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Editorial: Women's equity in education

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Editorial on the Research Topic Women's equity in education

In honor of the 50th anniversary of Women's Equality Day in 1973, which in turn commemorates the 1920 adoption of the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution, granting women the right to vote, we launched this special women's equity in education issue. Our aim had been to celebrate women's gains in the fight for better, more balanced opportunities, as well as explore the challenges and work for equality that remain. To that end, we gave priority to the intersectionality of women's inequalities in the US educational leadership system, particularly the nature of discrimination between women's gender and other social constructs, particularly race/ethnicity, in pursuing and serving as leaders. While we encouraged the exploration of several related themes, the four articles that comprise this Research Topic are all focused on women's access to and enactment of leadership in the US education system.

It is worth noting that women are gaining more equity in educational leadership as more than 50% of US school principals as of 2017 were women. But gender and race still play a role in how women are perceived and treated in these positions and their opportunities for further advancement (Bailes and Guthery, 2020). Such discrimination shows up in whether and how they are mentored, the years to advancement, and the nature of the schools where they are assigned, shaping their pipeline into and through leadership (Peters, 2010; Fuller et al., 2019).

While much progress has been made in recent times on advancing women's equity in education, there is still much work to be done to ensure that women have equal access and opportunities as educational leaders. Research shows that even though women make up the majority of teachers they are still underrepresented in educational leadership positions. This Research Topic highlights the importance of examining the disparities that women face in school leadership, especially as school principals and superintendents. This disparity is not based on the lack of required qualifications for these positions but rather on many invisible and unacknowledged barriers, negative and traditional stereotypes, as well as societal biases. These obstacles prevent our education system from benefiting from the diverse perspectives and experiences that half of the world's population can bring to the table. The contributions to this Research Topic examine the demands placed on women in educational leadership in two areas—as school leaders (current and aspiring) and as superintendents.

About the articles

The first article, *Reifying discrimination on the path to school leadership: Black female principals' experiences of district hiring/promotion practices*, by [Weiner et al.](#), examines how 20 black female principals' experienced school district hiring and promotion practices. The authors found that, for these women, the hiring and promotion practices often lacked standardized, transparent processes, leading to inappropriate comments and questions and systems that relied on relationships and political connections for access and selection decisions. Some reported being recruited specifically because of their race and assigned to predominately racial-minority schools with academic challenges, thus being pigeon-holed by assumptions of the type of schools they were best fit to lead and the kind of leadership (clean-up) they were best suited to provide. Most were tapped by someone in their district to pursue leadership preparation or advancement but found these opportunities to be fraught with discriminatory limits, such as being used to diversify applicant pools, and promoted to lead schools that were increasingly minority or with academic challenges. They often found the hiring process to be disjointed and with inconsistent expectations, adding structural barriers to their advancement. Few experienced other black people in any stage of the hiring process including on stakeholder panels. Finally, many felt pressured to address racial and gender stereotypes or forced to be inauthentic or performative when interviewed. The authors concluded that the hiring processes, at least for these women, reify gendered racism.

The second article, *"You have an affiliative leadership style. That is going to be a problem for you": Feminized orientations to school leadership and navigating the pipeline*, by [Odell](#), presents a cross-case analysis of four aspiring independent school leaders' reflections on their leadership approach and advancement experiences. It uses Carol Gilligan's Listening Guide Method to explore relationship leadership as experienced by these aspirants and the obstacles and barriers a feminine orientation to leadership created for them and their leadership journey. Through this process, [Odell](#) surfaces the aspiring leaders' reflections on how their gender identity and gender performance impacted their career journeys.

The third article, *"Precarious Positions: Glass Ceilings, Glass Escalators, and Glass Cliffs in the Superintendency"* by [Timmer and Woo](#) explores the challenges and biases women face when pursuing leadership roles. Drawing on publicly available data from the Jersey State Department of Education (NJDOE), [Timmer and Woo](#) explore the notions of glass ceilings, glass escalators, and glass cliffs in the superintendency of schools in New Jersey in the context of gender bias in educational leadership. Their largely descriptive study finds that the state of New Jersey has a higher proportion of women superintendents than the national average (34%–35% of the superintendent seats) and that on average women and men superintendents are equally qualified for the positions (roughly 40% of both hold a doctorate). Yet, they also found that women superintendents are more likely to lead districts serving students from lower-income households and minoritized student populations. The authors suggest that because women superintendents seem to be sorted into school districts with higher

academic needs, they are placed in more precarious and demanding leadership positions (representing the metaphorical glass cliff).

