achievement. The central challenge for school leaders is creating an environment where students achieve and teachers make a difference in their lives. There may be principals who are implementing effective strategies for their students, but who are not seeing corollary gains in student achievement because they are forgetting an important component, such as motivating staff through a positive school culture.

Also, by focusing on women school leaders and gender issues that surround school leadership, this research may promote more broadly the important work female principals are accomplishing in this area of school culture. By highlighting their successes, I hope to demonstrate there is something to be learned from their school leadership styles. All of this

information might prove to be helpful to principal training programs and to school districts that provide professional development to school leaders. It may also be helpful in the recruitment and retention of female school leaders.

Pilot Study

In order to assess the feasibility of my potential research project, I conducted a pilot study over the course of two semesters. My goal for the two phases of pilot study was to test out my interview protocols and to practice data collection. For each phase of the pilot study, I chose to interview women who were serving as school principals to keep my pilot closely aligned to my proposed research study. My first pilot interviews consisted of interviewing two women and the sole purpose was to test out my interview questions and practice the interview process. For the second phase, I chose to interview one female principal. While I gathered good data from the first two women interviewed, I realized I didn't get the depth in their responses that I was seeking. I decided for the second phase to expand my interview guide and interview the third principal twice. Doing a series of two interviews allowed me to complete the first interview, review the data that I collected and present it to the participant for review and discussion. During the second interview, I asked the participant to comment on the interview transcript and make additional changes by either correcting or adding information that she had forgotten to discuss in the first round of interviews. I was also able to add follow up questions and probes based upon comments in the first interview, for instance, asking her to elaborate on a topic or share specific examples of how she translated ideas into concrete leadership practices.

Based on the pilot study, I made adjustments to my interview questions. Between my first round of interviews and the second round, I changed my questions to be more open-ended with the hopes that the participant would feel more open to sharing their experiences in more depth.

This allowed for more elaboration from the participant about key experiences rather than her feeling tied to answering a specific question. During the second phase of the pilot study, I structured the interviews with a two-part focus. The first set of questions focused on the culture in the school building. The second set of questions related to how gender played a role in shaping the culture of the school and the challenges she encountered being a female school leader. We also discussed the advantages and disadvantages of being a woman in a school leadership role. Experiencing this more in-depth, two-part interview process allowed me to see what worked best and what I needed to do differently in order to gain more information from the participant. These changes influenced my design choices for this research study.

After testing out my interview protocols, the significant adjustment I made to my methodology was to invite fewer participants but to interview each participant twice. During the second phase of my pilot study, I found it was very beneficial to interview the principal, review the notes, and send those to her for review and reflection before interviewing her again. There were things she added after seeing my transcribed notes. This made for richer data collection which also proved to be critical to my dissertation study.

Prior to my pilot project I was undecided as to whether or not to interview principals all at the same school level. During my interview with the principal for my pilot study, she spoke about how the culture differs based on the level at which you serve. The challenges are different at the different school levels. Given this, I chose to only interview elementary principals for this study so that they would have experienced similar challenges.

Research Questions

One overarching research question with three sub questions guided my study:

- What are the experiences of female school principals in shaping the cultures of the schools they lead?

Three research sub questions were:

- What practices help female school principals to create a positive school culture?
- How do female school principals understand the role of school culture in student achievement?
- How have female school principals navigated challenges related to gender that they faced as women leaders in their work to create a positive school culture?

Methodology

I used basic qualitative research in this study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe qualitative researchers as people who are “interested in *understanding the meaning people have constructed*; that is how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 15). This definition aligned with my research study, as I was interested in the experiences of female school principals and the specific practices that they employ in building a school culture. Another key characteristic of qualitative research “is that *the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis*” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 16). As the researcher, I was the primary instrument as I conducted face-to-face and two virtual (due to Covid-19) interviews with practicing female school principals collecting data about their leadership experiences. Through listening to their experiences and stories, I came to understand and share how female principals are building positive school cultures and as a result, increasing student achievement.

Sample Population

The sample for this research study involved five female school leaders who are currently serving as principals in public schools at the elementary level. The five principals serve in schools located in urban areas of central North Carolina. The interviews took place in coffee shops for two principals and one took place in the individual principal's school at a time that was convenient for the participant. Due to challenges related to the current health pandemic, two principals participated in virtual interviews using Zoom. In addition to the interviews, I asked each principal to provide artifacts that were representative of their positive school culture.

One necessary condition of qualitative research is selecting the individuals who will participate and who are a good fit to provide the data needed to answer research questions. It is important these individuals have experience related to the topic of study (Creswell, 2016). The initial purposeful sampling for this study was that the participants are women currently serving as elementary school principals. Additionally, I used a criterion type of sampling. This involved determining in advance some criteria that all participants in the study meet (Creswell, 2016). The criteria for selecting the participating principals in my research study were the following:

- Using the NC School Report Card, the schools must have scored a letter grade of B or a letter grade of C is also acceptable as long as the school met and/or exceeded growth.
- Using the Teacher Working Condition Survey data, the schools had to have 90% or higher for staff participation and scored 80% or higher on the question, which asks: *Overall, my school is a good place to work and learn.*

- Using the recommendation from the district's superintendent or district level executive leadership, the principal must have a reputation for building a positive school culture.

Of the three criteria listed above, the participant must first be recommended by the district's superintendent or district level executive leadership. Once they received the recommendation, they must also have met the other two criteria.

Detailed Personal Profile of the Participants

In order to protect anonymity, I use pseudonyms for the names of all principals in this study.

- Principal Nelson is a White female currently serving at the elementary level. She is a tenured principal with 23 years of leadership experience and has a reputation for building a positive school culture. Her school was visited and included in Peterson and Deal's latest edition of the book *Shaping School Culture*. She has served in the same school community since 1997. It is the same community where she began her teaching career too. Her school earned a letter grade of B on the school report card. On the Teacher Working Condition Survey she had 100% staff participation. 98% of her staff reported that the school was a good place to work and learn.
- Principal Wilson is a young, White female principal in her third year leading at the elementary school level. Her school earned a C on the school report card but met expected growth. On the Teacher Working Condition Survey she also had 100% staff participation. 95% of her staff reported the school was a good place to work and learn. Principal Nelson served as a mentor to Principal Wilson during her first two years as a principal.

- Principal Long is a Black female principal in her sixth year serving at the elementary level. Prior to being a principal, she served as an assistant principal at the elementary and middle school levels. She also taught at the middle and high school levels. Her school earned a C on the school report card but exceeded growth. On the Teacher Working Condition Survey she had 100% staff participation. 94% of her staff reported the school was a good place to work and learn. Principal Long was recommended to participate in this research study by her school superintendent.
- Principal Laurel is a White female principal with over 25 years of experience in education. She is currently in her seventh year serving as her school's principal. She previously was named the county's principal of the year and was once the state's principal of the year. Her school earned a C on the school report card but did meet growth. On the Teacher Working Condition Survey she had 100% staff participation. 88% of her staff reported the school was a good place to work and learn. Principal Laurel serves in the same school district as Principal Long and was also recommended by her school superintendent.
- Principal Hill is a White female principal with over 20 years of experience. She began her career teaching at the elementary level and has served in various schools in her current district. She has been leading her current school for the past six years. Her school earned a B on the school report card and met growth. On the Teacher Working Condition Survey she had 100% participation. 91% of her staff reported the school was a good place to work and learn.

Data Collection Methods

For my research study, I used interviews as my primary data collection technique. Interviews are a good choice, because “In qualitative research, the idea is to explore a topic in depth” (Creswell, 2016, p. 110). I conducted two interviews with each participant. This allowed me to ask my questions more slowly, for participants to go in more depth with their explanations, and for me to create follow up questions after reviewing the transcript of their first. I had specific questions I wanted to ask in a specific order and then had other questions I wanted to ask with no specific order. Some of the questions I asked depended on the responses of the participants. This type of interview had both structured and unstructured questions. I followed the suggestions from Merriam and Tisdell (2016) when they state, “... the fewer, more open-ended your questions are, the better. Having fewer broader questions unhooks you from the interview guide and enables you to really listen to what your participant has to share ...” (p. 126). I wanted to be able to really listen to my participant’s responses and understand their experiences and then ask probing questions to follow-up. I audio recorded and transcribed these interviews. After the first interview, I followed up with each participant and shared the transcript of our interview. I wanted them to be able to read it and process it before the second interview. At the second interview, along with a few more questions, I asked them to add any additional information they would like to contribute and allowed them to add depth to their previous answers and explanations.

In addition to these interviews, I asked each participant to provide some artifacts that were representative of their positive school culture. These artifacts provided another source of data for my research study. At the end of the first interview, I asked for this documentation. These artifacts included things such as a belief statements, a mission and vision statement,

documentation of core values, evidence of celebrations and staff success. This document analysis was a strategy that helped me “uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research problem” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 189). This information provided further evidence of the culture these principals have established. It also provided practical examples of how a leader builds a positive school culture.

Data-Analysis Strategies

My first step in analysis was coding interview transcripts and artifacts. “Coding is nothing more than assigning some sort of short-hand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of data” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 199). The goal of data analysis was to find the answers to my research questions. After coding, I then grouped like codes to identify categories. Then, I looked at key ideas, patterns, or topics in my categories. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state, “devising categories is largely an intuitive process, but is also systematic and informed by the study’s purpose, the investigators orientation and knowledge, and the meanings made explicit by the participants themselves” (p. 211). Finally, I connected this data (categories) back to my research questions, conceptual framework, and literature review to develop the several themes that represent my findings from my study. I use the theme-based findings to answer my research questions directly in the final chapter.

Trustworthiness

All researchers interpret the data they collect. It is important that they make efforts to ensure their interpretations are trustworthy. “Unquestionably, qualitative research is ‘interpretive’ research, where the inquirer makes a personal interpretation of information” (Creswell, 2016, p. 190). As the researcher, I have asked questions, analyzed the data, and used my own lens for interpretation and understanding. It is critical for me to demonstrate that my

findings are reliable in order for others to trust the conclusions of my research. In addition to drawing from two different data sources, I increased the trustworthiness of my research by using two types of validity checks.

Member Checking

One way to ensure trustworthiness is to use member checks/respondent validation. “Member checking is when the researcher takes back to participants their themes or entire stories and asks the participants whether the themes or stories are an accurate representation of what they said” (Creswell, 2016, p. 192). I employed this strategy as part of my second interview with the participants. I sent them their first interview transcript in advance, and asked them to both read it over for accuracy and for any issues which stood out to them. Doing this gave them an opportunity to clarify or expand upon answers. In addition to getting feedback on the accuracy of transcripts, I also wanted to take my preliminary analysis back to my participants and ask if my initial interpretations made sense and represented their experiences. By completing a second interview, I received this type of feedback, and hopefully it made for richer and more reliable responses. An example of this was evident in my second interview with Principal Long. After sharing the transcript with her from our first interview, I asked her if there was anything she wanted to add. She immediately said there were a couple of things after reading through the transcript that she thought of and wanted to share related to her school culture. The second interview gave her an opportunity to do so before we moved on to the topic of gender. Checking my understanding of the women leaders’ answers to make certain that what I had recorded reflected their experiences and not my biased interpretation of their responses ultimately enhanced the trustworthiness of this study.

Peer Debriefing

The second validity check I used was peer debriefing. Creswell (2016) describes this process: “It is the review of a project by someone who is familiar with the research or the central phenomenon being explored” (p. 194). Once I compiled the data, I shared my coding strategies and preliminary findings with a peer who read through it and offered feedback to me. For this process, I used another female principal. I also shared coding transcripts and principals’ artifacts. One of the ways she helped was highlighting some of the similarities in my data of participants’ responses that I had overlooked. She also recognized that some of the leadership characteristics were very similar and suggested I think about how to set those apart. My peer’s role was to “provide support, play devil’s advocate, play challenger; and help refine the study” (Creswell, 2016, p. 194). This form of peer review allowed me to receive meaningful feedback that ultimately improved my study.

Ethical Considerations

Another way I ensured the trustworthiness of my research study is to proceed in as ethical a manner as I possibly could. Generally, the trustworthiness of my research was significantly influenced by my own code of ethics as a researcher. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) caution that “Although researchers can turn to guidelines and regulations for help in dealing with some of the ethical concerns likely to emerge in qualitative research, the burden of producing a study that has been conducted and disseminated in an ethical manner lies with the individual investigator” (p. 265). It was critical for me to be aware of ethical issues that could become problematic throughout the research process. For my qualitative research study, the issue of anonymity was an important ethical issue that was relevant to the participants in the study. Since I work alongside some of my participants in the same school district, it was important for me to create a

safe space where they felt comfortable speaking freely. I changed some of the details of their experiences slightly so as to ensure that they remained anonymous. Additionally, as the participants shared experiences related to gender and how others treated them, I was concerned it might make them uncomfortable or embarrassed. This is another reason that it was important that I honor their anonymity and use pseudonyms throughout the writing process.

Another important ethical consideration for me centered around the focus of my study on women who are serving as school leaders. Since I am a female and also a current school principal, my own biases and experiences that I bring as a female school leader could also be problematic if I allowed them to unduly impact the way I analyzed and interpreted the data. While this specific issue may relate more to positionality, I still believed it could present an ethical dilemma as highlighted by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) when they state, “the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection, data have been filtered through his or her particular theoretical position and biases” (p. 264). Basically, as the researcher I decide what gets included or excluded. In order to maintain trustworthiness, it was important that I did not let my own biases and experiences unduly impact the data that was collected and analyzed. In order to hold myself accountable, I kept a reflexivity journal to record moments when I was challenged to keep my own biases in check. Some of my reflections included how hard it was at times during the interviews to only be an active listener and not share my own practices. Also, as principals shared their experiences related to gender it was difficult not to comment and relate based on my experiences to what they were sharing with me.

Limitations

Since I interviewed a small sample of five participants, this could be seen as a limitation to my research. This is because their experiences are not generalizable to the whole population of

female leaders. My rationale was to keep my unit of analysis small and be able to spend quality time with a smaller number of women leaders. This provided me the opportunity to learn about their specific leadership practices that are making a positive impact on the culture of their schools, hopefully resulting in a richer collection of data. Since I was only including principals at the elementary level this could result in a limitation to my study. Principals working at the different school levels encounter different experiences. For example, a high school principal typically experiences greater gender diversity on their staff as compared to an elementary principal. This may impact their leadership practices. By not interviewing principals from different levels, it could limit the shared themes I was able to identify.

How I Report the Data

I provide my analysis of the data in two chapters. Chapter 4 focuses on the data analyzed from the interviews on school culture, and Chapter 5 focuses on the data analyzed related to the topic of gender. Each chapter has subsections. I identified key themes in the data and organized the subsections according to those themes, highlighting the similarities in the participants' experiences. In this next chapter where I report findings related most directly to school culture, I have a separate section introducing each participant that highlights their leadership practices and their experiences as a female school leader. I organize these sections for each participant by developing a profile based on a distinguishing feature that stood out in regard to their leadership style. In this section, I included some excerpts from the interviews. Each participant profile is a subsection of this chapter. Next, I discuss the common leadership practices that emerged from the analysis of the interviews. This made up another subsection of this chapter and each section was listed as a specific leadership practice. Finally, in Chapter 5, I discuss themes related to gender and school leadership.

