Check for updates

Networking and adapting their way forward: Women heads of large, K-12 independent schools and their leadership literacies

Jessica R. Flaxman*

Klingenstein Center, Teachers College, New York, NY, United States

Gender disparity at the leadership level of large (defined by the National Association of Independent Schools as >700 students) K-12 independent schools is a critical and persistent issue in the ongoing effort to foster equity and justice in historically white and male-led independent schools in the United States. Since 2009, the number of women leading all independent schools has increased from 31% to 41% in 2021. However, while a greater number of women lead independent schools today than in years past, they more often achieve the headship in small and K-8 schools and remain less likely (22%) to achieve headship of large (>700) independent schools. Using mixed-methods research including a quantitative survey of 30 of the 45 women leading large, K-12 independent schools in 2020; qualitative follow-up interviews; and analysis of exemplary "leader communications" from the crisis/pandemic school year, this study identifies the role of networking and adaptability literacies in moderating gender bias in the leadership pipeline.

KEYWORDS

women in educational leadership, adaptive leadership, leadership literacies, independent schools, networking

Introduction

A stubborn gender gap persists at the leadership level in both corporate America and K-12 independent education, where women Heads significantly lag men (Ammerman and Groysberg, 2021; Torres and Blackwell, 2022). In 2020, women represented just 22% of "C-Suite" leadership roles in corporate America; likewise in 2020, just 22% of school Heads of large, K-12 independent schools were women (NAIS-DASL, 2020; Women in the Workplace, 2020).

Although gender bias is a known and acknowledged factor in this disproportionality, incomplete stories persist about what holds women back. Questions about, and analyses of, gender disparity in leadership continue to place the locus of control and blame on individual women rather than the broader system that consistently recognizes, rewards, promotes, and maintains male leaders across all sectors and organizations both national and globally (Acker, 1990, 2006; Haslam and Ryan, 2008; Feibelman and Haakmat, 2010; Bierema, 2016, 2017; Haber Curran and Storberg Walker, 2017; Ely and Padavic, 2020; Weiner, 2021).

This study sought to better understand the gender gap by "storying the gap" in large, K-12 independent schools (Ravitch and Khannan, 2021). To do so, I collected first-person accounts of leadership from 30 women Heads of large, K-12 independent schools across the United States at the end of the 2020–2021 school year. Study participants' stories about what it took for them to emerge as leaders within large, K-12 independent schools, as well

as to lead effectively during the pandemic school year (2020–2021), unequivocally point to the criticality of their ability to hone and leverage networking and adaptability skills, called *literacies* in this study.

Literature review and conceptual framing

I began my study with an overview of the history of K-12 educational leadership in the United States, which I framed within the topography of Social Role Theory. I then explored different literacy theories and theories of emergence to present a clearer picture of women's leadership of large, K-12 independent schools, their skills, and their performance as Heads of school within the crisis context of the pandemic school year.

Gender disparity in K-12 educational leadership

The history of unequal leadership in America's K-12 schools dates back to their origins, when the superintendency afforded men working in the feminized profession of public education a suitably managerial position (Apple, 1985; Shakeshaft, 1989; Grogan, 1996; Blount, 1998; Skrla, 1999; Skrla et al., 2000; Carrington and McPhee, 2008; Weiner and Burton, 2016). By emphasizing the organizational nature of public-school leadership, the position was essentially created and safeguarded for men as men were, at that time, seen to possess 'agentic' traits such as decisiveness and rationality (Gardiner et al., 2000; Robinson et al., 2017, p. 2). Likewise, women, and not men, were at the time seen to "naturally" possess caretaking or "communal" traits such as soothing and smoothing (Eagly, 1987; Eagly and Johnson, 1990; Eagly and Karau, 2002; Eagly and Wood, 2012; Weiner and Burton, 2016).

Badura et al. (2018) find that stereotyped male, "agentic traits" such as assertiveness and dominance and stereotyped female, "communal traits" such as caretaking and empathy, have long moderated leader emergence along gendered lines within organizations. The "think-leader-think-male" trope continues to be salient in K-12 educational leadership, even within a changing context where gender and other forms of bias are increasingly acknowledged (Schein et al., 1996; Braun et al., 2017). Deficit-orientations and negative assumptions about women leaders persist today; for example, women who assert leadership traits too strongly aligned with men *or* women are subject to scrutiny and criticism resulting in loss of status, opportunity, or tenure, placing them in a "double bind" (Weiner and Burton, 2016).

As Perez (2019) writes in a recent book on data bias, in a "world designed for men," barriers to women's leadership emergence is due in part to the fact that both maleness and whiteness are "implicit; they are the default" (p. 23). Bias against women leaders has held women leaders in K-12 schools back for decades: despite consistently holding more than 90% or more of public-school teaching positions, as recently as 1970–1980, just 1% of superintendents were women. Over the course of each decade since 2000, women have gained some small ground as public-school superintendents—in 2000, women occupied 13.2% of public-school superintendencies (Glass et al., 2000); in 2010, 24.1% of public-school superintendents were women (Derrington and

Sharratt, 2009; Kowalski et al., 2011); and in 2019, 27% of superintendents were women (Robinson et al., 2017).