The final article, *"Revisiting Acker's Gendered Organizational Theory: What Women Overcome to Stay in the Superintendency"* is by [Clark-Saboda and Lemke](#). [Clark-Saboda and Lemke](#) in the same vein as the other articles, highlight how educational organizations can perpetuate gender inequalities. [Clark-Saboda and Lemke](#) employ a qualitative descriptive approach to construct narratives that are directly derived from the superintendents' real-life experiences and their personal sense-making processes. Their study shifts our focus to why women stay in the superintendency with all the challenges and barriers that they face. Relying on [Acker's \(1990\)](#) theory of gendered organizations which argues that organizations actively construct and perpetuate gender hierarchies and roles, [Clark-Saboda and Lemke](#) explore the normative culture within the New York State Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) superintendency. The authors found that despite facing numerous gender-related barriers, women superintendents were motivated by professional legacy, the impact of their work on families, and achieving an appropriate work-life balance.

Cross-article synthesis

The articles offer an opportunity for us to reflect on new insights and trends in the study of women in leadership, and the changing equity landscape: conceptually, methodologically, and substantively.

Conceptually all the articles in this Research Topic delve into some aspect of intersectionality theory by examining how different aspects of a person's identity such as gender, race, ethnicity, and class intersect to produce experiences of bias and discrimination. Intersectionality highlights how interconnected our seemingly distinct identities are and allows for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the oppression that marginalized individuals sometimes face. These articles highlight the impact intersectionality can have on education and social justice research, as well as policy change. Here several authors used intersectionality both to understand differences experienced by minority women and the difference in the schools and districts they were asked to lead.

The application of Black feminist thought in the first article brings together the intersection of race and gender creating a more comprehensive understanding of the biases and inequities that shape the predominantly White and male education leadership space. The third article uses [Acker's \(1990\)](#) theory of gendered organizations to explain the gender influences embedded in organizational structures and practices. Tailored toward corporate organizations, its use in educational leadership research highlights how educational institutions can have gendered divisions of labor and expectations that reinforce gender inequalities and discrimination in its many forms.

The fourth and final article in this Research Topic shifts attention to how women in educational leadership are sometimes placed in precarious leadership positions in educational institutions. These placements hinder their opportunities for success and career advancement. The authors adopt [Ryan and Haslam's \(2005\)](#) phenomena known as the "glass cliff" and

“glass escalator” to typify limits in the leadership recruitment and advancement processes. All these conceptual frameworks emphasize that individual identities cannot be understood in isolation and their use allows for a richer analysis of the power dynamics and inequality that exist for women in educational leadership.

Methodologically, three of the articles in this Research Topic apply qualitative data in their research. The first (Weiner et al.) and third (Clark-Saboda and Lemke) articles use an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) and qualitative description research respectively. These methodologies are valuable for uncovering the meanings of the participants’ subjective experiences in an in-depth way and provide a way to explore the complexities of the subject matter. The inclusion of the Carol Gilligan Listening Guide in the second article (Odell) sets a new standard for innovative approaches to comprehending and representing women’s narratives, ensuring that their distinctive perspectives are authentically captured.

These three articles together employ descriptive data and case studies as their primary research methodologies. While these approaches yield invaluable in-depth insights, they do come with certain limitations, such as the challenge of generalizing qualitative findings due to the relatively small sample sizes or the distinctive characteristics of the participants involved. However, despite these constraints, they offer an indispensable source of context-rich information. Researchers frequently turn to small sample qualitative inquiry to delve deeper into the intricate facets of complex issues, acknowledging that not all questions can be adequately addressed through quantitative methods alone. Such qualitative inquiry is of paramount importance in unpacking the “how” and “why” behind the multifaceted phenomena that surface within the realms of gender studies and feminist scholarship.