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the purpose of my research, and provided information on the setting and context. I also shared my data collection methods and demonstrated why using interviews was an appropriate method for gathering needed data. In addition, I described my efforts to ensure trustworthiness through member checking and peer debriefing. I also discussed the ethical considerations and limitations I was aware of as I conducted my research. By listening to the experiences of these women, I identified the strategies these women leaders were using to build a positive school culture while I also identified any challenges they encountered as a result of their gender that got in the way of their important work. I discuss these in the next two chapters.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS ON SCHOOL CULTURE

In this chapter, I discuss how the principals in my study impact their school culture in a positive way. With each vignette, I introduce the principals individually and highlight a distinguishing leadership characteristic and/or feature that stood out to me from my interviews. These key characteristics demonstrate the specific skills these school leaders possess and use to establish and sustain a positive school culture. Additionally, I report specific leadership practices that these principals implemented related to trust, professional development, communication, collaboration, care, and celebration. I also report the specific areas that presented a challenge to these leaders as they worked to build and maintain a positive school culture.

Each participant was a female school leader currently serving as an elementary principal. Additionally, I used a criterion type of sampling that involved specific criteria. Based on the 2019-2020 North Carolina School Report Card each principal's school needed to receive a letter grade of a B or C. Each principal's school also had to meet or exceed growth. Using the 2020 Teacher Working Condition Survey data, each principal's school had to have 90% or higher for staff participation and score 80% or higher on the question which asked: *Overall, my school is a good place to work and learn*. In addition to these data points, each district's superintendent or district level executive had recommended their participation because the principal had a reputation for building a positive school culture.

Table 1. Participant Criteria

Participants	2019-2020 NC School Report Card		2020 NC Teacher Working Condition Survey Results	
	Performance Grade Score	Academic Growth	Staff Participation in the TWCS	Staff Response to Q10.6. On the survey: <i>Overall, my school is a good place to work and learn.</i>
Principal Hill	B	Met	100%	98%
Principal Laurel	C	Met	100%	88%
Principal Long	B	Exceeded	100%	94%
Principal Nelson	B	Exceeded	100%	98%
Principal Wilson	C	Met	100%	95%

All five participants agreed to be interviewed and audio taped as they shared their experiences around building a positive school culture and how gender has impacted their work in this area. Three of the principals participated in face-to-face interviews. Due to Covid-19, two principals requested interviews using Zoom, a video conferencing tool. I interviewed each participant twice and each interview lasted an hour. After the first interview, I had the recording transcribed. Before the second interview, I shared the transcript from our first interview with each participant. This allowed them to clarify comments and add additional information. Also, during each interview, I took some notes but spent most of my time focusing on the interview and listening. In addition to the interviews, I asked each participant to provide at least one artifact that was representative of their school's positive culture. After transcribing the data, I analyzed each interview, coding key ideas and then looking for broad ideas from each interview. I then looked across all interviews to analyze each participant's responses to these key ideas in order to identify themes that cut across all interview data.

Participant Profiles

From analyzing the data, I noticed that each participant could be characterized by a distinguishing attribute. This leadership characteristic helps to demonstrate how they built a positive school culture and revealed some of my key findings on this topic. Principals who build positive school cultures are supportive, people-centered community builders who practice distributive and servant forms of leadership.

A Principal with a Positive School Culture is People-Centered

Principal Hill is a White female who has been a principal for six years at her current school. She has twenty years of experience in education and all of that experience has been in one school district. She began as an elementary teacher and moved into an academic coaching position. She fell in love with coaching others. After hearing about her coaching experience, I was not surprised that her love for helping teachers eventually led her into school administration.

As I sat in her office for the interview, on a side table I noticed three jars. One jar contained big rocks, the second jar contained small pebbles, and the third jar contained sand. As we discussed school culture and I asked Principal Hill for an artifact that represented the culture in her building, she immediately pointed me in the direction of the three jars. She said, “these three jars speak to our culture.” She described what each jar represented.

The big rocks are the big things in your life like family, your health, and your job. The pebbles are the meetings you have to go to, your child’s soccer practice and other things you may not always want to do but they are important. The sand represents all the little things that you get caught up in and have to do.

In describing these different containers, she referenced the “Pickle Jar Theory.” Essentially, the jars are metaphors for the things that are important in life and the importance of time management. Principal Hill said, “You’ve got to balance your family. You got to take care of yourself. We got to work together. We have to be realistic about what’s on our plate.” She also said, “If you are strategic about how you take care of yourself, then you actually end up being able to do it all.” She uses this with her staff to remind them to take care of themselves and each other. She said people in her building reference the jars. When she is working through things with staff members in her role as principal, she will often say, “Look at the jar. Is that a pebble? Is it a grain of sand? What is it?” When I asked Principal Hill how she would describe her leadership and the culture she has developed she said, “People first.” She recalled her first big PTA meeting in her school cafeteria. She said, “The cafeteria was full of parents and all of our teachers.” And the first thing she said was,

This is a family-first school, starting right now. And that’s not just the students and their families which is why we’re here. But it’s our teachers’ families too. Shortly after that, parents said to me, ‘I see you do that. And teachers definitely see it too.’

Principal Hill often says to her staff and teachers, “Go take care of your family. Go take care of your dog. We will get someone to cover for you.” She told her staff,

There’s going to be a day where I have to walk out of this building in the middle of the day and something is going to be happening here. And I want you all to know that I’m walking out of this building. And I want you to take care of whatever it is. Just like I am going to take care of whatever it is you need me to.

Principal Hill also talked about her open-door policy. She remembered when she first started at her current school she said,

There seemed to be this imaginary line that no one would cross even if I looked up and said ‘hey what do you need?’ They would just continue to hover outside my office door. It took a while for this to change. Now even when my doors are closed, like right now, staff know they can stand there and look in and I will make eye contact with them. Now they know even if the door is closed, it doesn’t mean stay away. It can be exhausting but the staff knows I am available. My job is taking care of people and while their emergency may not be an emergency to me, the fact that the copier broke is big to them.

Principal Hill attributed her current culture to the relationships and trust she and her staff have built over time. She believes listening is central to relationship building. She said, “I listen to them and make decisions based on what the staff says and their feedback. This builds trust and relationships. Also, [so too does] being very transparent about the fact that I listen to what everyone has to say.”

Just as Principal Hill spoke about how she puts the staff in her building first, she also talked about her students too. In the school, if they decide to implement something new, whether that be a procedure, practice or program, she always asks, “Is that what’s in the best interest of kids? And that is what it always comes back to.” This focus on putting students first was also evident when I asked her what the school stood for? Principal Hill was quick to say, “we are an inclusive, student-focused school.” When I asked her about the key ceremonies and celebrations at her school, all the events were student focused. Principal Hill’s elementary school operates a student council and the students plan events and run those alongside two teachers who serve as advisors. Another community-building event is a beautification day where students, families, and staff come together and work on the school grounds.

Through her leadership, Principal Hill demonstrates that she is about the people in her building. She listens to them, she is available to them, she builds relationships with them, and she makes decisions based on “what teachers are going to be able to manage” and “what is in the best interest of the kids.”

A Principal with a Positive School Culture is a Community Builder

Principal Laurel is a white woman in her fourteenth year as a school principal who has served in her district for twenty-seven years. She began her career as a physical education teacher. As a teacher, she kept finding herself in leadership roles. Rather than pursue her National Board Certification, she went back to school to receive her Masters in School Administration. All of her teaching and leadership experience has been at her current school. She went from being a PE teacher, to an assistant principal, and finally principal all at the same school. To top it off, she was also a student in the same district. Needless to say, her leadership is defined by the community she has built and been a part of for her entire educational career.

One of Laurel’s favorite things about being a principal and serving in a smaller community is the relationships she has built and being able to know “all my kids and their names.” When I asked about her school’s culture, she was quick to say, “everybody knows everybody.” She said, “I’ve been here so long that I taught people’s kids.” She also discussed the relationships that people have with each other.

A lot of people here have connections with each other. A lot of people have been here several years and some even have a drive to get here. When we do get new people, they realize how people here will bend over backwards to help them and they have people they can count on and go to. Everyone is willing to help.

When I asked her what her school stood for, she said, “doing what is right for children.” The example she gave highlighted this sense of community and the outreach that her school has for the students and families it serves.

When Covid first hit in March, we were not a designated feeding site. So, until we were, I came out every single day and was passing out food and my teachers were wanting to come and do the same thing. I finally had to establish a schedule because I could not have all the staff here at one time even though they all wanted to be here. The priority was taking care of our children. We got in cars and delivered food. At that moment, it was not about the schoolwork.

Principal Laurel also shared how hard her staff works to be sure students are successful. She gave examples that occur outside of the regular school day. She said,

Our teachers bend over backwards and work so hard because they want our children to be successful and they know they come in behind the eight ball. And so, they’re going to do things like tutor in the afternoons for nothing. One teacher met a Hispanic parent at the eye doctor so the kid could get glasses.

Given Principal Laurel’s passions and commitment, it is no wonder that her teachers go above and beyond. This sense of community is present in Principal Laurel’s actions too. She shared a story about a student who attended elementary school there and was the first person in her family to graduate from high school. She said,

I have known her family and her mom through my twenty-seven years here. And I helped her get to Elizabeth City State University. I picked her up and all of her things and took her to college. They have seen me deliver stuff in my car or buy clothes or buy shoes. I

guess the staff has seen that I am in this for the long haul, not just when the students leave here.

When Principal Laurel was sharing how she demonstrates care for her students, families, and staff, her focus on community connection was obvious again. She shared,

I know if somebody's husband or family member is sick, I'll call and check. I just texted a teacher who's been having some health problems all last year. I try to keep up with her weekly and just check on her just to see how she's progressing. I will reach out to a family like if a kid has lost a parent. I attend funerals and I go to the kids' ball games too. Additionally, the importance of community is highlighted in the way Principal Laurel recognizes her staff. She chooses to recognize everyone and one of the highlights is for the work they do outside the walls of the classroom. She said,

I give awards to staff at the end of the year. And they're usually certificates. I usually award them and give a description. For example, like the teacher who met the family at the eye doctor. I would share that story and then make up a quirky name for the certificate. I try to say a little bit or a blurb about everybody.

This type of recognition demonstrates how well Principal Laurel knows her staff and what they do for their students.

At the end of our first interview, Principal Laurel provided an artifact of her school's culture. It was a slideshow of photos from a community Job Fair they had prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. The pictures were of teachers, students, and their families. It also contained pictures of community members and the different jobs that were available to students right there where they lived. In addition to this event, when I asked about the key ceremonies, traditions, or celebrations the school had, Principal Laurel discussed their Fall Festival. She said,

Our Fall Festival out here is really huge. Our PTO [parent teacher organization] does it with all the games, food, and popcorn. People who don't even go to school here anymore come. It is a community thing. Our field day is really huge. They come out for field day!

In her role as a school leader, Principal Laurel's service to her community transcends beyond the walls of her school building. She leads with a strong sense of community which is evident through the examples that she shared and through the fact that her staff models what they see her doing. It is no wonder that whether a student or staff member, Principal Laurel says, "when people come here, they want to stay. It is like home."

A Principal with a Positive School Culture Practices Distributive Leadership

Principal Long is a black female who has been at her current school as principal for seven years. She has served in her current school district and at the elementary level for the last fourteen years. She has a variety of experiences at all levels but has come to realize working at the elementary level as she calls it, "is my sweet spot." She said she recalls somebody saying to her, "it's easier to build strong children than to repair broken adults." Building on the idea of building strong children, she says that as a school leader "that is what I set about doing, making sure our babies got a strong foundation."

Principal Long's distinguishing leadership trait became very obvious early on in our interview when I inquired about the school culture in her building. In addition to making sure her students had what they needed to be successful, Principal Long shared,

The other thing I set out doing really early was to build leaders. Leadership is my passion. I never wanted to be that person where everything was up to me. That can wear you out if you think you're the only one, and your voice is the only one that matters. And

so, I knew that in order to carry out the vision, I needed to create leaders within the school. This has created a tight-knit staff.

Principal Long also shared that she works to develop a cohesiveness with the staff. She described her school in terms of expectations and excellence:

There is a culture of high expectations. Again, something we said early on was if excellence is possible, being good is not good enough. And so as a staff, we decided we were going to focus on excellence. We discussed what that looks like and feels like.

Principal Long also shared what she had put in place at the school so that staff felt comfortable discussing things such as excellence. She said,

I feel like with my staff, they know they can talk to me about most things. There are some people who aren't ever going to talk, at least not to me. But I try to create space for this by having somebody on my leadership team that they're going to communicate with.

Principal Long also described work she does to build relationships. "On workdays when teachers are working in their rooms, I will walk through and sit down and talk about something that is not related to the job." Also, as it relates to growing teachers into leaders, she mentioned,

If there is any issue with a staff member, I will address it but that's my last-ditch effort to shift their behavior. I'm always going to talk about it first and see if I can eliminate excuses. Is it a 'don't want to' or is it a 'I can't'? If it is a can't then, I am going to build the teacher up so they can get to the place where they can.

She said, "I pour into people." Rather than considering firing anybody or putting a teacher on an action plan, she tries other things. Discussing what she would do with a teacher who is struggling, she shared,

First, I might shift grade levels. I might assign you a mentor. Even if you're new to the school but you've been teaching, you still have some adjustments to make. I will call on veteran teachers to support these teachers. I also focus on the emotional and the social needs of the teachers. I feel like people need to be taken care of.

Offering these different supports to teachers highlights Principal Long's desire to grow and develop teachers and demonstrates the investment she makes in her staff.

As I continued to interview Principal Long, there were other areas that surfaced that demonstrated her desire to share leadership and tap into other skills and abilities of her staff. In her first year Principal Long remembers completing a "SWOT analysis" with her staff. She explained,

I asked them to share the strengths, the weaknesses, the opportunities, and the threats concerning the school. Then, as a staff we came up with ways to address those things. We discussed how we could strengthen our strengths and minimize our weaknesses.

Beginning her tenure with a SWOT analysis was a great example of the opportunities staff have to give input and feedback and demonstrate leadership by deciding what needs to be done to create change. Also, Principal Long said she invests in her staff by encouraging them to attend staff development programs and activities. She says, "Sometimes you have to go to grow." And so she lets them go and then "they come back and share things with us." This is also an area where Principal Long utilizes distributive leadership. She shared,

We do get input on the staff development that they think they need. I also allow them to lead staff development. And I think that has been huge for us. There's always been some particular point in our staff meetings where they get the chance to teach each other something, either they've decided that they want to teach or something they do really

well. And I'll say, 'hey can you share this? Do you mind talking about this?' We had a regional teacher of the year and I've given them space in our meetings to talk because again it doesn't have to all come through me. I will have different people share. This has made a difference for us.

When I asked Principal Long what her school stood for, she was quick to say "excellence, leadership, and kids' success." Just as she has given teachers opportunities to lead, her school provides a similar opportunity for their students.