Without adequate support and encouragement in years past, women very likely attributed their failure to progress as leaders to their own shortcomings rather than to systemic biases working against them. To this day, the idea that women themselves are to blame when they fail to advance to leadership "is deeply ingrained in the field of education and helps to explain the continued underrepresentation of women in the education leadership ranks" (Weiner, 2023, p. 1).

The dearth of women leaders in K-12 education is problematic for many reasons, some of which directly impact the educational experience of students. Robinson et al. (2017) state that "lack of female representation is a problem not only because of fairness and equity but also because diversity brings improvements in leadership and learning" (p. 2). Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) further find that students stand to reap the benefits of women's leadership in part because "women of color and many white women are motivated by a strong desire to transform the learning conditions and opportunities for those who have been least well served by current educational policies and practices" (p. 11).

Women's leadership literacies

Within this gendered leadership context rife with bias and discrimination, words carry important meanings that, when not acknowledged, hold undue power in the present; the word, *competence*, is one such word. Had women leaders ever benefited from assumptions of their inherent competency *to* lead, the word *competencies* could be used synonymously with *literacies* in this study; however, as the "presumption of incompetence" (Muhs et al., 2012) has long held women back from professional advancement, the word is here eschewed and replaced.

Replacing the words *competency/competencies* with *literacy/literacie*s is an important shift for "non-traditional" leaders in independent schools who have not historically been seen, supported, or promoted. The phrase, *leadership literacy*, is borrowed and adapted from futurist Johansen's (2017) *The New Leadership Literacies* in which he articulates a new set of leadership skills necessary within VUCA contexts including global climate change, cyber terrorism, and pandemic (p. 6). To prepare for and be able to adapt to unwanted but likely disruptive events and phenomena, Johansen argues for "new leadership literacies," such as maker skills, rapid prototyping, commons creating, the ability to look back from the future, the willingness to engage with fear, the acceptance of morphing organizations, and the privileging of positive thinking and energy (p. 7). His point is not that leaders acquire each or all these emerging literacies but that leaders strive toward multiliteracy and lead from a stance that privileges adaptability, diversity, flexibility, positivity, and emergence.

Thinking about literacy as not simply reading and writing but instead as a continua of skills in different domains allows for an expansion of what was formerly considered one half of a binary replete with power dynamics, *literate/illiterate*. In his seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paolo Freire theorizes a pathway—much like a darkened hall in a labyrinth—by which the oppressed forge a pedagogy of their own liberation by asserting their voices "as part of a wider project of possibility and empowerment" (Giroux, 1987, p. 7). By "unveiling the

world of oppression… through praxis," the oppressed create a pedagogy for all who seek "permanent liberation" (Freire, 2018, p. 28). Understanding the relationship between identity, power, and literacies helps to advance social justice and gender equity concerns, as this novel leadership study of women leading large, K-12 independent schools challenges long-standing binarisms that reify theories of leadership historically associated with men (Guzzetti, 2010, p. 260).

Multiple literacies theory and theories of emergence

Freire's work spurred many important reconsiderations, including the New London Group's radical reframing of literacy studies in the 1990s that saw literacy as both a cognitive and a sociocultural phenomenon. This adaptation and expansion allowed for more people to not only claim literacy but to demonstrate and benefit from it. In lowercase, *new literacies* are skill sets associated with specific domains ("workplace literacies") and self-identified constituencies ("feminist literacies") and differ depending on geographic location and people (Baynham and Prinsloo, 2001; Ono and Tsai, 2008; Guzzetti, 2010; Mikulecky, 2010, p. 220). In addition to race, socioeconomic status, geography, and culture, gender mediates literacy and literacies (Subrahmanyam and Greenfield, 1998).

Since the turn of the 21st century, the field of literacy studies has continued to expand within the seemingly infinite context of new digital technologies, platforms, and modalities. "Multimodality" is defined by Cope and Kalantzis (2009) as "the capacity to mix modes" using a multitude of media, communication methods, actions, and behaviors and resulting in diverse forms of expression as well as topics and perspectives. As Kalantzis et al. (2010) aver, "The logic of multiliteracies recognizes that meaning making is an active, transformative process, and a pedagogy based on that recognition is more likely to open up paths to a world of change and diversity" (p. 72).

Multiple Literacies Theory, which understands literacies as constructs consisting of "words, gestures, attitudes, ways of speaking, writing, valuing; ways of becoming with the world," emerged from this optimistic, expansive chapter in literacy studies (Masny, 2010, p. 338). Through the Multiple Literacies lens, skill development and performance are seen as processes without a specific end-goal or outcome (Masny, 2010, p. 340). Grounding her theory in the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Masny theorizes literacies as rhizomatic expressions that emerge organically to forge networks of knowledge and connection (p. 4).