Finally, the fourth article by Timmer and Woo is the only one that uses comprehensive descriptive data to gain deeper insights into their data and draw meaningful conclusions. The authors construct cross-sectional analyses and *t*-tests to assess gender differences in superintendent positions in New Jersey. The authors use quantitative data to explore the evidence on gender discrimination in a unique way. Given the absence of gender-related information in the publicly available data provided by the New Jersey State Department of Education (NJDOE), the authors made use of three distinct sources to assign gender to superintendents. Their method incorporates data from the Social Security Administration’s lists of popular names by decade, the state school districts’ public directory containing superintendent names and titles, and a web search across various websites and social media platforms.

Substantively, the four articles provide both new insights and stubbornly persistent problems and limitations to achieving greater equality for all women as school and district leaders. They look within unique sectors and circumstances, such as large intermediary agencies and independent schools, as well as interactions between superior and subordinate leaders and even school board members.

One article stands apart because it explores the consequences of gendered limitations in comparing the careers of men and women superintendents using statewide data, and provides a more nuanced way to evaluate the limitations statistically, with useful

metaphors. While statewide, about 30% of the superintendents were women, they seem to be sorted into leading smaller, K-8 districts, reflecting what the authors term a glass ceiling. Given that women superintendents were slightly more experienced and many have a doctorate, the authors concluded that women were taking longer to advance to the superintendency—labeling this phenomenon as the glass escalator. Finally, they point to the pattern in which women are more likely to lead districts with higher percentages of low-income students, students with disabilities, and English Language learners, describing these as precarious district leadership positions, like a glass cliff.

The other three articles provided deeper insights into the challenges women experience when seeking and enacting leadership positions. They show the persistent forms of sexism and racism deeply embedded within the layered processes female job applicants face and district leaders manage in order to get and maintain their leadership positions. According to the respondents, female job applicants and current district leaders must curate their appearance and demeanor to align with narrow gendered expectations. Moreover, they must negotiate overt acts of sexism and racism, in day-to-day interactions and being given these as reasons for being passed over for a position. These articles also affirm the gendering of leadership opportunities, more often pigeonholing women to stereotyped areas of leadership work (such as curriculum and instruction rather than more technical areas such as operations and finance). They shed light on why women may take longer to advance—because they were less likely to be tapped or mentored to pursue leadership positions, and more likely to be closed out of “the old boys club.” Finally, across the qualitative studies were reports of racist and sexist workplace interactions, in which women were either overlooked, had their ideas stolen, or were harassed and subjected to inappropriate comments. What came through is a persistent struggle for voice and respect, with the simultaneous struggle to project a socially acceptable persona. For Black women, the struggle is even more significant, with the narrowed expectation (and stereotype) that they best fit in leading crisis situations and challenging conditions, representing an even more precarious professional glass cliff.

Despite the 50-year Women’s Equality benchmark, these papers show that culturally and systemically, women, particularly Black women, continue to experience insidious and deeply ingrained challenges as educational leaders. They continue to adapt to these challenges individually, through projection, curation, and performance, to limit harassment and find avenues to succeed. They shoulder what Kegan and Lahey (2016) term as a “second job” trying to manage other people’s expectations of what they can and should do and how to look their best.

While these four studies were conducted in very different settings, combined they suggest a mixed-methods approach to evaluating the intersectionality of persistent and embedded discrimination for women of all races/ethnicities across all stages of leadership careers and the processes that support or hinder advancement.

Finally, given the insidious nature of the discrimination that these studies uncover, perhaps further research should be directed at the systems themselves, both unpacking the processes that maintain such discriminatory expectations and practices and exploring systemic solutions. Weiner et al. begin this focus by

pointing out the disconnected hiring practices black women applicants experienced and calling for revisions to hiring and promotion systems. However more is needed for systems to conduct internal gender equity audits to uncover and interrogate the discriminatory behaviors, practices, and assumptions that create delimiting and even hostile work environments for women leaders.

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