We've given children ownership. We have created our own leadership curriculum with attention to focus, reason, innovation, dreams, and encouragement. We've created a sense of leadership among the children. They do goal-setting. They determine what it is that they want to achieve. They monitor their progress. Teachers talk to them about what they are doing and what they can do better. We discuss what it means to have a growth mindset.

Principal Hill's key characteristic is her ability to develop teacher-leaders. She knows her investment in her teachers and her students will pay off in the long run.

A Principal with a Positive School Culture Practices Servant Leadership

Principal Nelson is a white, female school leader who has served as principal at her current school for the last twenty-four years. She has worked in the same district for a total of thirty-two years. It did not take long in my first interview with Principal Nelson to learn why she decided to become a principal and how that leadership role has driven her work. She shared a personal experience about how she was ridiculed by her colleagues who served on her grade level for being a creative and positive teacher. She said,

I would see the kids in the other classrooms experiencing a negative culture and it broke my heart. I knew this is not how it should be for children. My kids loved school and were happy to be there. My attendance was off the charts and so were my results. The results of my colleagues were horrible. And that really was a heavy burden for me. I knew this should not be happening. I decided then I wanted to create a school where everybody looks forward to coming to school. Where everybody is feeling validated, loved and nurtured, and everybody is thriving. I had a sense of advocacy for all children.

Seeing these negative, toxic cultures led Principal Nelson into administration with a focus on a positive school culture. She said, “she knew the negativity her colleagues brought into the classroom” and knew this negativity could not create the appropriate environment to promote learning. She wanted to learn how to create a positive school where “not only kids thrive but the adults do too. Kids are not going to feel loved and nurtured if the adults don’t.” And now today being a servant leader and “the relationships” are what she enjoys the most about being a principal. Moreover, Principal Nelson shared that, “there is nothing more rewarding than seeing kids coming into a building happy. And on the last day when kids leave crying because they don’t want to leave, well then you know it is a job well done.”

Principal Nelson said her experience has taught her “children and adults have to feel safe. And, if they don’t feel safe, they are not going to thrive. They have to feel valued, validated, and accepted.” This comment is a great example of Principal Nelson’s focus on the well-being of her school community. Early on in her career as principal she developed a mantra, “love, laughter, learning, and leading” that became the hallmark of her school. She said now she has parents who were students at her school and they still remember those four words.

Another example of Principal Nelson's servant leadership was obvious when she said that during graduate school she wrote a paper and stated, "I want to be a leader who didn't do things to my staff but did things with my staff." This became her mission as a school leader. She said, "I never expect my staff to do something that I wasn't willing to do with them. And so those expectations came with me having high expectations of myself and me being in there with them." Principal Nelson also shared that one of the leadership practices that she implemented that went a long way to building trust was "transparency and the practice of doing with, that collaboration." She went on to say, "when staff sees you're willing to put in the hours, you're willing to be down in the weeds with them, you're going to protect them and you're going to advocate for them, that builds trust." Principal Nelson served as assistant principal at her school before becoming principal. She remembers the staff rallying for her to become the principal. She attributes this support to the fact that "they knew I wasn't going to ask them to do anything that I wasn't willing to do and that I was going to do my part and see what I could take off of them, so they could actually do their part and teach."

Principal Nelson's servant leadership is also evident when she talks about communication and availability to staff. She shared that she "constantly" communicates. She also said,

I believe responsive communication is important. I can't stand for emails to sit or a text to sit and not respond. So, the team that we do have has 24/7 access to one another now.

And while that can become overbearing, at the same time, if we don't respond then that sends a message too and it is why I think responsive communication is so important.

When I asked Principal Nelson how she makes herself available, again her response was "24/7."

Principal Nelson is a principal who serves alongside her staff. She has created a culture of strong relationships where “teachers feel supported to design engaging work and empower students to engage in learning.”

A Principal with a Positive School Culture is Supportive

Principal Wilson is a white, female school leader who is in her fourth year as a principal and her fourth year at her current school. Prior to being a principal, she served as an assistant principal in the same district. She has served in this district for the last fourteen years. All of her experience has been at the elementary level.

When I asked Principal Wilson to describe her leadership style and how it has impacted her school’s culture she said, “supportive.” She said, “this is the word I use to describe myself to teachers and families.” This supportive style was evident and woven into many of her other answers to my interview questions. When I asked her what contributed to her school’s culture, she said it was being “people-centered” and always available to her staff. This supportive style of being focused on the people has strong ties to Principal Hill’s leadership trait of being people-centered and Principal Nelson’s style of being a servant leader. An example of this is evident in her description of her open-door policy. She said having an open-door policy means

I get nothing of my own stuff done at school. So I’m there on Sundays to get my own work done, or stay up late to get my own work done because my time there needs to be about the people I serve.

She also said in her role as a leader, she always takes time to meet with everybody. She said, “I even did this during my internship as an assistant principal.” She believes it is important “to know staff, know who they are, know who their family is and what they value.” Knowing this information she says, “helps me better support each staff member.”

Principal Wilson also shared some of the little ways she offers her support. She said, I do lots of little things. Like I started several years ago putting positive notes on sticky notes on their car windows so they could get to their car in the afternoon and they would smile even after a hard day. I have also taken a treat trolley around during the school day or offered them room service. I did that this year and even let the students help lead it. I try to make things special and fun.

Principal Wilson also said she supports her staff by being “part of the work.” Elaborating on this idea, she said, “It builds trust too because the staff know I am not here just to oversee or facilitate or dictate the work.” She went on to say, “anything that we’ve done with staff like professional development they see I’m right there in the middle of it. I will go and do model lessons too.”

Since coming to her school, Principal Wilson also developed actions teams, which are subcommittees of her school’s leadership team. These teams are “led by staff, organized by staff, and meetings are facilitated by staff. The staff know I will attend and I am there to support them.” Principal Wilson said, “I believe this is their school, not mine.” She also described some specific guided reading training she provided to her staff. She recalls,

After the initial training, there was lots of support given to teachers. During the second phase of training, I let them choose what they needed to continue to be successful. We let the teachers choose what reading level they felt they needed support in to be able to teach their students. Then we modeled it for them. We chose the text and planned the lesson.

In the area of professional development, it is also important to Principal Wilson that teachers feel supported to follow their own interests. “Any time a teacher comes to me and says, ‘I want to go to this PD’ or whatever, whenever, I make the resources available. I think this is incredibly valuable.”

The support Principal Wilson has for her teachers is also evident in her availability to staff. She actually said, “I don’t know when I am not available to staff. I think I am available to a fault.” She referenced the use of Educator’s Handbook which is a tool used by the district for teachers to report discipline issues to the school’s administrative team. The tool is designed to report issues for administrators to handle as they can. She said, “this year our goal is to use it more strategically. Not using it falls on me because when there is a question, a problem, or any kind of issue, I just go help.”

Principal Wilson also supports her staff by recognizing their efforts. In her newsletter, she does “staff shout outs.” She said,

We also use bragboards outside of the individual classrooms so teachers can be recognized for their focus on global studies or for targeting technology. We also are beginning to recognize teachers for what we call ‘landmark moments.’ This summer we are collecting information from staff about years of experience and completing additional work like master’s degrees and certifications.

I think the level of support Principal Wilson offers her staff is best illustrated in the artifact that she provided me that was representative of her school’s culture. She shared,

I did a book [study] with the staff this year called *Power of Moments* by the Heath brothers. It was very timely and about the power of moments. Throughout the book they reference different types of ‘EPIC’ moments. It is an acronym for elevation, pride, insight, and connection. I gave them a little jar and said collect moments, not things. And every time you have a big or little moment, put it in the jar. At the last staff meeting, I put together a slideshow of all the different moments they had submitted to me. We passed

around champagne flutes with sparkling grape juice and toasted to a new year and a moment!

Principal Wilson believes, “my role is one of support so that students and teachers (through that support) can realize their full potential.”

Leadership Practices that Impact Culture

Researchers indicate that in addition to the orientating philosophy and values that I described as I introduced each of my participants, there are specific leadership practices that build a positive school culture. As part of the data collection process, I asked each principal questions related to these practices. It was evident there were specific ways these school leaders build trust, provide staff development, communicate, demonstrate care, and celebrate their schools.

Trust

While the principals went about building trust in different ways, there were some common themes in their approaches. Two of the principals said they built trust by being in the work with their teachers. Principal Wilson said, “it is about being part of the work and not just oversee, or facilitate, or dictate the work.” Principal Nelson said, “it is about doing with, not to.” She also mentioned, “it is the practice of transparency, that practice of doing with and that collaboration.” Principal Nelson expanded on this idea to mention transparency with communication so “there are no hidden agendas.” She also mentioned that “empowering others to be leaders” builds trust as you allow them “to lead and make decisions.” Principal Wilson also conveyed that distributive leadership has helped to build trust. She said, “I have created action teams to demonstrate I trust their decisions and leadership.”

Principal Hill said she had built trust by admitting when she doesn't know something. She said, "there are things I don't know." She went on to say, "there are so many things our teachers are doing today that I've never done. And so, to be able to acknowledge that in front of them and say, 'Now tell me what this is like.'" Principal Hill proposed that using this approach has created space for teachers to step up and demonstrate what they know and can do. She said, "when you admit you don't know something, or you're transparent about your weakness, then people will come out of the woodwork to help you because they realize that you don't think you're perfect or have all the answers." All three of these principals' approaches are related to being transparent and being in the work with teachers in a way that creates space for teachers to lead, have input, and help make decisions.

The other two principals believed trust was built in the way they deal with people. Principal Laurel said, "teachers know they can share their personal issues with me and it stays in the confines of this office." She added, "If it gets out, it's going to be because you told them, not because I did." Principal Long also had a similar approach to working with colleagues and staff. "It is how I deal with people." She said, "People tell me things in confidence. I make sure they don't hear it again. I let people know that if they tell me something, I'm going to keep it close to my heart." Both of these principals' approaches are related to how they communicate with their staff. Principal Laurel also shared, "I try to over communicate. And I try to get their input into things and don't just make decisions without getting their input first." While Principal Laurel related this to communication, her strategies are similar to the first three principals as they all involve teachers having input in decision-making. With all five principals, it is clear that trust was built through maintaining transparency, ensuring good communication, and valuing teacher input.

Professional Development

There were some definite commonalities in the way these principals provided professional development for their staff and how they helped teachers grow. It was clear when it came to providing professional development opportunities that these principals relied on teachers to share what they know and be the experts. Principal Laurel said, “when we have somebody that we recognize is doing something really great, then we have them present to staff.” Principal Long had a similar approach. She said, “at staff meetings teachers have a chance to teach each other something either they’ve decided that they want to teach or something they do really well.” In addition to giving teachers opportunities to teach their peers, these principals also shared the importance of providing targeted support that was focused and connected to the school improvement plan. Describing professional development, Principal Nelson stated,

It’s always tied to the school improvement plan. And we have been very mindful to narrow the focus and not overwhelm. So, we usually just have two focuses per year and we stick to that. We recognize too much new, too much change at one time is going to overwhelm, and it won’t be done with fidelity.

Principal Wilson kept the professional development focus tight at her school too. She shared,

I try to only focus on one to two things at the most every year. Sometimes there’s many more things I want to do with teachers. But I feel like that smaller focus has helped them go deeper and to not be bogged down by so many little things that they can only do surface level stuff.

The professional development Principal Hill offered to teachers was also targeted support. The difference is that it was more individualized. Principal Hill said, “it was very specifically

targeted toward what that teacher needed or expressed that they needed.” She shared this example:

A teacher said, ‘I really can’t visualize a better way to do my math in a small group, but I know I need to make some changes.’ Then, we would of course pick somebody who was the right person to help this teacher.

While Principal Hill provided individualized, focused support, she also relied on other teachers to help provide the learning. This idea of allowing teachers to identify what they need also came up among the other principals when I asked them how they encourage teachers to grow. There was a strong belief among the principals in this study that teachers need to be able to follow their professional interests. Principal Wilson said, “when there’s an interest, I allow them to follow that. So, any time that they come to me with ‘I want to go to this PD,’ I make the resources available. I think this is incredibly valuable.” Principal Long also reiterated this same idea. She said, “when staff members want to go places, I don’t have an issue with that and we have Title 1 funds so I’ll let them do that and then they can come back to share things with us.” Overall, at these principals’ schools, professional development was focused, individualized, teacher-led, and teachers were allowed “to go, to grow.”

Collaboration

Collaboration was important to all the principals I interviewed as each one spoke about the multiple ways they promote working as a team through input, suggestions, and decision making. When I specifically asked about the opportunities teachers had to collaborate, Principal Laurel said, “I do that all the time.” She went on to share that “I am of the mindset that I am not in the classroom doing it. And so, I don’t dictate anything. I feel like they are the professionals and the experts in the area, so we talk about whatever it is.” Principal Wilson had a similar

response when she shared her staff has so many chances that “there’s very little that gets back to me of people’s frustrations because they just come to me. They know they can email and come to me when they have any input to offer.” Principal Hill said she just shared the master schedule with her staff, asking for feedback. She said,

I asked staff to look over it and if they have suggestions for how they could make it better, please email me. It is part of our culture. Teachers know I really want to know and as a result a lot of people will respond. And they see me change as a result of their feedback and suggestions.

All five principals also spoke about using teams to get input and to help with decision making. Each principal used a variety of different kinds of teams in their building. There were action teams, leadership teams, and diversity teams. Principal Nelson said, “We have more teams now than ever before.” She also spoke about “putting teachers in leadership roles on the various teams.” This was mentioned by the other principals too. Principal Nelson said, “They do the work. They know the vision. They know the mission. They know our school improvement plan. And they make those decisions collectively. They’ve been empowered and they take their role on these teams seriously.” Principal Long said her staff knows at school improvement meetings, “I am not in charge.” She added, “if teachers have ideas about things that they want to do, I encourage them and will support what they want to do.”

Principal Nelson and Principal shared a “Stop, Start, Continue” process they used with their teachers. Principal Nelson said, “I think this has really solidified or maintained our school culture by doing this annually.” She explained,

Everybody has an opportunity to give input on what they want to see stop, start, or continue in regards to policies, practices, and procedures. The staff at our school takes this very seriously and so I learned early that we had to do it.

Principal Nelson shared that once everyone has had a chance to give their input, “the school leadership takes this information and literally takes a full day for us to go through everybody’s feedback and then take action.” She also said,

Just because it goes on our Stop, Start, Continue list doesn’t mean that it’s going to happen. But each grade level team has a representative and they know that person is representing the grade level and being the voice for the grade level. And if let’s say a start doesn’t happen or a stop doesn’t happen, then that person is able to go back to their team and say, ‘this is why.’

Principal Wilson also shared this same idea and said she had used it with her staff for the last three years. She said, “it provides a format for conversations.” Overall, collaboration at these schools has impacted school culture in a positive way because teachers were given leadership opportunities and lots of chances to give input and feedback.