The rhizome is an intriguing root and shoot system that grows on a horizontal axis, like ginger and lily of the valley; as a theoretical symbol, the rhizome highlights non-hierarchical and networked pathways; multiplicity; heterogeneity; and connectivity (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Masny, 2013). For the purposes of this study, the rhizome, being an essentially flat or distributed system with infinite possibilities of origin and emergence, offers a powerful symbol challenging traditional understandings of leader emergence. The rhizome thrives as it pushes into new ground and adapts as it grows, embodying the dynamism of emergence. Defined as "the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions" (Obolensky, 2014), "emergence" focuses on the networked webbing between us and our words, actions, behaviors.

With an emphasis on collaboration and the ways we together create new worlds of thinking and being, "emergent strategy" (Brown, 2017) eschews traditional, heroic, and hierarchical leadership frameworks.

Methods and analysis

This mixed-methods study explored the experience of women leading large (>700), K-12 independent schools, and discerned, based on their multimodal storytelling, a novel theory of leadership emergence through the articulation of leadership literacies. The following questions guided my study:

(1) What literacies do women leading large, K-12 independent schools employ as Heads of School?
(2) What do such literacies tell us about the nature of women's emergence as leaders in K-12 independent education?

Using an explanatory sequential design, I collected data in two consecutive phases beginning with quantitative and followed by qualitative. With support from the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), I designed and shared a closed-questions survey with the 45 women leading independent schools with greater than 700 students in 2020. Thirty women Heads completed the survey and 26 agreed to participate in the interview stage. Participant attrition resulted in 22 participants completing a 60–90 min, semi-structured qualitative interview over Zoom during the months of June and July of 2021. Ten participants then shared examples of their leader communications in the form of email letters to their respective communities from the pandemic/crisis school year.

Study participants

Thirty women heads of large, K-12 independent schools responded to a quantitative survey of their background, experience, and training for K-12 headship. These 30 survey respondents represented 67% of the total number (45) of women heads of large, K-12 independent schools in the NAIS member-school network of more than 1,500 schools during the 2020–2021 school year. Of the 30 women heads of large, K-12 independent schools in this study, 63% were in their first headship, and a significant number were also the first ever woman head in their school's history.

This study used the language of NAIS to pose questions to participants about their social identities in order to gather data that would be congruent with other NAIS-DASL generated data. Twenty-five of the 30 survey participants, or 83%, identified as white, while five of the 30 survey respondents, or 17%, identified as Black, Middle Eastern, Latinx, or Multiracial. Ten percept of survey respondents offered information about their ethnic or religious backgrounds. Most participants who chose to identify their religious affiliation identified as Christian, specifying the impact of the Episcopal Church on their leadership, and a number of women also identified as multinational or multilingual. All participants in this study identified as women and used she/her/hers gender pronouns, and all survey respondents were over the age of 45 at the time of the survey in 2021. Sixty percent were between 45 and 54 years of age, and 23% were between 55 and 59 years old. The remaining 17% were over 60.

The National Association of Independent School divides the United States into seven specific regions: Northeast, East, Mid-Atlantic, Southeast, Midwest, Southwest, and West. Of the 30 respondents, 27% served as head of a large, K-12 independent school in the Mid-Atlantic region (which includes the District of Columbia, Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, and Virginia). Twenty percent served as head in the Southeast region (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas). Thirteen percent served as head in the Midwest (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Minnesota, and Michigan). And 13% served as head in the Western region (California, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, and Alaska). The regions with the lowest representation in this study were the Southwest (Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, and Kansas); the East, which includes New Jersey and New York; and New England, which includes Massachusetts and Connecticut, and where the fewest number of women in this study reported leading a large, K-12 independent school.

Data analysis

To identify some of the many leadership literacies women Heads of large, K-12 independent schools described in their first-person accounts of leadership during the 2020–2021 school year, I used *in vivo* coding procedures to "label data segments instead of researcher-created words or phrases" during the "first cycle" of my analysis (Ravitch and Carl, 2016, p. 249). Based on these coding processes, I commenced "second cycle coding," in which I assigned data to categories and sub-categories, relying on inductive coding as well as deductive coding processes. I used open coding methods including highlighting tools as well as different colored notes to capture emerging themes and concepts (Ravitch and Carl, 2016, p. 250). Participant stories were coded for their inclusion of anecdotes related to reasons for seeking headship; challenges faced in their personal or professional lives pertaining to their gender identity; role achievement; and role performance. From these broad categories, themes pertaining to specific skill sets, or literacies, emerged.

Findings: The role of role networking and adaptive literacies

Forging connections: The role of networking literacies

Networking is defined in this study as the ability to forge authentic and beneficial connections with people in possession of social and political capital within the independent school network, inclusive of colleagues, supervisors, other heads of school, students, families, and executive search professionals. To counteract implicit and explicit gender bias in their journeys to the Headship of a large, K-12 independent school, study participants created multiple points of connection with role models, mentors, sponsors, and search consultants. They described different types of influence including those who inspired them, those who actively taught or apprenticed them, and those who promoted them.

