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Barriers to the Hiring of Women for the Independent School Headship

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Walden University
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Abstract

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MA, University of Northern Colorado, 1986

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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November 2021

Abstract

Despite over a century of activism to increase gender equality, inequalities persist across U.S. employment sectors, including in independent K-12 schools, which are predominately staffed by women yet led by men. The purpose of this qualitative, exploratory case study was to understand the perceptions of six female heads of school and six female search consultants regarding the barriers that women face in being hired for the head of school position in independent K-12 schools. Most researchers studying gender equality have focused solely on the perspectives of female leaders, although executive search consultants are important arbiters in the search and hiring processes. An assumption of the study's liberal feminist theoretical framework was that gender plays a part in every aspect of human experience and that society violates the value of equal rights in its treatment of women. The participants engaged in one-on-one semistructured interviews and the data were analyzed thematically. Three barriers emerged for women in attaining the independent school headship: (a) societal gender bias, (b) women's creation of barriers for themselves, and (c) an underrepresentation of women serving as hiring decision-makers. This study concluded that women must be strategic in navigating the search process to minimize the gender bias that they are likely to face. Also, women must develop confidence in their qualifications and readiness for the job. Additionally, more women are needed as hiring decision-makers serving on school hiring teams and as search consultants. This study has the potential to create positive social change by equipping search consultants and aspiring female heads of school with strategic knowledge that could help women navigate barriers more effectively and increase gender equality in the headship.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to my husband, Chris, a fellow career educator who appreciates the strong, independent women in his life. He has been my unwavering champion, chief encourager, and wise thought partner for 30 years. For our daughter, Roxy, an ambitious and confident young woman who will bust through any glass ceiling that dares to stand in her way. And for our son, Connor, whose bold spirit and loving heart offer hope that the arc of the universe is indeed bending towards justice.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Robert Voelkel and committee member Dr. John Harrison for their mentoring and guidance throughout the process of conducting this study. Their thoughtful reviews, wise questioning, detailed feedback, and genuine encouragement have made all the difference in the world. They have helped me attain my life goal and contribute to the advancement of talented, ambitious women in the field of education.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

In this study, I explored the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship by examining the perceptions of female heads of school and female executive search consultants about what the barriers are, why the barriers exist, and how they perceive those barriers might be addressed. Most researchers (e.g., Bohuslava et al., 2018; Calderone et al., 2020; Carbajal, 2018; Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2018; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Hartman & Barber, 2020; Hogue et al., 2019; Zheng et al., 2018) have explored the perspectives of the female head of school candidates. This study provided an examination of the barriers to the headship from the perspective of both the candidates and the hiring professionals who lead the search process to fill the position. This study has the potential to create positive social change by informing aspiring female heads of school about how to engage more knowledgeably and strategically in the search process. In Chapter 1, I provide the background to the study, the problem, the purpose, the research questions (RQs), the theoretical framework, the definitions, the assumptions, the limitations, and the significance.

Background

Independent schools are a type of private school, each with a unique mission, that are run by nongovernmental agencies called boards of trustees. They do not receive government monies and, as either for-profit or not-for-profit companies, rely on student tuition and charitable gifts to fund their operations. The chief executive officer of an independent school is called the head of school. The head is responsible for the overall management of the school, for academic leadership and strategic vision, and for the

quality of the student experience (National Association of Independent Schools [NAIS], n.d.-a). In hiring their head of school, the leaders of independent schools often engage with an executive search firm to help the school identify, recruit, and screen qualified candidates (Brown, 2016; NAIS, n.d.-b). Executive search consultants are individuals who craft the final job description, recruit and screen applicants, and facilitate finalist interviews. Executive search consultants play an integral role throughout the process as well as in the final hiring decision (Manfredi et al., 2019).

In the United States, heads of school are disproportionately White and male (Torres, 2017). Although women make up 75% of the teaching ranks in the United States, they currently comprise only 33% of the heads of school (Torres, 2017). This disproportionality is not limited to the world of private education: Only 21% of U.S. public school superintendents and 24% of university presidents are female (Tarbutton, 2019). Despite an increase in initiatives to recruit and hire more women, the percentage of female heads of school has remained flat since 2000 (Torres, 2017). To understand the problem better, multiple perspectives are needed, including the perspectives of executive search consultants. Their role in the hiring process is significant. According to Tienari et al.'s (2016) research in the corporate world, executive search consultants contribute to the underrepresentation of women in senior roles. Specifically, the predominance of men in upper management is "reproduced by executive search consultants and their clients" (Tienari et al., 2016, p. 58).

Although research has been conducted into barriers to senior management for women in many fields, including education, it is almost entirely from the perspective of

the female leaders themselves. To date, the perspectives of female leaders in combination with the perspectives of the executive search consultants are not well understood, according to my review of the literature. This study provides a much-needed examination of the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship from the perspectives of both female heads of school and executive search firm consultants.

Problem Statement

The problem addressed in this study is that the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship are not well understood. The current gender imbalance in school leadership is problematic for several reasons. First, it violates 21st-century workplace norms of gender equity (Maranto et al., 2018). After more than a century of activism for women's rights in the United States, women are not equally represented in the headship (Torres, 2017). Research shows that the presence of women in leadership positions can help correct inequities by disrupting the formation of stereotypes about girls and women for both boys and girls (Olsson & Martiny, 2018).