Communication

All five principals communicated consistently with their staff through a weekly newsletter or memo. While the specific day varied, each principal was intentional about getting the newsletter to staff prior to the week ahead. There was also consistency among the principals about what they shared through this communication. Each newsletter or memo contained information for the week ahead, staff affirmations, and curriculum highlights. Principal Nelson also shared she uses a theme with her staff each school year and she uses this newsletter “to tie everything to the theme.”

Another area of consistency for communication among these five principals was being available and visible. The principals spoke about the importance of walking through classrooms, doing morning announcements, and being available to their staff at all times. As I mentioned earlier, Principal Wilson said, “I don’t know when I am not available to my staff.”

This group of principals also spoke about the importance of monthly staff meetings, and Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings as opportunities to share information; however, there were a couple of unique ideas that they shared to promote communication and visibility. Principal Hill created a staff dashboard to keep all of the communication in one place for her staff. It is a spreadsheet that contains all the important links. Principal Hill said now teachers will say, “Hey put this on the staff dashboard so we can all find it easier. It is a managerial thing that has made our communication frequent and clear.” She said,

If there’s somebody here that maybe has come from another school, that’s one of the biggest pieces of feedback that we get is the organizational piece of our communication.

They know every week what to expect and they know exactly where they can go to get it.

They have a clear picture of what things are going to look like too.

Principal Hill also shared an unusual way she made herself available to staff, creating a mobile office on a cart. She and her assistant principal had one and would take turns positioning themselves and their mobile office on different hallways of the school. She shared,

She stood on the red hall one day, and I stood on the blue hall and then we switched. And we literally stood outside the bathrooms to be the monitors. And the teachers knew exactly where we were all day, every day.

She shared, “during Covid this practice seemed to help teachers be more comfortable. I was visible and available.” Communication was a key practice to the leadership of these principals by creating transparency, availability, and visibility.

Care

When it comes to establishing positive relationships with all stakeholders, welcoming new teachers, and demonstrating care, all five of these principals understand creating a supportive culture is about doing the small things. The “little things” were either mentioned or clearly demonstrated in every conversation I had about care. Similar to some of the other leadership practices, principals demonstrated their care in many different ways. While they shared ideas like a treat cart, jeans days, and spending time pausing to really listen to staff, it was clear that all of these things happened because the principals were intentional. There were a few ideas shared that were different from what others had done, which I discuss below.

Principal Nelson invested a lot of care into her new teachers. She began the year with a new teacher orientation but what she offers beyond that is a real investment. After the summer orientation, she organized dinner seminars. The new teacher attends along with their mentor. These dinner seminars are held off campus. They go out to dinner and always have a topic that is related to what is going on around them. Principal Nelson explained,

Like in October our topic is conducting positive parent-teacher conferences. In December, we discuss how to survive Christmas in the elementary school. Towards the end of the year in April or May we share information about the end of grade testing and the madness that comes with all of that. The mentors always come. They know the topic ahead of time. And then the mentors all share. And so really the mentors lead this event. We also have a celebration of success. And then if they are encountering a problem or

challenge, which they always are, then they share it during this time and our mentors offer solutions. This also is great for building leadership capacity. Another cool thing is they see me and Tammy [the Assistant Principal] in a different environment when we attend these dinners. And so, it really builds that sense of trust and connection. And again, they feel supported, cared for, and valued.

Principal Long shared a neat idea to demonstrate her care for her staff by providing self-care sessions. She provided these sessions along with her guidance counselor and social worker. She said, “every month it was something that we shared with staff that they needed to do just to take care of themselves.” She said this helped “people know that I don’t just care about what they do as a staff member but who they are as a person.”

All of the ideas shared about caring for the school community demonstrated one important theme. It has been stated many different times in slightly different ways but the idea that “doing the small things make a big difference” seems to hold true.

Celebrations

Finding ways to celebrate student successes, honoring the contributions of teachers, and having some key traditions and ceremonies were also a key practice to this group of principals as they worked to create a positive culture in their schools. At each principal’s school there was a specific time and way to recognize the learning that was taking place in their building. While the frequency varied, every principal had some type of celebration to recognize student growth and achievement. Many recognize students as part of the daily announcements and at special assemblies. At Principal Nelson’s school this practice had evolved into the kids celebrating themselves. She said, “you want the students to own their own successes.” Principal Nelson said,

Students have to determine and recognize their success from the nine weeks and then their contribution to the classroom for the nine weeks too. So that's become a nice tradition rather than teachers selecting or just being a few because everybody's made growth in some way. And everybody deserves to be celebrated for their growth.

Similar to the way they celebrated students, this group of principals also had a variety of ways to recognize the hard work of their staff. There were end of year awards, staff superlatives, brag boards, staff shout outs shared in school newsletters, and even buttons or pins awarded to staff for their big moments like a completed master's degree or additional certification. Principal Nelson tied staff recognitions to the school-wide theme of the year. She said one year we had "a construction worker of the week." It was very important to her that the recognition had to be related to "a contribution that had a school-wide impact rather than them doing something that was self-serving." Principal Nelson shared some examples,

It was a contribution that was felt across the building. We recognize things as simple as helping clean up chairs after a program or for developing a playlist of activities that the teachers could use on a rainy day. It just needed to emphasize those who were contributing to the total school program.

In addition to celebrating students and staff, having key traditions and celebrations were equally as important to these principals. As each principal shared their different traditions, the one commonality was that all of these events were student-centered and or family centered. The recurring event that was common among most of these schools was a fall festival. It provided an opportunity for the students with their families to come together and have fun with the teachers and staff.

There were a couple key traditions that were shared that had a different spin on this idea of bringing the school community together. Principal Hill shared a “Light Up the School Night” that takes place every December and is organized and put on by the school’s student council.

The student council sets up luminaries beginning at the school sidewalk all the way to the road on both sides. The students are responsible for lighting all the candles. Then parents drive up and it is dark and lit up. Families park and come inside where they have different things set-up. We have our music teacher who often will have her school chorus perform.

The PTO makes an ornament for students to decorate and take with them. The student council will have a fun activity like reindeer food. It is throughout the whole building.

We have fake fires on our smartboards and someone is reading a holiday story. Our student council does it all and it has become a huge tradition.

She pointed out this was not a fundraiser either. It is just a fun, community event put on by the students.

At Principal Wilson’s school there is a special tradition to celebrate the end of the year. The school has an old bell tower in the center of the school’s courtyard. Principal Wilson shared,

On the last day of school everybody comes in the courtyard and we count down the end of the school year and ring the bell. The principal was the one who got to do it. It was fun. A couple of years ago, we had a retiree who had been at the school for twenty years so she got to ring the bell. This has become a new tradition to let whoever is retiring ring the bell. So, the last time we got to do this, we had a teacher who retired after twenty four years at our school so she rang the bell.

Each tradition offered up something different, but it was evident that students are at the center of these celebrations. As Principal Long shared about a tradition she has at the beginning of the

year for her staff, she shared something that I believe is a great way to summarize all of these celebrations. She said, “this is our heart work as it deals with the inner person.”

Challenges Principals Faced in Building a Positive School Culture

As principals shared the ways they established a positive school culture, I also asked them about the challenges they faced that made this work more difficult. Each principal had a different challenge but what became obvious was the majority of the challenges they encountered were caused by things that were out of their control and not related to culture building. The challenges that they discussed were staff turnover, bureaucracy at the district and state level, parents, and a principal who sometimes felt taken advantage of by their staff.

Staff Turnover

Two principals mentioned issues with teacher turnover. The turnover is not a problem because of the vacancies it creates, but rather the environment that the turnover creates and the rebuilding that has to take place as a result of the losses. Principal Long mentioned that because of the hostile environment that was present in the school prior to her arrival, she had to spend a lot of time and energy creating an environment where staff felt safe. She said,

And so my first year, it was really about making people feel safe again. And because we were focusing so much on the feelings, the academics dropped. This created pressure coming down from the top (district). The staff were not in a place they could handle it. So, a lot of people left. That is just a hard thing. And then you're rebuilding teams, and you're trying to find good people. It is really difficult. We stabilized and eventually exceeded growth. But I think this turnover has been the hardest.

Another principal also spoke about the environment that is created when you have a staff member that needs to leave. Principal Laurel said,

When you have somebody who is negative and brings people down, because everybody knows who that person is. And you can't change people. You can't change attitude or whatever. So you work really hard and put a lot of pressure on and eventually my teacher left. And it wasn't fun because no one likes to do that but if I would not want my own child to have that teacher then that teacher needs to go.

The environment that comes when staff members leave and the work that it creates to rebuild good relationships stands in the way of a positive school culture.

Bureaucracy

Principal Nelson's noted that the barrier to a positive school environment that she has to navigate are all the hoops that schools have to jump through that are created at the district level and the state level. She said, "I think this gets in the way." The example she gave was the state tests students are given. Principal Nelson said, "Teachers are measured by the end of grade tests and that is one day's outcome, one piece of data." She recalled what happened when they would change the tests. She said,

They would re-norm a test and your test scores would drop and it made trying to keep staff morale up difficult. I would have to help teachers understand what it means and not that you suddenly went from being an outstanding teacher to an ineffective teacher. I would have to reassure teachers this is not what happened. The issue is how the kids are being tested.

Principal Nelson also discussed how even now the state is creating more changes related to reading. She felt strongly that the state's answers were "not the cure." Rather, it is these very shifts from the state and even the district that make the work of the principal trying to build a positive school culture a real challenge.

Parents

Principal Hill shared that her biggest challenge in building a school culture has been the parents. She said, “I think at every school, parents can be a barrier for school culture.” Principal Hill’s priority is collaborating with parents “especially if it’s a student that has specific needs and we need to have a really strong partnership.” She said it is these relationships that can often be a barrier for school culture if you have difficult parents. She said, “sometimes parents can be a downer on school culture because certain schools have a clientele where parents come in and can be difficult.” Principal Hill said, “this will be a barrier until teachers know they will be supported.” Principal Hill shared how she handles these situations. She said,

Now if a teacher is in the wrong, which has happened, I’m still going to support the teacher but we are also going to fix the issue and acknowledge it. We will fix it with the family and the student.

Principal Hill didn’t think this was hard to do, but if teachers have an administrator who do not trust, or until trust is established, she strongly felt “this can be a barrier” to a positive school culture.

Taken Advantage Of

Unlike the other challenges that were discussed, one principal did speak about a specific challenge related to building a positive school culture. Specifically, Principal Wilson noted that building a positive school culture sometimes leaves her feeling “taken advantage of by her staff.” She shared that people have questioned “why am I letting so many people go on vacations in the middle of the school year?” She said, “I believe family is first so if they are asking five days in advance, what can I say?” As a result, Principal Wilson said, “I do say yes too much probably

but our job is hard. I feel there has to be give and take.” As a principal in her fourth year leading a school she said, “this has been my biggest challenge.”

Intentional, Authentic and Strategic Female Leaders

As I interviewed all five principals there were some key words that kept coming up in our conversations as they discussed their leadership practices that led to a positive school culture. While these principals’ practices were aligned to the research on positive school culture, these words I kept hearing repeated by different individuals began to create a theme for how these female principals lead their schools.

The three words that were repeated during our conversations were intentional, strategic, and authentic. In my interviews with Principal Nelson, all three of these words surfaced and she mentioned the word intentional more than once. Principal Nelson spoke about being strategic as it related to helping her teachers grow and in the professional development she offered. She also shared her artifact which she called the school’s “Ten Givens.” They are:

1. All staff members care about all of our students and each other.
2. Everyone believes that all students can learn and succeed.
3. All staff members know that our “core business” is to empower students to engage in learning.
4. No student or staff member is yelled at, humiliated, or put down for mistakes, for not understanding, or for the bad choices they make.
5. Grade levels support each other in meeting individual student needs.
6. Data is analyzed to determine instructional needs.
7. Instruction is designed based on data results and student interest.

8. All staff members are viewed as the leaders of the school and hold themselves to the same high expectations that they hold their students to.
9. Administration will support all staff members in developing their capacity to lead and design engaging work.
10. All teachers as 21. century educators will effectively use technology themselves and with students to transform learning.

Principal Nelson said, “these have been our ten givens throughout my time at the school and are our non-negotiables.” She was strategic in how she used these to guide the work of her school and ensure everything they did “stayed aligned to those givens.” She also said, “the staff uses the ten givens with one another. They hold one another accountable. There is safety in that, and it provides an anchor.” Principal Nelson also uses a theme each year for her school with staff and students and how it develops is strategic and very intentional.

Our themes are not fluff. They are rooted in data and in what our school data says we need. And so, it has substance and purpose. Our theme drives everything we do. It becomes our message during morning announcements, and it is written about in school newsletters.

Principal Nelson also used the word intentional more than once when she was talking about the team-building opportunities she provided her staff. She was intentional about how she brought her staff together and who they worked with during their time together. Being intentional in these areas, Principal Nelson said, “created a sense of family.” As she talked about this family atmosphere and I inquired about how she created this type of school culture that promotes positive relationships, she attributed it to being “authentic” and “genuine.” She said, “it comes through authentic, genuine interactions and being present with people. Truly pausing to be

invested and to listen. We have to model what we expect. We have to model what to expect with authenticity.”

The word strategic came up in my interview with Principal Long as she was sharing how she cultivated trust as a school leader. As she was sharing the importance of communication, she said, “it is important to be strategic about how you share information.” Principal Wilson also spoke about being strategic and intentional during our time together. As she discussed how she cares for her school family, she mentioned the many things that can get in the way and distract a principal from taking time to show you care. She said, “you have to be more strategic about making time for those conversations or even just checking in on staff.” Principal Wilson also talked about being more strategic in how she recognizes and awards her students. She said, “It was strategically just focused on who is carrying out those specific skills and strategies that we’ve been talking and learning about.” She used the word again in a similar manner when she discussed recognizing her staff. She was talking about a new recognition plan she had for staff and she said, “We want to be more strategic about the awards we offer just like they do in the corporate world.” When Principal Wilson was sharing how she built a positive school culture in her building and what she contributed to the positive school culture, she mentioned the word intentional both times.

Similar to Principal Wilson and to Principal Nelson, another principal used the word intentional when it comes to listening to staff. Principal Hill shared how she took time to listen to staff when she first became principal of her school. She discussed how to decide what changes to make. She said, “It is being intentional about listening to people and making conscientious, thoughtful decisions.” In my interview with Principal Laurel, being intentional came up in our conversations too. Principal Laurel had a similar practice to Principal Nelson in how she

developed a focus for the year. Rather than a theme like Principal Nelson, she used a book. She said, “We talk about the book and its message throughout the year, and the kids know it. The teachers carry that theme throughout too. We are intentional about it serving as our focus for the year.”

These five principals shared some of the same practices and those practices were not uncommon to what research says about building a positive school culture. For example, these principals recognize their students with special programs and award their staff for their accomplishments. As I listened to these leaders share and analyzed the data on their practices, it is the specific attention they give to these practices that stands out. It is done with a focus that is strategic, intentional, and authentic.