Role models

A role model is a person whose words, actions, or being inspires admiration or imitation. One study participant told a story about

paying attention to the specific times that her school head, who was a woman, would post an announcement on the faculty room door back in the days before email communications. "I always took [that] seriously and thought, okay, what made her communicate *now*? I watched that closely" (Participant 20). Another participant explained that for her, role models were as, if not more important, than mentors and sponsors: "I do not have someone who I check in with regularly and talk through my career… I just do not, I'm not designed that way. I'm busy; I'm working" (Participant 11). This participant described the impact of hearing a woman head of school's story about being pregnant while leading a K-12 girls' school. "When I heard that, I [realized] I do not have to be 40, 50, or 60 to be the Head of School. I could actually be a head during childbearing years" (Participant 11). Another participant described how she noticed an influential colleague who was particularly adept at "working an event" and "being a professional" (Participant 18), while another woman talked about the influence of working for a female head of school whose professional pathway from "teacher, to department chair, to division head, to Head of School" inspired her to try to do the same (Participant 19).

Study participants also described male heads of school who served as role models. Said one participant, "I had a historically strong Head of School who shaped a lot of the stylistic things that I lean on in terms of the way to frame things" (Participant 21). Another participant described a time when she was an Upper School Head looking at another Upper School Head position and deciding, after watching the male Head of School at the potential new school, that she was ready to do his job, that she was "ready for the next thing." "He made the position look doable. He was so personable. I was like, what am I doing? I'm ready. I'm ready to do this" (Participant 1). By studying how others performed as heads of school and looking for role models, women who went on to lead large, K-12 independent schools were catalyzed to do so in part by observing the leaders around them, and seeing elements of themselves in what they saw.

Mentors

Women heads also forged meaningful and beneficial professional connections through mentorship. A mentor is defined in this study as a knowledgeable or experienced leader who actively trains or helps another person, usually a direct report, but sometimes an employee of another school, to learn or master the skills or ways of thinking required of Heads of School.

Study participants experienced mentorship in different ways, and often through relationships with other Heads of School. For example, Participant 20 said,

> I didn't really think about being a Head of School until I started to work with some really good Heads, one of whom was a great mentor. She made it look attractive, challenging, fun, and rewarding… I thought, well, what the heck, I should give it a try.

Another woman described her pathway as in some ways the result of a "very forward thinking" male school head who told her when she was in her late twenties that she should "think about being a Head" (Participant 18). A different participant who did not have a strong background in educational leadership was directly encouraged by her male Head of School to "pursue courses that would be pertinent to an aspiring Head" (Participant 14).

Mentorship hinges on the inculcation of knowledge and skills in others. As one participant said, "I worked for a very innovative, out-of-the-box thinker who challenged some of the assumptions about girls' schools and really made us think broadly and boldly about education" (Participant 13). Mentors helped one school head to see her strengths and helped her to "figure out the parts that needed to be polished and needed to grow" (Participant 2). Another participant described her mentor as a woman head of school who told her:

> You're going to run this place, and I'm going to teach you how to do it. I'm going to stick you in every single area that you want, and some areas that you don't want and I'm going to give you feedback. And it's going to be hard, but you're going to love every minute of it (Participant 15).

A different school head described being pulled by her Head of School into "every Board meeting, every executive session, every crisis conversation" when she was an Assistant Head (Participant 10). This same school head also became a sponsor, telling her about a headship opportunity even before she had decided to pursue Headship. Participant 1 was mentored by her male Head of School despite being very young in the work:

> I was under 30 and completely unproven, but he saw something in me, and he empowered me to have the full run of the principalship. I think I've ended up trying to do a lot of what he was doing.

Based on participant storytelling about the importance of networking literacies in the early stages of their leadership journeys, it is evident that "sitting" Heads of School have a direct impact on who enters the leadership pipeline. Of survey respondents, 46% reported that their Head of School was the one to encourage them to seek formal leadership training and to support them in doing so, and many qualitative interview participants spoke to the criticality of having their head's direct support in the form of sponsorship.

Sponsors

A sponsor is defined in this study as a professional mentor or colleague who agrees to take an active role in an aspiring leader's executive search experience. A sponsor will reach out to share information about job opportunities, pick up the phone to tell search firms about an applicant, write letters of recommendation, and otherwise promote a candidate to the specific school or hiring committee where a leadership opportunity is open. One study participant described her sponsor as a man who would "just pick up the phone" and "give a reference" for her (Participant 11). She saw her sponsors as "influencers," people who will "leverage their privilege to speak on [her] behalf to vouch for [her]." Another school head described her sponsor as a male Head of School who offered "that gentle nudge" and "opened doors" for her to become more well-known and respected by search firms (Participant 16). A different school head said that her sponsor was the person to tell her that she was a great leader:

> He said, "People love doing things with you and for you, and you know you have a great way of inspiring people, of getting

people to do what they do not really want to do yet feeling good about it. You should always be thinking about what's next for you." (Participant 13).

With his encouragement, this participant applied to be the Head of School upon his retirement, and when she did not get it, he helped her to achieve a different headship elsewhere.

A sponsor is not simply a helper in these instances; he, she, or they are experienced leaders who can and will tell leadership candidates what they need to know and provide honest feedback so that they can become better applicants. One participant told a story about a sponsor who was like a "second dad," a male school head who told her, when she did not get a leadership job she had applied for in his school, that she was "everyone's second choice, and no one's first," and why (Participant 12). Another participant described her sponsor, a woman head of school, who said that she wanted her to pursue headship and told her when it was "time to look for another job," even if it meant losing her (Participant 7).

For some study participants, sponsorship by another woman was important: "It was just different; it took the idea of women helping women to a whole new level for me" (Participant 15).

> She picked up the phone and talked to the search consultant about me and why she thought that I needed to be considered as a candidate for this school and that it was the right fit for me.

In this participant's view, there was something especially personalized and powerful in the sponsorship that a woman provided for another woman. "When I got the job, the first thing I did was I sent her flowers… she put her personal and professional reputation on the line for me, and I'm grateful for that" (Participant 15). Study participants consistently described how they leveraged networking literacies to forge authentic connections with influential leaders who would promote them, even if it meant having to replace them when they left for a new position in another school.

Executive search experience

Women leaders with networking literacies can achieve promotion by participating in and securing the support of executive search professionals, or headhunters. Executive search describes a process by which individuals apply and are vetted for senior leadership positions in organizations that may be for-profit or not for profit.

In this study, executive search describes the process by which an independent school leader applies for a more senior position in their own or another independent school. Seeking to recruit excellent candidates, to ensure equity of process for those candidates, and in some cases to create distance from candidates who can become emotionally invested in job prospects, independent schools and Boards of Trustees contract with search consultants who will steward candidates through rounds of interviews that funnel them from applicant to semifinalist to finalist. Schools pay search consultants a percentage of the contract that is ultimately negotiated with the individual who is offered the position, amounting in many cases to tens of thousands of dollars, especially within the context of large, K-12 independent schools where annual salaries for Heads are typically in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

In the effort to understand the experiences of women heads of large, K-12 independent schools, this study engaged participants in discussion of their own executive search experience. Of survey

respondents, 57% reported that they participated as a semifinalist or finalist in 1–3 search processes before landing their first Head of School position. Seventeen percent participated in more than three searches, and 20% experienced one search only. Asked whether they participated in a search led by a woman, either as Board Chair or search consultant, 73% of survey respondents reported that they participated in one to three searches involving a woman Board Chair or search consultant, and 64% of respondents reported that they were selected for a headship resulting from a search process led by a woman.

Seeking challenge: The role of adaptability literacies

Wearing many hats—Demonstrating leadership agility

Of this study's 30 survey respondents, 89% had served in the role of Assistant/Associate Head or Upper School Head prior to assuming their first headship. Around 20% of survey respondents became the head of a large, K-12 independent school after leading a K-8 school, working in higher education, or running a nonprofit. Eighty percent of study participants served as a division leader at one point in their career, with the greatest number having served as Upper School Head followed by Middle School Head, Lower School Head, and finally Early Childhood. Over 90% of survey respondents reported having served, at different points in their respective careers, as one or many of the following: department chair, director of college counseling, director of admissions, dean of students, and dean of faculty.

The role of Assistant or Associate Head was an especially important "training ground" (Participant 21). The Assistant Head role often includes interacting with the Board, which is considered one of the most critical aspects of a future head's training. One respondent remarked how the Assistant Head role gave her a deep understanding of the "operational components of a school" including finance, admissions, advancement, alumni relations, and governance (Participant 5). The Assistant or Associate Head role is essentially the "jack of all trades" responsible for the "day to day running of school operations" (Participant 18). One Head who served for many years in the Assistant Head role described a process wherein her relational literacies deepened: "I became the *de facto* ombudsperson for both the faculty and the parents, which gave me a lot of insight into the customer experience of the school" (Participant 13). A different study participant said,

> As the Assistant Head, I felt competent in the running of the academic side of the school, and I felt like I was running a leadership team effectively in other parts of the school and working collaboratively with senior leaders (Participant 8).

Another respondent said that the role of Assistant Head directly prepared her for headship by giving her the chance to learn and oversee departments including advancement, admissions, and hiring (Participant 20).

In addition to successfully performing the role of Assistant or Associate Head of School, many study participants also, at one or many points in their careers, held senior administrative positions in K-8 or K-12 independent schools prior to achieving the headship of a large, K-12 independent school. Although the Upper School Head position is very often the steppingstone for male heads of independent schools, women leaders in independent schools have never had the same level

of success as men in achieving the Upper School Head position. Thus, a significant number of women heads in this study served as Middle School Head/ Middle School Principal, Admissions Director, Director of College Counseling, and CFO. No participant in this study achieved the headship of a large, K-12 independent school without repeatedly demonstrating adaptability in terms of roles, skills, and contexts.