Summary

The literature shows that there are certain leadership behaviors of the principal that do impact student achievement. In the book, *School Leadership that Works*, Marzano et al. (2005) show that there is a direct correlation between principal leadership and student achievement. Additionally, as Deal and Peterson (2016) point out,

Reforms that focus only on changing structures or increasing school accountability will never succeed in building positive organic forms that will serve all our students. Reforms that bring new technologies or higher standards won’t succeed without being embedded in supportive, spirit-filled positive, story-driven cultures. School won’t become what students deserve until cultural patterns and ways are shaped to support joyful and creative learning. Leadership from throughout the school will need to build and maintain such positive, purposeful places to learn and grow. (p. 283)

In this study, I have identified leadership practices that five female elementary school principals have implemented to build a positive school culture that ultimately will impact student achievement. At the beginning of the chapter, I offered profiles of each principal that highlighted key characteristics that emerged among the participants and called attention to specific ways these leaders have built a positive school culture. I turn in the next chapter to the ways in which gender influences the development of a positive school culture.

CHAPTER V: FINDINGS ON GENDER

The role of gender and the part it plays in shaping school culture for a female elementary principal is yet another facet of my research study. As I interviewed the five participants, they discussed advantages and disadvantages to serving as a female school leader that emerged from our conversations. In my review on the literature surrounding gender and leadership, I highlighted three challenges that I noticed female school leaders faced: professional identity, judgment, and mentorship. As part of this study, I wanted to know if these female elementary school leaders had similar experiences. I discuss their experiences below. I also share the advice my participants gave for future leaders and what needed to change in the way women were leading for them to continue to experience success.

It was clear among all of my participants that they believed that gender did play a role in shaping the school culture. Two of the principals felt like gender had to play a role but were not sure if they could pinpoint how. Of the two who were unsure, one remained that way and the other's response to this question evolved during our discussions and in the end, was in line with the other three female principals. Three of the female principals felt like gender did play a role because women were more nurturing. In addition to being more nurturing, several also mentioned that being a mother helped in offering a woman's touch to leadership. Principal Laurel said, "being a mother has helped especially with understanding issues that come up with teachers." Principal Long was one who felt the nurturing made a difference. She said, "women are more in tune and more aware of the disconnect that may sometimes happen when they're dealing with people. I think women are more concerned about how people are feeling."

Advantages

When it came to the advantages of being a female school leader it was clear among all five elementary principals that being a female in a building with mostly female staff was seen as a clear advantage. Principal Nelson's response to this question was:

Well, the big advantage is that 98% of the staff is female so from a female leader, I have that perspective of how females operate and know how to navigate the emotional piece of who a female is and just the feelings of juggling motherhood and being a wife and being a teacher. I had that common experience so I could empathize and see it through their lens and their perspective. And I do think it would make it hard for a man to lead a building full of women and not have that perspective to be able to be truly into it.

Principal Long's response was similar. She said,

We have a lot of women in our building and they come and talk to me about things that are concerning them. It could be a health issue. It could be something going on with their children. But they felt comfortable talking to me about that type of stuff.

Principal Wilson reiterated a similar theme when she shared,

Well, the majority of teachers, especially in elementary schools, are female. And so just understanding the balance of women in general I think is important, especially since most of our teachers are mothers. I think that allows for a lot more empathy because we can understand that if they are not just teachers, they are mothers, they are wives and that comes with a different set of expectations, in my opinion. It may not be fair but true.

All five principals agreed that serving as a female school leader in a building of mostly female staff was a significant advantage. This advantage provided them an opportunity to build relationships, have empathy, and demonstrate understanding.

Disadvantages

There were more differences than similarities among these female school leaders when it came to the disadvantages of being a woman in the role of an elementary school principal. Two principals spoke about the physical limitation they believe they had when it came to dealing with difficult students or parents. Principal Laurel said, “I am thankful we have an SRO (school resource officer). I can be stern with a parent but there are times when we had children here who are bigger than me and there would be a physical limitation for me.” Principal Nelson echoed a similar response when she said,

There were times, especially when all of us in the office are females, when kids are bigger than me. And so just that limitation or that liability with having to restrain kids. I found myself especially as I got older, relying more on my PE teacher to assist me when it came to having to restrain a child.

Principal Nelson also shared another disadvantage was related less to the educational side of things and more to things related to facilities. When it comes to these things, she felt she had to “prove I knew what I was talking about.” She said,

Anything that fell more under the male-dominated domain, even buses, I found myself having to draw on my experiences and I would say ‘I grew up in a home where my dad owned a gas station. I know about how cars operate or buses run.’ Or ‘my dad was a contractor’ or even some bureaucratic issues too because again I found myself having to prove my knowledge and my background. I would often say, ‘Well I grew up in a home where my dad served on the school board.’

Principal Long had a different disadvantage but it was related to the perception of her being a female. She shared,

Sometimes I feel like women are perceived as weaker when I've had to deal with parents. And I can think of some situations where men and women have approached me a certain way and expected me to cave. Even though I am soft on the inside, I can be hard on the outside. And if I think you want me to cave, I make it my business not to. But I've had people come in and try to intimidate me. And I just don't think they do that with men, at least not to that extent.

Principal Wilson described a disadvantage that she perceived was related to her tone and presence. She shared,

When she came to her school, the assistant principal had been there for ten years and was a man. I would walk into classrooms, and he was the principal. I was not. And he would say something differently, and it might have just a different tone, exact same words even, but it would be taken more lightly from me instead of from him.

Principal Hill felt like a disadvantage of being a female was the expectations that she feels are put upon her. The one she has experienced is what she calls her "perma-smile". She said, "as soon as I walk on campus, you smile. Because that's the inviting way to be." She shared,

It's having to be something that you're not needing to be at the moment. And it can be exhausting just putting that on for eight to ten hours straight. I know that's just smiling. But it permeates through everything. The expectation is you have to be welcoming when somebody walks in.

Unlike the advantages, the disadvantages that were mentioned varied among the participants. It was clear that the physical limitations provided a drawback to being a female principal. The other disadvantages seemed to be related to experiences they had with other people (parents, district workers, and outside consultants) and were related to the gender biases of these people.

Challenges

In addition to the advantages and disadvantages of being a female school leader, I also asked my participants if they had felt gendered in their role as a female school leader, and what their experiences were as it relates to what literature says are challenges for women related to professional identity, judgement, and mentorship.

As I listened to the disadvantages that were shared by these women, and then asked about their experiences of feeling gendered in their role, there was a connection for two principals. For two principals, what they viewed as disadvantages for them were related to their experiences of being gendered in their role. Principal Hill shared an experience that did not sit right with her. She was serving as an assistant principal in a meeting with a community member who was a male.

I remember he looked at me and said, ‘Why aren’t you smiling? You’re so much prettier when you smile.’ We were having a normal conversation, just like I am talking to you now. It made me angry. But I just smiled on cue. While this is small, it has always stuck. This experience is directly related to the disadvantage she shared when she discussed the expectation of having to act or be a certain way. She described how she felt she needed to always wear a smile – what she called a “perma-smile” when she entered the school. Clearly, the experience of being gendered in her role has left her with an unrealistic expectation that she carries with her to work every day. This is an example of a gendered expectation that because she is a female she should smile and be inviting to everyone. It is as if she cannot display how she might really be feeling.

When I asked Principal Nelson her experiences of being gendered in her role, she drew on those instances when she felt like she had to prove herself in areas outside of instruction.

Since she was a female, others made her feel like she could not possibly know what she was talking about when it related to things like facilities, transportation, or even politics. Both of the experiences these women had made an impact on them in such a way that they now view it as a disadvantage to be a female leader when it comes to some aspects of the job.

Principal Long shared a similar experience to Principal Nelson related to being gendered in her role. She said, “when we have had emergency situations occur or something related to a maintenance issue and someone from the fire department comes, they meet me and my male assistant principal, and they always want to talk to him.” She also recalled a situation in which her hiring decision was questioned because the person she hired was a female custodian. Her decision was questioned because of the person’s gender and their abilities to handle the job. She said,

The majority of people in the maintenance department in my district are men and because of that, they don’t really like the idea of hiring women. I mean, we do have female custodians but the custodians and the maintenance in our district work together on things. So, I hired a female custodian and someone from maintenance had a conversation with me. It was from the standpoint of being a custodian and being able to do hard work like being able to use and move heavy equipment and so on and so forth. And there were some other things said about the fact that I hired a female because I was a female.

Principal Wilson also had a situation with a parent that left her feeling gendered in her role. She said,

It was a discipline issue with a student that used profanity and displayed inappropriate behavior. It was also a new family to the school. When I called the mother, I told her it wasn’t the first time that this had happened. And she immediately questioned why she

wasn't aware of it before now and requested an in-person meeting with all involved. We had the meeting and my male assistant principal attended too. In the meeting, my assistant principal said, 'We will call you when you need to know, and we called you when we felt you needed to know. And you need to trust we are going to do what is best for your child and we will bring you in when we need your help or reinforcement.' It was exactly what I had said to her on the phone. I felt like it was his presence and a man offering that to her that made the difference. I remember walking away and thinking she didn't trust me. It took a man's voice saying for you to trust what we were saying.

Of my five participants, only one, Principal Laurel, did not recall an experience where she felt gendered in her role. Other challenges that women felt as women in a leadership role related to issues of professional identity, judgement, and mentorship.

Professional Identity

When I asked my participants about their experiences being a competent female leader while not coming across as too feminine or too masculine, Principal Laurel did not recall having any experiences where she felt that way. Principal Wilson, in her fourth year as principal, said this was an area that was "still a work in progress." The other three principals had some definite ways they managed issues related to their professional identity as women in leadership.

Principal Long said she has managed her professional identity by "coming at it from a place of facts." She said,

I try not to make any decisions based on emotions because emotions change. And so even if I am upset about something, I won't make a decision at that moment. If I have time to sleep on it, I'll do that because I always want to think about it from an objective standpoint. I don't mind stepping back. I don't think it is negative to step back and find a

different angle to say what I need to say or get what I need to get. I try to see what biases other people might have and what biases I might have to move forward. I try to be who I am and this has helped me.

Principal Nelson said also had a clear way she had managed her identity as a professional and school leader. She said,

I really feel like this is how I balanced it, and I feel like parents, staff, and district office people always knew that is where I was going to stand, that all decisions are going to be based on what's best for children. And so that was like that bottom line, and so that kept it from appearing too feminine or too masculine. It was like there was no gray there. This is the hard line that we're going to do what's right for kids.

While Principal Hill did not have a specific way she managed her professional identity as a woman, she did recall an experience where she felt she appeared too feminine and worked to change it. She said she began listening to her prerecorded voice messages that went out to her school families and she thought she sounded really sweet and thought, "I sound like a ditzy and I don't think of myself like that." She said she started studying voice inflection and "read about how Margaret Thatcher had voice coaching to have a more emboldened voice." She said,

I found it interesting and while it is something small, I've definitely changed the way in which I pre-record my messages. I feel like it is a respect thing where you want to command that respect. Not demand it, but command that respect. I feel like if I compare my messages from years ago, they are very different.

Judgment

I asked the five participants if there were certain challenges they encountered as they built their school's positive culture that were related to their gender and if there were

opportunities for recognition. Principal Hill spoke about encounters with parents where she felt she was being judged harshly or spoken to in a way that may not have happened had she been a male. She recalls a parent reaching out to her very angry and saying, “I had failed his child because I refused to communicate to the parents about a teacher’s personal situation.” She also recalled an email exchange with a parent who told her how to do her job. She said, “In both of these situations, they were males, fathers, and while they were minor things, to them they were huge. It taught me about how to respond but also taught me how to teach other people to treat you.”

When Principal Wilson became a principal, she followed a male school leader. She said, I like to be a part of all things. So, I think when I came that was hard. The staff felt like they were being micromanaged and I didn’t see it that way. I felt like it was being helpful and supportive. I don’t think they expected me to be as big of a presence because they hadn’t had that. I think that thoroughness did eventually gain trust and buy-in.

Principal Nelson said her biggest challenge was “being conscientious about the fact that I was not just talking the talk but that I was living it out in my daily actions.” She did say when she was building that school culture, “I had to prove myself more to be not just competent but to be genuine and empathetic more than a male would have to.”

When it came to being recognized for their efforts, all five principals felt like there were opportunities for recognition or to be involved at the district level. Three of the five principals I interviewed had all been recognized as a Principal of the Year for their school districts. It is likely this recognition relates to the positive school cultures they have been able to build.

Mentorship

The research indicates that often women are placed in roles without adequate support or training. While the training and experiences of these five women differed, outside of a year-long internship program as part of their graduate work to be an administrator, there was not a lot of additional support. Four of the five principals did receive official mentors upon becoming a school principal. Beyond that, at least from what is offered at the district level, it seems as Principal Long said, “I did a lot on my own.”

Two of the principals participated in programs of study that included a year-long internship serving as a school administrator. Both principals had a rich experience and felt this prolonged mentorship experience in the principal role best prepared them for the role of a school leader. As far as the professional development that is offered, Principal Nelson said, “I have seen it wax and wane over the years depending on the district office’s leadership and what they offer or can provide. If it wasn’t offered, I would seek it out myself.”

Principal Wilson seemed to have the most positive experience when it came to support and training. She said she had a mentor who she met with monthly and they still continue to meet. She also shared,

I have done several things through the North Carolina Principal and Assistant Principals Association like the Distinguished Leadership Program which was phenomenal in helping me understand the importance of school improvement, networking, and collaboration. I gained a lot of insight from that. I continue to seek it out. I am also in a professional network.

Similar to the others, while her experiences were valuable, they were ones she sought out.

Advice for Future Female Leaders

When I asked each participant what advice they would offer to another female school leader who was trying to build a positive school culture, there were clear themes that emerged.

Those themes were as follows:

1. Build relationships.
2. Be visible and approachable.
3. Know yourself.

Three of the five principals discussed the importance of building relationships, which makes sense considering that developing networks and building community were how they described important aspects of their work as leaders. Principal Long said, “at the end of the day, if you have strong relationships and you make enough deposits then it can help you navigate and save you time when you have to make withdrawals.” Principal Laurel said, “you need to gain respect and you can do that through building those relationships.”

The two longest tenured principals of the five I interviewed both mentioned the importance of knowing yourself. Principal Long said,

You need to know the good, the bad, and the ugly. Know your strengths and your weaknesses, be aware of those biases, surround yourself with people who may be looking at things through a different lens than you so that you can have a variety of opinions and perspectives when making decisions.

Principal Nelson said, “know thyself and stay true to thyself.” She recalls the program at [her masters’ degree institution] really helped her in this area. She said, “It helped me come to terms with my inner self and my inner purpose and finding my purpose. And it helped anchor me in what my vision was.”

In addition to these themes, Principal Wilson mentioned the importance of listening. “You have to listen. You can’t come in wanting to change because you don’t know what that change is going to need to be until you know your people.”

What Needs to Change?

In order for women to continue to be successful in leadership roles, I asked my five participants what needed to change or what women needed to do differently. While the responses varied, there seemed to be an overall theme of women needing to feel empowered to speak up and assert themselves, despite societal expectations for women to be quiet, docile, and accommodating.