Being nimble—Accepting and managing the unknown

In fact, study participants credited their efficacy as heads of large, K-12 independent schools during the very stressful pandemic/crisis school year of 2020–2021 to their adaptability literacies including accepting and managing the unknown. One woman connected her crisis management approach to simply "being nimble" (Participant 3), while another described her ability to lead through the pandemic as "being ok with letting go" (Participant 20). Participant 14 told me, "I am very good at project management. I went through several crises in my previous career," and those experiences helped her to keep "a very cool head" and make a point to continually "communicate" as she reopened school in September of 2020. She described the criticality of keeping her eye on what was essential, the school's mission:

> When a crisis hits, the nonessential goes away. And there is clarity, because the non-essential goes away. So you do not have the clutter of the things that bubble and take up a lot of time and energy because the crisis eliminates all of that. Dealing with all the people issues, the operational issues, the parent issues, the enrollment issues, the fundraising issues, and the well-being of everyone—that was [just] the mission. And that in a way made it simpler (Participant 14).

In this head of school's story, her adaptability literacies included staying calm, drawing from previous experience, and staying focused on that element as a means of simplifying and managing chaos. A different participant described the additional importance of moving quickly and confidently, or pivoting, within unfamiliar circumstances. She said,

> I gained some credibility very early in the pandemic because I came back from NAIS that February and said to our tech director, you need to go learn [about this program called zoom] and get every teacher an account right now. We then spent the next two weeks training faculty… the ability to close early and pivot quickly gave me a kind of credibility for the next few months (Participant 16).

This head of school modeled leader agility for her community, responding in real time to the urgent need to adapt traditional elements of school life within the context of the pandemic by learning and leveraging novel technologies such as zoom. Asked about how she adapted her communication with employees and families through the pandemic, Participant 17 told me, "You have to be adaptive. You cannot be that person who's like no, it has to be written. You [need to be] like, ok, fine, I'll talk on video" (Participant 17).

Shifting modes and moving forward

Shifting from in-person to video communication is just one of many ways that women leading large, K-12 independent schools demonstrated adaptability literacies during the pandemic. Being adaptable was as much the result of learning new things as it was about

doing the same thing, but differently. For example, there was an increased need to communicate during the 2020–2021 school year, as well as a need to communicate over different digital platforms. Leaders who could quickly learn and become comfortable using technology to send authentic messages thrived, while those whose communication style and practice failed to adapt within the context of the pandemic drew criticism.

Participant 1 beautifully described how she adapted her leadership to the new context by simply understanding not how to sail, but that she needed to sail a different kind of craft: she said, "I helped the school realize that although we are normally a cruise ship, sometimes we have to be a catamaran." Being adaptable is essential to K-12 independent school headship because, in the words of Participant 9, "on a good day, this is an impossible job." She went on to tell a story about how she led an adapted graduation ceremony while school was closed in June of 2020 and the news of George Floyd's murder broke:

> When George Floyd was murdered, that was the same weekend that we did a drive-by graduation. We drove to every single senior's home and graduated them in person on their front lawns. What was interesting about it was that because I was driving all over the place, I had NPR on the whole time. I would get out of my car… and we would go in, and it was intensely joyful. And we'd clap, and then we get back in our cars and go to the next place, and every time I'd get back in my car, it was the intensity, and the pain, and everything else that was going on with the country basically being on fire over racial injustice. The juxtaposition of those two experiences… they were interwoven, and it was so intense.

This head of school's ability to shift gears and move forward while experiencing both grief and joy is noteworthy. First, she led her administrative team to adapt their graduation ceremony, demonstrating agility and meeting the expectations of families within a crisis context. Second, she did so while absorbing news of the horror of George Floyd's murder in the car between each visit to a senior's house. Her ability to feel pain and sorrow while also expressing joy for her students' achievements highlights the importance of multiple literacies in leadership today.

Discussion

The storytelling of women heads of large, K-12 independent schools in 2020–2021 suggests that to counteract gender bias in their field, women who aspire to lead large, K-12 independent schools need to be remarkably networked and adaptive from the start of their careers to someday ascend to the headship of a large school historically led by men.

This finding highlights the salience of Multiple Literacies Theory, as there are myriad other literacies that serve as the foundation for networking and adaptability, such as relational, strategic, and personal literacies. It further demonstrates the challenges for women and other leadership minorities who attempt to secure promotion without having had the opportunity to develop such literacies through leadership role performance, as men historically have.

Being adaptable and networked certainly helped study participants to rise in the leadership ranks of large, K-12 independent schools. Different participants described being "willing," "saying yes," and

generally being agreeable to opportunities offered to them that fell outside the boundaries of their job descriptions. They also spoke about their willingness to "say yes" to trying new roles in their schools when they were tapped. While illustrative of the power of networking and adaptability, these findings also point to another "double bind" for women – on saying yes to whatever opportunity they are given, women leaders likely take on unpaid labor, which can be considered both the "cost of doing business" *and* the "opportunity costs" of aspiring, as leadership minorities, to leadership within historically male-led institutions. Future research into the unpaid labor of women and minorities who aspire to lead independent schools may uncover additional findings.

Conclusion

Through their first-person storytelling, women Heads of large, K-12 independent schools who participated in this mixed-methods research study demonstrated and spoke to the critical leadership literacies of networking and adaptability in order to find success and promotion within their professional lives working in independent schools. Due to long-standing and systemic gender bias within the independent school leadership pipeline, women Heads of predominantly and historically male-led independent K-12 institutions have had to be consistently adaptive, which includes forging and seeking networks of support. Beyond helping them to attain high-ranking leadership roles in independent schools, their *habit of adaptability* helped them to not only achieve Headship in a male-dominated leadership field but also to lead effectively and impactfully during the pandemic/crisis school year of 2020–2021.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by IRB. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

References

Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: a theory of gendered organizations. *Gend. Soc.* 4, 139–158. doi: 10.1177/089124390004002002

Acker, J. (2006). Inequality regimes gender, class, and race in organizations. *Gend. Soc.* 20, 441–464. doi: 10.1177/0891243206289499

Ammerman, C., and Groysberg, B. (2021). How to close the gender gap. *Harv. Bus. Rev.* 3, 126–133.

Apple, M. (1985). Teaching and "women's work": a comparative historical and ideological analysis. *Teach. Coll. Rec.* 86, 455–473. doi: 10.1177/016146818508600306

Badura, K. L., Grijalva, E., Newman, D. A., Yan, T. T., and Jeon, G. (2018). Gender and leadership emergence: a meta-analysis and explanatory model. *Pers. Psychol.* 71, 335–367. doi: 10.1111/peps.12266

Baynham, M., and Prinsloo, M. (2001). New directions in literacy research. *Lang. Educ.* 15, 83–91. doi: 10.1080/09500780108666802

Bierema, L. L. (2016). Women's leadership: troubling notions of the "ideal" (male) leader. *Adv. Dev. Hum. Resour.* 18, 119–136. doi: 10.1177/1523422316641398

Bierema, L. (2017). "Foreword" in *Theorizing Women and Leadership: New Insights and Contributions From Multiple Perspectives*. eds. P. Haber-Curran and J. Storberg-Walker (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Incorporated)

Blount, J. M. (1998). *Destined to Rule the Schools: Women and the Superintendency, 1873–1995.* New York, NY: State University of New York Press.

Braun, S., Stegmann, S., Hernandez Bark, A. S., Junker, N. M., and van Dick, R. (2017). Think manager-think male, think follower-think female: gender bias in implicit leadership theories. *J. Appl. Soc. Psychol.* 47, 377–388. doi: 10.1111/jasp.12445

Brown, A. M. (2017). *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds.* Chico, CA: AK Press.

Carrington, B., and McPhee, A. (2008). Boys underachievement and the feminization of teaching. *J. Educ. Teach.* 34, 109–120. doi: 10.1080/02607470801979558

Cope, W., and Kalantzis, M. (2009). "Multiliteracies": New Literacies, New Learning. *Pedagogies* 4, 164–195.

Deleuze, G., and Guattari, F. (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus: Schizophrenia and Capitalism.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Derrington, M. L., and Sharratt, G. (2009). Female superintendents: breaking barriers and challenging lifestyles. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bull.* 75, 8–12.

Eagly, A. H. (1987). *Sex Differences in Social Behavior: A Social Role Interpretation* Hillsdale, NJ: Elrbaum.

Eagly, A. H., and Johnson, B. T. (1990). Gender and leadership style: a meta-analysis. *Psychol. Bull.* 108, 233–256. doi: 10.1037/0033-2909.108.2.233

Eagly, A. H., and Karau, S. J. (2002). Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. *Psychol. Rev.* 109, 573–598. doi: 10.1037/0033-295X.109.3.573

Eagly, A. H., and Wood, W. (2012). Social role theory. In LangeA. M. Van, A. W. Kruglanski and E. T. Higgins (Eds) *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology.* Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, 458–476.

Ely, R. J., and Padavic, I. (2020). What's really holding women back? *Harvard Business Review.* Available at: https://hbr.org/2020/03/whats-really-holding-women-back

Feibelman, S., and Haakmat, M. (2010). Independent school leadership: A gendered experience. *Indep. Sch.* 70, 83–87.

Freire, P. (2018). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed (4th edition)* London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Gardiner, M. E., Enomoto, E., and Grogan, M. (2000). *Coloring Outside the Lines: Mentoring Women Into School Leadership* Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.

Giroux, H. A. (1987). "Literacy and the pedagogy of political empowerment" in *Literacy: Reading the Word & the World.* eds. P. Freire and D. P. Macedo (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey), 1–27.

Glass, T. E., Bjork, L. C., and Brunner, C. C. (2000). *The 2000 Study of the American School Superintendency: A Look at the Superintendent of Education in the New Millennium.* Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administration.