Principal Long described what she feels needs to change for women thoughtfully. She offered, “women need to understand it is okay to be confident, to be smart, and to be knowledgeable.” She shared an example of her female superintendent and why she admired her. She said,

My superintendent doesn’t mind making hard decisions. She doesn’t mind having the hard conversations. She doesn’t mind telling you what she thinks and why she thinks that. And she’s not fazed by it. She can say something. And if she turns it over in her head after that, she will share some of those things with us in principals’ meetings. So, I think it is important to just be confident and lead from that perspective. You can really only sustain who you are. And to try to be anybody else that’s more or less, that’s not to say that we are not supposed to grow and evolve and learn from our mistakes. But we don’t need to try to be men in order to be effective. It is okay for us to be who we are and believe it is enough.

Two other principals spoke about the need for women to speak up. This idea seems related to Principal Long's comment that women need to be confident and feel knowledgeable, in part because they usually are knowledgeable but have been socially conditioned to not be too assertive about their knowledge. Principal Hill had mentioned that she did not like or want to be recognized. She said, "other colleagues told me I like to go back to my building and 'stick my head in the sand.'" She referred to this thought about herself when asked what needed to change. She said,

Women need to get their heads out of the sand and say what really needs to happen. I think principals in general need to do that. I do not know a lot of females that are going to stand up and do that.

Principal Hill discussed a recent principals' meeting in her district. A female tenured principal spoke out about an idea the district was pursuing. Principal Hill said,

I was grateful to her for what she said, because it was what I think most of us were feeling and thinking and knew it needed to be said. I didn't feel emboldened enough to say it. Women need to demonstrate brave leadership.

Principal Nelson shared a very similar story. She said,

Another colleague always accused me of keeping my head in the sand. And I did want to stay in my little world at my school and just stay under the radar. I did not want to draw attention, and that has not served the gender well. I would say more women need to step up, speak out, and advocate, and bring that attention to what they're doing rather than trying to hide from it.

After hearing a similar story from two principals, I found another theme in my data as to why women want to stay under the radar. After Principal Hill had shared the need for “brave leadership” what she shared after that explained a lot. She said,

I don't think there are skills women need that we don't already have. I think there are skills we need to take advantage of. I feel emboldened to do what we need to do for kids at my school and for my staff here. I feel very confident in that most days. You might have parents that will call and threaten you and all the things you are doing. But I feel empowered here. But in the bigger picture of our school district or even the state, I don't feel that. And part of that is my own fault. Part of it is, I'm working so hard to maintain life-school balance myself. And working so hard to keep the culture here going. I don't have the time and energy to take my focus off of things here to go and do some of the things other people are doing.

This thought of trying to speak up while also trying to balance life outside of work, is aligned to what Principal Wilson felt like needed to change and had not been mentioned with the other participants. Principal Wilson said,

I think there need to be boundaries in the workforce for women to be successful. With accessibility now being a 24-hour thing due to the internet, smartphones, and laptops, I feel like employees (in general) are required to work around the clock. This is unfair in general, but especially to women, who are still expected (unspokenly) to keep the house and raise the children. Women need permission to be off the clock to refresh and attend to their families. I think this is still a challenge for many women as they feel they must choose family vs. profession. It shouldn't be that way.

The data shared here demonstrate a need for women to speak up. However, my participants noted that due to the many other roles women juggle, they feel there is sometimes not time or easy space to be vocal and still maintain what they have worked to develop in their school buildings.

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the principals' perceptions on gender and considered the role gender played in these women's experiences building a positive school culture. Specifically, I shared the advantages and disadvantages of serving as a female school leader. Author Sheryl Sandberg (2019) says,

Women are hindered by barriers that exist within ourselves. We hold ourselves back in ways both big and small by lacking self-confidence, by not raising our hands, and by pulling back when we should be leaning in. We lower our own expectations of what we can achieve. We continue to do the majority of housework and child care. (p. 8)

Her comments nicely capture some of the very challenges these women principals faced.

Additionally, in this chapter I discussed what female school leaders believe needs to change in order for other women leaders to continue to be successful. In chapter 6, I examine the implications of this data, its limitations and recommendations for future leadership practices and future research in this area.

CHAPTER VI: ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate how school leaders work to improve school culture. Specifically, I explored the practices and skills demonstrated by female school leaders who have established and sustained a positive school culture. Another purpose of this study was to consider the role gender played in creating this kind of environment. In this chapter, I offer an analysis of the study and some conclusions, discuss limitations of this study, and provide recommendations for practice and future research.

From my interviews with these five female elementary school principals, I uncovered key leadership characteristics they possessed and used to create a positive school culture. Those key characteristics were being people centered, being a community builder, implementing distributive leadership, demonstrating servant leadership, and being supportive. While I identified one primary key characteristic for each participant, there were critical principal behaviors that were easily identifiable and related to the key characteristic. Additionally, these key characteristics and principal behaviors are also directly related to the leadership practices that research says builds a positive school culture that impacts student achievement. Those elements are building trust, professional growth and development of teachers, communication, collaboration, care, and celebration. From my data, there were some key words that also surfaced in my interviews with each principal. These words seemed to create a theme for how these female principals engage in leadership. Those keywords are authentic, strategic, and intentional.

As principals shared their practices, I also highlighted practical leadership ideas. These practices demonstrate not only the positive school culture these principals have established, but also the positive work of these female principals despite challenges they had to overcome along

the way. The challenges that these five principals encountered were different for each individual. While they each had different experiences related to barriers to building a positive school culture, these barriers were typically things they could not control and not related to school culture. These challenges were teacher turnover, state and local bureaucracy, parents, and being taken advantage of by staff.

As I also studied gender and the role it played in these female school leaders' experiences building a positive school culture, I noticed that there were some clear advantages and disadvantages that emerged related to gender. These women also had experience with some of the same challenges that surface in research about women in school leadership roles. These challenges related to professional identity, judgement, and mentorship. The five female principals I interviewed also had some clear advice for future female leaders and what needs to change in the way women are leading today.

Answers to Research Questions

One overarching research question with three sub-questions guided my study. I answer each of these questions in turn in this section.

Research Question 1

What are the experiences of female school principals in shaping the cultures of the schools they lead?

Based on the criteria I used to identify my participants, the artifacts that were provided to me as evidence of their school's culture, and the data from my interviews, I believe these five principals have experienced significant success in shaping their school's culture. These successes have not occurred without challenges, which I address as part of my discussion of one of my three sub questions below.

Each of the principals I interviewed have served in their current school for seven or more years with the exception of one principal who is in her fourth year leading at her current school. Each of the principals spoke about the time it has taken for them to build a positive school culture and then see it impact student achievement. Principal Wilson, who was the youngest principal I interviewed, spoke directly to the issue of time when I asked her about how the culture had impacted student achievement. Her response was “not enough.” She shared,

I am the sixth principal in ten years and so it was not until after being in my school for over two and a half years that we started to see some really good progress on common formative assessments and benchmark tests.

She also shared that one area she has seen impacted is staff retention. She said, “Now my staff is not turning over and I feel that is equally as important as student achievement.” Principal Wilson said what she does have now is “trust.” She said, “That’s impacted my culture.” Principal Long, who is in her seventh year as principal of her school said “longevity helps” when trying to build a school culture. She also said when she began as the principal in her first year, she sought out the voices of her teachers and staff about needs and visions: “I wanted to hear from them.”

Each principal recognized the first thing they had to establish in order to begin impacting the culture was trust. Each principal used different leadership practices to establish trust, though together they show how important trust is to school culture. As researchers on schools allude to, trust is, “the connective tissue” that binds school communities together.

Research Question 2

What practices help female school principals to create a positive school culture?

It was evident from my interviews with these five elementary school principals that they implemented the very leadership practices that researchers also indicate influence school culture.

Those leadership practices involve trust, professional development of teachers, communication, collaboration, care, and celebration. After reviewing the data from my interviews, it became apparent to me that each principal had a certain behavior that became their focus and essentially it was how they described their school's culture, and the leadership they provided to their school community. These behaviors were similar, although the participants emphasized some more than others.

In my discussion and implications section later in this chapter, I demonstrate how these principal behaviors are linked directly to the key leadership practices that have already been identified by other researchers as instrumental in building a positive school culture that impacts student achievement. Not only are the principals' behaviors and practices closely linked, but at times it was hard to identify one specific leadership practice for each person. Rather, in the data from the interviews there was evidence of more than one leadership practice that was contributing to that specific principal behavior and characteristic. This demonstrates how important all the leadership practices are to building a positive school culture and how one affects another.

One common factor that was important to each principal I interviewed, contributing to why I believe they made these leadership practices a priority, was the importance of relationships. When I asked them what they enjoyed most about being a principal, it was always the relationships. From each principal I heard comments such as "the relationships," the "people," and "the contact and relationships with kids and adults," The relationships seemed to be their "why" for building a positive school culture that ultimately impacts student achievement.

Research Question 3

How do female school principals understand the role of school culture in student achievement?

Each principal indicated their school's culture had impacted student achievement in a positive way. Each also mentioned that this positive impact was most noticeable and evident before the Covid pandemic which created significant new challenges and a period of remote learning for all schools. As it relates to student achievement data, all five principals were seeing gains. Principal Wilson felt her school was seeing progress in assessment data, while Principal Laurel mentioned the growth her school had experienced in state testing data and said, "our school was a D, then a C, and now a B." Principal Nelson's school had reached 90% proficiency, and Principal Hill's data projections were going up each year.

Principal Long and Principal Nelson also mentioned how the positive school culture had impacted student achievement through students taking more control over their own learning.. Principal Long shared, "we've given children ownership." She discussed what this looks like in her building. She said,

We help determine what it is they want to achieve. They monitor their progress. Teachers talk to them about what they're doing and what they can do better. It is not what we do to them. It is what we are trying to do for them and instill that within them.

Principal Nelson shared a similar approach. At her school, a theme is chosen each year and used with the entire school community. The theme is used with parents, students, and staff. Principal Nelson analyzes all her school data and uses that to reveal exactly what the theme needs to be for that school year. She went on to say at her school "we want our students to own their own

successes. So, it is not always coming from us. We want it to come from within. Students determine and recognize their success and we celebrate their growth.”

I recognize one key factor that was evident through my interviews is what these principals do for their staff, they also do for their students. If they celebrate teachers, they are also celebrating staff and students. The leadership practices they implement with teachers are equally as evident in the practices and procedures they implement in their building with students. I think this is an important component to their leadership work that demonstrates how culture impacts student achievement; this group of principals clearly understands the importance of consistency. They empower students to take ownership in their own learning the same way they empower teachers in their building to grow and take ownership in school improvement.

Research Question 4

How have female school principals navigated challenges related to gender that they faced as women leaders in their work to create a positive school culture?

Four of the five principals had specific experiences where they felt gendered in their role as a female school leader. In describing the research on gender and leadership, I highlighted three challenges that continually surfaced in studies about women in school leadership roles. As I interviewed these principals, I noticed they experienced similar challenges as a female principal building a positive school culture related to issues of professional identity, judgement, and mentorship.

It appeared that the more tenured principals had learned how to navigate these challenges related to gender better. Only one of the tenured principals did not have many challenges that she perceived she experienced related to gender. The others spoke specifically about operating from a place of facts. Principal Long shared the importance of making decisions based on information

rather than operating from emotions. Principal Nelson navigated challenges she encountered by always making her decision based on what is in the “best interest of children.” Focusing on students and their needs and achievement provided a bottom line for her and allowed others to know where she stood.

Discussions/Implications

One of the most important reasons that research is performed is to provide knowledge and understanding that can be useful in improving what we are already currently doing. In this section, I share key lessons from this study related to school culture and the role of gender in leadership

School Culture

My primary goal in this study was to learn about and analyze five female elementary school principals who built a positive school culture. Below I share themes related to how principals’ key leadership characteristics and behaviors coupled with leadership practices impact school culture.

Theme 1

A principal with a positive school culture is people-centered and demonstrates care.

In Michael Fullan’s (2020) book *Leading in a Culture of Change*, he quotes the work of Lewin and Regin who offer up suggestions for businesses and companies. They suggest that leaders should pay “as much attention to how we treat people, co-workers, subordinates, customers – as we now typically pay attention to structures, strategies, and statistics” (p. 65). One principal I interviewed already has this “people first” concept down and it was evident in other principals’ leadership styles too. Principal Hill’s artifact that “speaks to our culture” had a

central message of a healthy life balance. She said, “You got to balance your family. You got to take care of yourself. We got to work together.” She also said,

The biggest thing on my mind in almost every single decision I make is how are teachers going to be able to manage that? And if we are going to do this, is this what’s in the best interest of kids?

This comment definitely demonstrates how the care of people both staff and students matter first to this principal. Traces of this people-centered approach are also visible in some of the other key characteristics such as Principal Nelson, who practiced servant leadership and in her closing statement of our interview she said, “remember who you serve.” There was also Principal Wilson who was supportive of her staff and said your school culture needs to be “people-centered.” She also said, “You have to still allow them to put their families first in order that they can put the school family second.” This focus of paying attention to the people is also aligned to the leadership practice of care. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015a) highlight the importance of caring relationships by stating, “first and foremost, for principals to earn the trust of their teachers, they must demonstrate genuine caring for teachers, students, and parents alike” (p. 69). Care for their school community can also be seen in the examples my participants gave of doing small things like a treat cart, promoting self-care, and pausing to really listen to their teachers and staff members’ concerns and being invested in them personally.

Theme 2

A principal with a positive school culture is a community builder who develops trust.

Deal and Peterson (2016) remind us of the importance of community and trust when they state, “the culture of school needs to be deeply connected to the community through relationships

and activities” (p. 212). “The connections people have with each other” is what Principal Laurel contributed to her school culture. Principal Laurel shared,

Our teachers bend over backwards and work so hard because they want our children to be successful and know they come in behind the eight ball. And so they’re going to do things like tutor in the afternoons for nothing. They do things like meet a Hispanic parent at the eye doctor so the kid can get glasses.

These acts of service build relationships with the school community. Each principal I interviewed shared at least one large community event their school had every year that included the entire school community. Some of these events even brought back people who had attended the school and returned for these events every year. The most common events were Fall Festivals, Holiday celebrations, and one principal was in the midst of planning the school’s one-hundred-year celebration. Deal and Peterson (2016) remind us how important these types of events are for building a climate of trust when they state, “Trust is easy to damage, hard to establish but it remains one of the most important elements of parent and community ties” (p. 216). The principals I interviewed provided practical examples of how to develop a trusting and welcoming sense of community. As researchers Adams and Christenson (2000) state, “trust makes better places for students to learn by enabling and empowering productive connections between families and schools” (as cited in Tschannen-Moran, 2004, p. 6).

Theme 3

A principal with a positive school culture practices distributive leadership and encourages professional development.