Grogan, M. (1996). *Voices of Women Aspiring to the Superintendency.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Grogan, M., and Shakeshaft, C. (2011). *Women and Educational Leadership.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Guzzetti, B. J. (2010). "Feminist perspectives on the new literacies: practices and research" in *The New Literacies.* ed. E. A. Baker (New York City: Guilford Press), 242–264.

Haber Curran, P., and Storberg Walker, J. (2017). *Theorizing Women and Leadership: New Insights and Contributions From Multiple Perspectives.* Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Incorporated.

Haslam, S. A., and Ryan, M. K. (2008). The road to the glass cliff: differences in the perceived suitability of men and women for leadership positions in succeeding and failing organizations. *Leadersh. Q.* 19, 530–546. doi: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2008.07.011

Johansen, B.Center for Creative Leadership. (2017). *The New Leadership Literacies: Thriving in a Future of Extreme Disruption and Distributed Everything (1st).* Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Kalantzis, M., Cope, B., and Cloonan, A. (2010). "A multiliteracies perspective on the new literacies" in *The New Literacies* (New York City: Guilford Press), 61–87.

Kowalski, T. J., McCord, R. S., Petersen, G. J., Young, I. P., and Ellerson, N. M. (2011). *The American School Superintendent: 2010 Decennial Study.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Masny, D. (2010). Multiple literacies theory: how it functions, what it produces. *Perspectiva (Florianópolis, Brazil)* 28, 337–352. doi: 10.5007/2175-795X.2010v28n2p337

Masny, D. (2013). *Cartographies of Becoming in Education: A Deleuze-guattari Perspective.* Dordrecht: Sense Publishers.

Mikulecky, L. (2010). "An examination of workplace literacy research from new literacies and sociocultural perspectives" in *The New Literacies* (New York City: Guilford Press), 217–241.

Muhs, G. G. Y., Niemann, C. G., and Harris, A. P. (Eds.) (2012). *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class For Women in Academia.* Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah.

NAIS-DASL (2020). Customized report: Women leading large (>700) K-12 independent schools. Washington DC: The National Association of Independent Schools.

Obolensky, N. (2014). *Complex Adaptive Leadership: Embracing Paradox and Uncertainty.* England: Routledge.

Ono, H., and Tsai, H. (2008). Race, parental socioeconomic status, and computer use time outside of school among young American children, 1997 to 2003. *J. Fam. Issues* 29, 1650–1672. doi: 10.1177/0192513X08321150

Perez, C. C. (2019). *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed For Men* New York: Abrams.

Ravitch, S. M., and Carl, N. M. (2016). *Qualitative Research: Bridging the Conceptual, Theoretical, and Methodological.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Ravitch, S. M., and Khannan, C. A. (2021). "Storying the gaps: transforming schools through story-based inquiry" in *Flux Leadership: Real Time Inquiry for Humanizing Educational Change* (New York: Teachers College Press), 1–19.

Robinson, K., Shakeshaft, C., Grogan, M., and Newcomb, W. S. (2017). Necessary but not sufficient: the continuing inequality between men and women in educational leadership, findings from the American association of school administrators mid-decade survey. *Front. Educ. (Lausanne)* 2, 1–12. doi: 10.3389/feduc.2017.00012

Rowe, M. A. (2021). NAIS research: State of independent school leadership survey. Available at: https://www.nais.org/articles/pages/research/nais-research-2021-state-of-independent-school-leadership-survey/

Schein, V. E., Mueller, R., Lituchy, T., and Liu, J. (1996). Think manager–think male: a global phenomenon? *J. Organ. Behav.* 17, 33–41. doi: 10.1002/(SICI)1099-1379(199601)17:1<33::AID-JOB778>3.0.CO;2-F

Shakeshaft, C. (1989). *Women in Educational Administration.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Skrla, L. (1999). Masculinity/femininity: Hegemonic normalizations in the public school superintendency. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, QC.

Skrla, L., Reyes, P., and Scheurich, J. J. (2000). Sexism, silence, and solutions: women superintendents speak up and speak out. *Educ. Adm. Q.* 36, 44–75. doi: 10.1177/00131610021968895

Subrahmanyam, K., and Greenfield, P. M. (1998). "Computer games for girls: What makes them play," in *From barbie® to mortal kombat: Gender and computer games*. eds. J. Cassell and H. Jenkins (The MIT Press).

Torres, A., and Blackwell, C. (2022). "The equity and justice outlook. 2020-2022" in *National Association of Independent Schools Trendbook*, 105–119.

Weiner, J. M. (2021). *Gender matters: The unique challenges facing women in education* Cambridge, MA: Harvard EdCast transcript.

Weiner, J. M. (2023). Increasing female representation in school leadership. *National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP).*

Weiner, J. M., and Burton, L. J. (2016). "They were really looking for a male leader for the building": gender, identity and leadership development in a principal preparation program. *Front. Psychol.* 7, 1–14. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00786

Women in the Workplace (2020). *A Study Conducted by Leanin* Org and McKinsey.