In a multiple case study of school principals chosen for building a positive school culture to sustain school improvement efforts, Hollingworth et al. (2018) concluded,

Instructional leadership strategies such as allowing or even inviting teachers to be leaders, encouraging professional growth, knowing and understanding staff strengths and areas of growth, and permitting professional autonomy can help leaders build healthy, positive school cultures ready to embrace change. (p. 1029)

These exact leadership strategies were implemented by the elementary principals I interviewed. One in particular, Principal Long, understands this well. She said she knew, “I needed to create leaders within the school.” This was her passion as a school leader. She even found a way to support the effort of her teacher leaders by giving them a stipend for the extra work, commitment, and leadership. The other principals also believed in this idea of relying on teacher leaders. Every principal I spoke with discussed how they encouraged professional growth in their teachers. Their approaches ranged from letting teachers who wanted to “go and grow” do so to developing specific, targeted professional development in the areas where teachers indicated they wanted and needed the support. Principal Long discussed how she relied on teachers to lead at staff meetings and share new ideas or the learning from their own professional development opportunities. This group of five principals also had a leadership team they relied on to make decisions and be responsible for sharing information with their teams. Principal Nelson shared, “I empower others to be the leaders, showing them that I trust them to lead. I empower them as leaders and trust them as leaders to make decisions.” In addition to this strategy of helping grow teachers as leaders, she thought this practice was also an important leadership practice for building trust too. In the book, *School Leadership that Works*, “input” is identified as one of the twenty-one responsibilities of school leaders. Marzano et al. (2005) state,

Specific behaviors and characteristics associated with this responsibility and identified in our meta-analysis are the following:

- Providing opportunities for staff to be involved in developing school policies.
- Providing opportunities for staff input on all important decisions
- Using leadership teams in decision making. (p. 52)

Theme 4

Principals with a positive school culture practice servant leadership, promote collaboration, and prioritize communication.

“The central dynamic of servant leadership is nurturing those within the organization” (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 17). Principal Nelson summed up her leadership style in a similar way and said it about “remembering who you serve!” She attributed the culture in her building to the “relationships and accepting and validating people from children to adults.” Principal Nelson felt strongly “that kids aren’t going to feel love and nurtured and thrive unless the adults experience that too and are thriving.” Principal Nelson demonstrated this servant leadership by being in the “practice of doing with.” She said, “I knew I wanted to be a leader who didn’t do things to my staff but did things with my staff.” As a result of this belief, collaboration and communication were key to her efforts. Principal Nelson provided her staff with a weekly newsletter and a school calendar where it was transparent that there “were no hidden agendas.”

Other principals in my study recognized the importance of communication too. Every principal I spoke with implemented some type of weekly communication with staff. Principal Hill even boasted about this being a strength for her since it was an area in which she had received the biggest amount of positive feedback. She said, “every week they know where they can find information.” She felt this was important because her staff “knows the clear picture of what things are going to look like.” Additionally, every principal spoke about being available to their staff and having an “open-door policy.” Another important component to being in the work

with staff was collaboration. Principal Nelson felt it was important that staff see “you’re willing to put in the hours, you’re willing to be in the weeds with them.” Principal Hill gave an example of this collaboration and even opportunities for feedback when she shared that she sent out her master schedule and asked staff “to please look over it. And if you have suggestions for how we could do it differently or better, please email me.” She shared that she does this a lot with things such as homework policies, and even uses a collaboration document for feedback from her school leadership team. Principal Wilson felt like this collaboration was also important to how she cultivates trust. She said, “it is important to be part of the work and not just oversee, or facilitate, or dictate the work.” The importance of both communication and collaboration is highlighted in the research too. In the book *School Leadership that Works*, communication is identified as one of the twenty-one responsibilities of the school leaders. Marzano et al. (2005) state,

Specific behaviors and characteristics associated with this responsibility and identified in our meta-analysis are the following:

- Developing effective means for teachers to communicate with one another.
- Being easily accessible to others
- Maintaining open and effective lines of communication with staff. (p. 47)

Further highlighting its importance, their research shows communication is significantly correlated with student achievement. Principal Nelson felt that this collaborative practice of “doing with” also served to build trust. The importance of both of these practices can be found in other research studies too. In a study on relational trust conducted with twelve principals who served in a variety of communities, Cranston (2011) found that trust and collaboration go hand-in-hand. The principals in this study believed that “trust among faculty can lead to collaboration

and effective dialogue” (p. 66). Furthermore, study participants regarded “relational trust as a necessary social condition that allowed teachers to come together and work collaboratively on ideas that could potentially improve teaching to benefit students’ learning” (p. 66).

Theme 5

Principals with a positive school culture are supportive and encourage celebrations.

Describing the importance of nurturing and recognizing her staff and students, Principal Wilson said, “My role is one of support so that students and teachers (through that support) can realize their full potential.” Here Principal Wilson offers a great way to describe why supporting staff is so important. This idea of being supportive is a leadership strategy I found to be so closely related to being a servant leader that the principal behaviors really are the same. Like Principal Nelson who practiced servant leadership, Principal Wilson also discussed “being in the work.”

Some researchers describe engaged and involved behaviors with staff as collegial leadership. For example, Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015a) state, “Principals who exhibit collegial leadership are perceived by their faculty to be supportive and egalitarian. They are considerate, helpful, and genuinely concerned about the welfare of teachers” (p. 70). Principal Wilson and Principal Nelson gave examples that show how they demonstrate these characteristics that also were illustrated by all the participants in my study. For example, Principal Wilson shared that she attends professional development alongside teachers and said, “I’ll even go in and do model lessons. Even if they really are horrible it shows them I am willing to try too.” She also shared her development of action teams, which are subcommittees of the school improvement team that are organized, facilitated, and run by the staff themselves while she plays a supportive role. The other principals I interviewed also all relied on teams of teachers

to help support the school's goals for teaching and learning. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015a) also state that "collegial leadership presumes that a group of individuals hold not only common goals in mind but also have shared ideas about how to work together in pursuit of those goals" (p. 70).

A leadership practice closely associated with being supportive is encouraging celebrations for both students and teachers. Deal and Peterson (2016) remind us of why this is important, stating, "True heroes and heroines don't have super powers; they are regular people who, through caring and dedication, go beyond what is expected. For the school they become important symbols and exemplars" (p. 237). The principals I interviewed found unique ways to celebrate their staff. Principal Nelson shared how she recognizes staff members and ties it to her school theme for the year. She likes to recognize staff for "contributing to the total school program." Principal Long mentioned that she gives awards to teachers just like she does to students. She also shared how the staff wrote cards for each other and exchanged those with each other. This was a great way to ensure everyone was recognized. She said they would write about things they appreciated about each other, accomplishments they noticed, or why they were grateful for each other. This way, "Everybody got a chance to feel special." Principal Wilson was working on a new idea to recognize staff for "landmark moments" such as completing an additional degree or certification. She said, "I wanted to figure out a way to be more strategic and be more like the corporate world with staff receiving pins or buttons for different accomplishments." Also, each principal shared with me photos and videos of their staff, students, and families as part of the artifacts that gathered to represent their school culture. These ideas for celebrations and the artifacts shared with me are aligned with Deal and Peterson (2016) who

state, “Just as businesses, hospitals, or military units recognize their finest role models, schools do this with words, pictures, plaques, photos and videos, or special ceremonies” (p. 236).

Throughout this study, I highlighted the great work female school leaders are doing in building a positive school culture. Additionally, my findings demonstrate exactly what the research says about how a school leader shapes culture and the kind of environment that is created. Peterson and Deal (1998) suggest school leaders shape culture to create a place where:

- There is a commitment to teaching and learning.
- There is a collaborative and supportive environment.
- There is a common vision and goal.
- There are celebrations of teachers, students, and families. (p. 30)

My participants touched on all of these ideas in my interviews with them and as they elaborated on what creating a positive school culture entailed.

Gender

As part of studying how these five female elementary school principals built a positive school culture, I was also interested in their experiences related to gender. Their experiences mirrored what we know from the literature about the challenges still facing female school leaders and what needs to change if we are to create more equity in school leadership.

Professional Identity

Of the five principals I interviewed, all but one had experiences trying to be a competent leader who did not come across as too masculine or too feminine. Only two of the more tenured principals, Principal Nelson and Principal Long, found a way to manage gendered expectations well. Principal Wilson, who is in her fourth year serving as a school principal, felt like this was an area where she still needed to work. She identified a specific area where she felt she was

coming across as too feminine and sounded “ditzy” and worked to change it. These experiences are aligned to other research that has been done in this area. “Gender identity can impel principals to reconstruct their identity in the context of gendered cultural norms and power structures when exercising leadership” (Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2019, p. 325). Gendered expectations still present challenges for women and they are still working to find ways to manage them. Sandberg (2019) maintains, “The more women attain positions of power, the less pressure there will be to conform, and the more they will do for other women” (p. 171).

Judgment

The principals in my study mentioned some of the challenges they faced building a school culture that were related to their gender. Three issues seemed most salient. One issue these principals experienced was related to situations where they were either spoken to in a way that they felt would not have occurred if they had been a male, or their decisions were questioned because of their gender. In all of these situations, it was a male who was speaking to them or questioning them. A second issue that presented a challenge for one school principal was related to the staff perceiving her involvement as her micromanaging them. A third issue that another principal experienced was the need to prove themselves as competent. These challenges demonstrate exactly what other studies on this topic have concluded. “Biases still exist in the way female leaders are perceived in the educational workplace despite national efforts to generate equity” (Murakami & Tornsen, 2017, p. 821).

Mentorship

While the training experiences for these five female principals were different, and all but one received a mentor when they became a principal, there was not a consistent system of support and mentoring once they were in leadership roles. Only two principals spoke about

having a rich experience provided to them through a yearlong internship that was part of their program of study. These prolonged mentorship experiences in the principal role are what they believed best prepared them for being a school leader. It was clear that there was not a lot of support in the area of mentorship offered to these principals once they were on the job and a common theme was “seeking it out yourself.” Hearing the challenges that these women faced due to gender biases that still exist, and also learning that there is not a consistent system of support offered to new principals, outside of a year-long internship for the two who were fortunate to experience that in their program, was troublesome. As one study concluded, “It is not enough to put capable leaders in place, but they must be supported” (Peters, 2012, p. 36).

What I found in this study is that female school leaders are doing great work in the area of school culture and student achievement despite the challenges that are ever present for them. As part of the interview process, I asked the five principals what needed to change in order for women to continue to be successful. Principal Wilson spoke about the challenge of choosing between your family versus your profession. She talked about how women face pressures in their homes and related to raising children, often feeling like they have to seek permission to attend to issues at home. Her solution to this challenge was “boundaries” since so many people feel we need to be accessible 24-hours a day through the Internet, smartphones, and laptops. It is worth further reflection on what boundaries and expectations we all need, including men. For example, Sandberg (2019) argues we need to “urge more men to become part of the solution by supporting women in the workforce and at home” (p. 26).

In addition to Principal Wilson’s challenge, there were two themes that emerged indicating specific areas of work that are still needed for female school principals to be successful. 1.) Women need to feel empowered to speak up and assert themselves, despite

societal expectations for women to be quiet, docile, and accommodating. 2.) Women tend to want to fly under the radar and not be recognized for their efforts. While many would say there has been progress in the way of gender equity, these themes indicate gender issues are still lurking, even when they are below the surface. Sandberg (2019) gives a possible remedy for these issues that still exist. She says,

If we want a world with greater equality, we need to acknowledge that women are less likely to keep their hands up. We need institutions and individuals to notice and correct this behavior by encouraging, promoting, and championing more women. And women have to learn to keep their hands up, because when they lower them, even managers with the best intentions might not notice. (p. 36)

Limitations

The data from this study come from a series of interviews with five elementary principals. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, one possible limitation to the generalizability of my findings is that I included only principals who served at the elementary level as participants. One of my participants had served at all different levels (high school, middle school, and elementary). In our interview, she mentioned how different it is leading an elementary school. Her comment reminded me that context matters and that the challenges women face in building a positive school culture likely vary by level and type of school.

As part of my data collection, I interviewed each participant twice. As I interviewed each participant, I gave them a copy of the interview guide at each interview. The second interview with each participant focused on gender. During the interview, as I asked questions related to gender, a few of my participants' initial responses were, "I would have to think long and hard about that" or "I have not given a lot of thought to that." These responses made me wonder if

giving them the questions on gender ahead of the interview would have allowed them to think more deeply about gender issues and as a result offer richer responses.

It is also possible that because I am a female elementary principal, my personal perception of the questions may have influenced my analysis of the interview data. My own experiences also invariably influenced how I analyzed the data and selected the issues that seemed to stand out. At the same time, I think my own positionality as a principal helped put my participants at ease and led them to answer with more honesty and enthusiasm, especially because they knew I could relate to their experiences.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the nature of my study and my focus on the leadership practices of female school leaders that impact school culture, and the role gender played in developing the culture, there are different stakeholders who might benefit from recommendations from my findings.

The first groups of stakeholders are superintendents. They might be wise to consider the value of allowing principals to serve in schools for longer periods of time and work to retain principals so they will stay in one place for an extended amount of time. Each principal I interviewed, with the exception of one, had served at their current school for more than seven years. They all mentioned that it took time to build trust with staff. Some of the principals who have served in their current schools for a significant period of time mentioned that having longevity at the school helped to build the positive school culture. Some of the principals also mentioned that upon their arrival there was a turnover in staff. It took time to hire new staff and create a tight knit group of educators who trusted each other and trusted their leader. With these factors in mind, superintendents might benefit from keeping principals, whose school's data

shows they are making progress, in place for a period longer than the typical three-to-five years and find ways to retain principals who are quick to leave.

The second group of stakeholders are universities and colleges who are creating programs of study for future school leaders. These stakeholders might benefit from knowing how impactful yearlong internships were to preparing principals for their current roles. Currently, there are a variety of options for future school leaders who are pursuing additional degrees and licenses and not all of these result in a prolonged mentorship experience in the principal role. Of the five principals I interviewed, only two had extended internships but both felt this provided a rich experience leaving them feeling well prepared for the role of a school leader. With research indicating that women are often placed in leadership roles without the adequate support or training, high quality and extended internships might be a valuable way to provide much needed support and guidance. Additionally, universities and colleges might consider including even more information on gender issues in their programs for both men and women as this information could provide ways to help future female school leaders navigate the gender biases that still exist and both men and women to challenge these inequities. In a case study of one female principal navigating the principalship, MacKinnon (2019) recognized gender as a factor in the experience as her participant described her struggles leading as a woman. This study revealed, “gender does matter when it comes to principalship” and posed this question “Now that more women are educational leaders, do we still need to think about issues of gender equity?” (p. 22). This case study provides support for why addressing issues of gender and gender bias is an important consideration for universities and colleges who are preparing and training prospective school leaders.

The third group of stakeholders would be district level directors or individuals who oversee school leaders. These stakeholders would benefit from recognizing the importance of offering new principals a mentor and investing in research about what the mentorship looks like and offers new school leaders. While all but one of the five principals I interviewed had mentors, only one spoke about it being a positive experience. As I mentioned above, the research indicates often women are put into leadership roles without the adequate support. Additionally, new female school leaders would benefit from having strong, experienced female school leaders as their mentors. Women need to hear from other women who have experienced some of the same things related to gender and women need other women to help guide them through some of the continued challenges that women face due to gender biases.

Recommendations for Future Research

In a study examining two female principals and the development of their professional identities as principals, researchers concluded, “biases still exist in the way female leaders are perceived in the educational workplace despite national efforts to generate equity” (Murakami & Tornsén, 2017, p. 821). While the perceptions of female leaders as leaders was not a direct focus of my study, I was interested in the challenges women faced while building a positive school culture. It was clear from my interviews, and similar to the case study mentioned here, that there are still challenges that exist surrounding gender equity. Future research could explore the gender biases that exist and how they impact female leaders' ability to be effective.

As I spoke to these five female principals, almost all said things like, “I know gender makes a difference, but I am not sure how.” And, “I haven’t given gender a lot of thought. I may have experienced some gender biases and just didn’t realize it.” Also, when I asked them if their gender played a role in shaping the culture, I got a lot of responses related to being a “mother”

and “leading with a woman's touch” and being “intuitive.” To me, these responses create an opportunity for future research to explore how women’s own gender biases and lenses impact how they lead. One principal spoke about “wanting to fly under the radar” and later in our conversation about what needed to change for women she discussed finding her voice to say what really needs to be happening for her school and the district. Then, there was Principal Wilson who discussed the need for a boundary for work so women could have the opportunity to take care of their families. While each of these comments touch on something slightly different, it makes me wonder if there is a theme of women underestimating themselves and their abilities. Sandberg (2019) states, “when women evaluate themselves in front of other people or in stereotypical male domains, their underestimations can become even more pronounced” (p. 30). While we have seen more women take on principalships, there are still issues with gender equity. Another opportunity for future research might be to study women’s own perceptions about themselves as leaders coupled with reflections on their gender biases and how they can sometimes lead women to underestimate what they can do as leaders.

As my interview with one principal was coming to a close, I asked her what all of this discussion around gender and culture had her thinking about. She said, “I would be curious to ask my staff what they perceive are the biggest differences between me and other male principals they had. Maybe there are even some blind spots or areas I could approve upon.” Another principal in one of my interviews mentioned a similar idea as she also wondered what the staff’s perception would be in regard to her leadership compared to her male assistant principal. These comments gave me an idea about future research. While this study focused only on female school principals, future research could compare both female and male school principals to one another. It could be a similar study on school culture but examine the leadership practices of both

male and female school leaders. The analysis of the research findings may give insight into whether or not there are certain leadership practices that one gender performs better at than another. This could be helpful for districts as they find ways for principals to support one another. Such new knowledge would prove helpful in determining how to support new principals and even assign mentors.

As I shared my data in Chapters 4 and 5, there were three key words that came up often in my conversations with these female school principals who participated in my study. Those three words were intentional, authentic, and strategic. I wondered if it was this kind of intentional focus that helped make them successful at creating a positive school culture. As I was studying research literature on this topic, I found one study that examined the relationships among the authentic leadership style of principals and the trust and engagement levels of teachers. The study concluded that “the authenticity of the school principal is positively related to the teachers’ engagement levels” (Bird et al., 2009, p. 167). I think this is another area for more research. Further studies on this topic might highlight other areas that are impacted by the authenticity of principals, and also how principals and those around them define and describe authenticity.

Final Thoughts

Creating a positive school culture has been a priority for me as a school leader. Over the last ten years serving as a school principal, I have worked to create a place where students and teachers want to come to every day. One of Simon Sinek’s quotes on leadership has always resonated with me. He says, “leadership is not about being in charge. Leadership is about taking care of those in your charge.” This quote is so important to me because the people in my charge matter to me. Relationships are important. I knew if I could create a positive environment for teachers with great adult interactions and relationships, then I believed it would directly impact

our students and their achievement. This is what led me to my research study. I wanted to know if other school leaders were investing in human capital and seeing a return on their investment through better student outcomes. Also, serving as a female principal, who earlier in my career never really saw myself in this role, I was curious to know more about the experiences of my female colleagues. I wanted to hear their stories and highlight the good work that I knew was happening under their leadership.

The one thing I learned the most from this study is that many women are not doing good work leading their schools, they are doing great work and creating school cultures where students and staff are thriving. I think women leaders do not give themselves enough credit. Maybe this is because women are too busy doing the work to stop and reflect on their accomplishments. As I interviewed each principal, I left feeling proud of what is happening in our schools and feeling like our schools are in good hands under the leadership of a woman.

I think another thing I learned is how important it is for principals, regardless of gender, to have opportunities to share their ideas and the great things they are doing. While I consider myself a seasoned school leader, I loved hearing the ideas from colleagues who share the same role as me. There are school leaders out there doing great things and as principals we should have opportunities to learn from one another. There is so much thrown at school leaders today; juggling it all is a difficult task regardless of your years of experience. As I listened to these women share their ideas about building a positive school culture, I wondered why we are all so often in silos reinventing the wheel in our own building. Three of the women I interviewed served as principals in my own district and shared some new, fresh ideas with me. I could not help but think principals across our district would benefit from hearing from them as well. I think school districts would be wise to create time for principals to share with one another. Too often

principals sit in long meetings on topics that feel irrelevant to the work we are currently doing. After spending time with these five school leaders, I believe it would be time well spent if principals could come together on a periodic basis and share their ideas and successes. In the end, it would be the teachers and students who would reap the benefit.

I think what really surprised me in conducting this study was how little thought was given to gender by the women in my study. I was not expecting this response. Part of me feels strongly that women are too busy doing the work, making good things happen, and juggling all the other things that demand their time and attention to really reflect on their positionality and challenges. As a result, they simply do not have the time to pause and reflect on issues related to gender unless someone calls their attention to it. And in my case, I had their attention but as several admitted, they had not stopped to consider how gender was impacting their work. I am thankful that my questions gave some of them something to think about that maybe they had not thought about before.

A final thing I am left thinking about is the importance of using my voice as a female school leader. As one principal said, “we need brave leadership.” I listened to a principal share how grateful she was that one of her colleagues spoke up on behalf of principals. She said, “It was what most of us were feeling and thinking, and knew it needed to be said.” Then I listened to the most seasoned principal I interviewed say, “more women need to be willing to step up, speak out, and advocate, and bring attention to what they’re doing rather than try to hide from it.” I realized there are women out there doing really great work and I am one of them. Not speaking up does not serve our students, staff, schools, district, or members of gender well. Furthermore, other women are counting on us to be brave and speak up!

REFERENCES

- Bird, J., Wang, C., Watson, J., & Murray, L. (2009). Relationships among principal authentic leadership and teacher trust and engagement levels. *Journal of School Leadership, 19*(2), 153–171. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105268460901900202>
- Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. (2003). Trust in schools: A core resource for School Reform. *Educational Leadership, 60*(6), 40–45.
- Burkhauser, S. (2017). How much do school principals matter when it comes to teacher working conditions? *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 39*(1), 126–145.
<http://eepa.aera.net>
- Cranston, J. (2011). Relational trust: The glue that binds a professional learning community. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research, 57*(1), 59–72.
- Clinton, H. R., & Clinton, C. (2019). *The book of gutsy women*. Simon & Schuster.
- Connors, N. A. (2000). *If you don't feed the teachers they eat the students! A guide to success for administrators and teachers*. Incentive Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. (2016). *30 essential skills for the qualitative researcher*. Sage.
- Cruz-Gonzalez, C., Segovia, J. D., & Rodriguez, C. L. (2019). School principals and leadership identity: A thematic exploration of the literature. *Educational Research, 61*(3), 319–336.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2019.1633941>

- Deal, T. E., & Peterson, K. D. (1990). The principal's role in shaping school culture. *Office of Educational Research and Improvement*. ED 325 914. U.S. Department of Education.
- Deal, T. E., & Peterson, K. D. (1998). How leaders influence the culture of schools. *Educational Leadership*, 56(1), 28–30.
- Deal, T. E., & Peterson, K. D. (2016). *Shaping school culture* (3rd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Duke, D. L. (2010). *The challenges of school district leadership*. Routledge.
- DuFour, R. (1998). Why celebrate? *Journal of Staff Development*, 19(4), 58–59.
- Eagly, A. H. (2005). Achieving relational authenticity in leadership: Does gender matter? *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16, 459–474. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.03.007>
- Engels, N., Hotton, G., Devos, G., Bouckennooghe, D., & Aelterman, A. (2008). Principals in schools with a positive school culture. *Educational Studies*, 34(3), 159–174.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03055690701811263>
- Fullan, M. (2020). *Leading in a culture of change* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Fullan, M. (2014). *The principal: Three keys to maximizing impact*. Jossey-Bass.
- Hallinger, P., Liu, S., & Piyaman, P. (2019). Does principal leadership make a difference in teacher professional learning? A comparative study China and Thailand. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 49(3), 341–357.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2017.1407237>

- Hollingworth, L., Olsen, D., Asikin-Garmager, A., & Winn, K. M. (2018). Initiating conversations and opening doors: How principals establish a positive building culture to sustain school improvement efforts. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 46(6), 1014–1034. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143217720461>
- Johnson, S. M. (2019). *Where teachers thrive: Organizing students for success*. Harvard Education Press.
- Lassiter, C. J. (2012). *The secrets and simple truths of high-performing school cultures*. The Leadership and Learning Center.
- Lee, H., & Li, M. F. (2015). Principal leadership and its link to the development of a school's teacher culture and teaching effectiveness: A case study of an award-winning teaching team at an elementary school. *International Journal of Education Policy & Leadership*, 10(4), 2–17. <http://journals.sfu.ca/ijepl/index.php/ijepl/article/view/148>
- MacKinnon, K. (2019). "Boy, I wish I were a man!": Navigating principalship as a woman. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, 190, 18–25.
- Marzano, R. J., Waters, T., McNulty, B. A. (2005). *School leadership that works*. Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning.
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research A guide to design and implementation*. Jossey Bass.

- Murakami, E. T., & Tornsen, M. (2017). Female secondary school principals: Equity in the development of professional identities. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 45(5), 806–824. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143217717273>
- Nicols, J. D., & Nicols, G. W. (2014). Perceptions of school leaders: Exploring school climate data based on principal gender and student achievement. *Advancing Women in Leadership*, 34, 28–37. http://advancingwomen.com/awl/awl_wordpress/
- Peters, A. L. (2012). Leading through the challenge of change: African-American women principals on small school reform. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 25(1), 23–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2011.647722>
- Peterson, M., & Spencer, M. (1990). Understanding academic culture and climate. New *Directions for Institutional Research*, 68, 3–18. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ir.37019906803>
- Ryssdal, K. (2010). *Zappos CEO Tony Hsieh: Full interview transcript*. Marketplace. <https://www.marketplace.org/2010/08/19/zappos-ceo-tony-hsieh-full-interview-transcript/>
- Sandberg, S. (2019). *Lean in: Women, work, and the will to lead*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Schein, E. H. (2004). *Organizational culture and leadership* (3rd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.
- Sebastian, J., & Moon, J. (2018). Gender differences in participatory leadership: An examination of principals' time spent working with others. *International Journal of Education Policy & Leadership*, 12(8), 1–16. <http://journals.sfu.ca/ijepl/index.php/ijepl/article/view/792>

- Shaked, H., Glanz, J., & Gross, Z. (2018). Gender differences in instructional leadership: how male and female principals perform their instructional leadership role. *School Leadership & Manage*, 38(4), 417–434. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2018.1427569>
- The Flippen Group. (2014). *Leadership blueprint: Building relational capacity & high performing teams*. Flippen Group.
- Tschannen-Moran, M. (2004). *What's trust got to do with it? The role of faculty and principal trust in fostering student achievement*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the University Council for Educational Administration, Kansas City, MO.
- Tschannen-Moran, M., & Gareis, C. R. (2015a) Faculty trust in the principal: an essential ingredient in high-performing schools. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 53(1), 66–92. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-02-2014-0024>
- Tschannen-Moran, M., & Gareis, C. R. (2015b) Principal trust, and cultivating vibrant schools. *Societies*, 5(1), 256–276. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc5020256>
- Vandehey, J. (2019, November 14). *What is culture?* Medium.
<https://medium.com/@jgvandehey/what-is-culture-5eed12b57c4>
- Whitaker, T., Whitaker B., & Lumpa, D. (2009) *Motivating & inspiring teachers: The educational leaders guide for building staff morale*. Eye on Education, Inc.
- Wrushen, B. R., & Sherman, W. H. (2008). Women secondary principals: Multicultural voices from the field. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 21(5), 469. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390802297771>

APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW QUESTION GUIDE

Questions for Initial Interview on School Culture

Introductory Questions

1. How long have you been in this position?
2. How long have you worked in your current district?
3. Prior to being an administrator, what was your background/experience? Teacher? Specialist?
4. What led you to want to be a principal at this level?
5. What do you enjoy most about being a principal?

School Culture

1. Could you please talk about the school culture in your building?
2. So, what do you contribute to the current school culture?
3. Tell me in detail, about the kinds of things you have done to promote a positive school culture?
4. What do people say (and think) when asked what the school stands for?
5. How has your school culture impacted student learning/achievement?
6. What challenges have you encountered in building a positive school culture?

Trust

1. How do you cultivate trust as a school leader?
2. What leadership practices have you implemented that built trust?

Professional Development

1. What professional development opportunities do you provide your staff?
2. How do you encourage and/or help your teachers grow professionally?

Collaboration

1. What opportunities do you provide for staff input, suggestions, and decision-making?
2. What leadership opportunities do you provide your staff?

Communication

1. How do you communicate with your staff?
2. How do you make yourself available to staff?

Care

1. How do you establish positive relationships with staff, families, and students?
2. How are new teachers welcomed?
3. How do you personally demonstrate care to staff, families, and students?

Celebrations

1. How and when (if at all) are classroom successes shared and recognized?
2. How are contributions of fellow staff members treated, supported, and recognized?
3. What are the school's key ceremonies, traditions, and celebrations?

Closing

1. Using one to two words, how would you describe the culture you have established and/or your key leadership style that impacted it?
2. Can you provide for me some artifacts that are representative of your school's culture?

Questions for Second Interview on Gender and Leadership

Introductory Questions

1. Since our first interview together and after reflecting on what you shared, is there anything you want to add regarding school culture?
2. After looking over the transcript from our last interview is there anything that needs to change?

Gender and Leadership

1. Did your gender play a role in shaping the school culture?
2. What are the advantages of being a female school leader? What are the disadvantages?
3. At times do you feel like being a female school leader is an asset? A liability?

Professional Identity

1. How have you balanced being a competent female leader while not appearing too feminine or too masculine?
2. Describe an experience you have had as a woman leader that made you aware of being “gendered” in this role?

Judgement

1. Were there challenges you faced in building a school culture because of your gender?
2. As a female school leader how have you been recognized for your efforts?

Mentorship

1. What training, experience best prepared you to be a principal?
2. What kind of support, training, and mentoring have you received since becoming a principal?
3. What advice would you give an aspiring woman leader who is trying to promote a positive school culture?
4. What if anything about the way women lead today needs to change in order for female leaders to be successful in a complex, rapidly changing environment where we’re faced with seemingly intractable challenges?

Closing

1. What does all of our discussions surrounding culture and gender mean to you?
2. What are you left thinking about?