Second, female leaders in educational systems can have a positive effect on students' academic outcomes (Maranto et al., 2018), and their expertise is needed to help address the achievement gaps that continue to plague schools. Third, gender diversity in leadership brings benefits such as new perspectives, viewpoints and solutions, and challenges to the status quo (Hunt et al., 2015). These benefits extend to increasing companies' net income. Companies with gender diversity are 15% more likely to outperform their competitors in financial returns (McKinsey & Co. & LeanIn.org, 2016). This is particularly relevant for independent schools, which rely on the retention and

recruitment of tuition-paying students, as well as philanthropy. Fourth, there is a growing shortage of head of school candidates, which threatens the caliber of the head of school talent pool (Kane & Barbaro, 2016; Torres, 2017). It is expected that, by 2026, 68% of the current heads of school will reach retirement age and, as a result, competition between schools for qualified leaders will intensify (Kane & Barbaro, 2016). One way to stem this shortage is to grow the talent pool by increasing the number of nontraditional candidates, including women. This exploration of the perspectives of both sitting female heads of school and female executive search firm consultants could shed new light on the problem of gender inequality in the independent school headship and the barriers faced by women in being hired for the top position.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of female heads of school and female executive search firm consultants to better understand the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship. I used a liberal feminist theoretical framework. The participants' perceptions about the influence of gender on women's advancement was analyzed thematically based on participant responses to interview questions. The interview questions and the emic themes that emerged from participant interviews were sensitized by and discussed in relation to the framework of liberal feminism. Insights gained from this study may be informative for aspiring female heads of school, hiring committees, school boards, and executive search firms about what the hiring barriers are, why the barriers exist, and how they perceive those barriers might be addressed.

Research Questions

I sought to answer the following RQs in this study:

RQ1: What are the perceptions of female heads of school regarding the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of female executive search consultants regarding the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was liberal feminism. Feminist theory postulates that Western civilization is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology, that women are defined in comparison to male norms and values, that gender plays a part in every aspect of human experience whether individuals are conscious of it or not, and that the ultimate goal of feminism is to change the world through gender equality (Rogers, 2005). Liberal feminism is a relatively recent development in feminist thought, having emerged from the contributions of many early feminist thinkers (Crater, 2019), including Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, and Harriet Taylor (Eisenstein, 1981). Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Simone de Beauvoir were also notable contributors to feminist thought (Eisenstein, 1981), as well as more recent activists like Betty Friedan (Levine, 2015), Gloria Steinem (Michals, 2017), and Rebecca Walker (Snyder, 2008).

Liberal feminists believe that women should have the same rights as men but that society violates the value of equal rights in its treatment of women (Saulnier, 1996). Further, liberal feminists strive to raise awareness and to bring about societal change, including equal access to education and career opportunities for women (Crater, 2019).

Liberal feminism examines men's and women's social roles, aspirations, and access to power and, therefore, it was an appropriate framework for an exploration of the ways in which gender influences the recruitment and hiring of women for the independent school headship. I conducted semistructured interviews with both heads of school and executive search firm consultants to understand their perceptions about the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship.

Nature of the Study

I used a qualitative exploratory case study design to examine the perceptions of female heads of school and female executive search consultants about the barriers women face in attaining the independent school headship, why they believe the barriers exist, and how they perceive that the barriers might be addressed. According to Ravitch and Carl (2012), qualitative researchers attempt to understand the meaning that people make out of their experiences. The use of semistructured interviews provided a flexible and adaptive method of data collection that captured the context, complexity, and detail of the participants' experiences and perceptions about women's access to the independent school headship. I explored how participants' experiences and perceptions were "interpreted, understood, experienced, produced or constituted" (Mason, 2002, p. 3) through an inductive analysis of the interview data. Because this study's purpose was to explore and interpret perceptions about the problem, a qualitative design was appropriate. Greater detail about the nature of this study will be provided in Chapter 3.

Definitions

External barriers: Factors such as attitudes toward women, sex role stereotypes, domestic responsibilities, and expectations for masculine qualities that are external to a woman and that may inhibit her career aspirations and advancement (O'Leary, 1974).

Gender: Socially constructed conventions regarding roles and behaviors of men and women (Krieger, 2003). Gender roles, relations, and expressions of masculinity and femininity vary within and between different cultures.

Gender equality: A social condition in which men and women have equal rights and equal access to resources, power, status, opportunities, rewards, and safety (Rolleri, 2012). Rolleri (2012) observed that, "when gender equality exists, society equally values men's and women's similarities and differences" (p. 4).

Internal barriers: Those factors that diminish the career aspirations and occupational self-efficacy of women, including low self-esteem, feeling out of place, feeling that they should defer to their partner's career, and role conflict (O'Leary, 1974).

Worldview: Attitudes, values, beliefs, and expectations about the world that inform one's thoughts and actions (Gray, 2011).

Assumptions

In this study, I assumed that there are socially constructed barriers to women's access to the independent school headship. These barriers may be a combination of both internal barriers (i.e., lack of confidence) and external barriers (i.e., implicit bias). These assumptions are based on a liberal feminist lens that contends that gender plays a role in all aspects of the human experience, that gender roles affect individuals' worldview, and

that gender equality has not yet been achieved (Tarbutton, 2019; Torres, 2017). Additionally, I assumed that some participants may not have experience with the problem being studied and/or that some participants may withhold information if they felt that it may be in some way disadvantageous to themselves or to their career.

Scope and Delimitations

The issue of women's equal access to positions of power is a far-reaching and broad topic that pertains to women's ability to fully participate in and benefit from economic and civic engagement at all levels in society (Hague, 2016). In this study, I focused specifically on women's equal access to the head of school position within independent schools. This focus was selected because the field of education has historically been majority female, except in the most senior position, where a significant gender gap persists (Torres, 2017). Using a liberal feminist theoretical framework, I explored the perceptions of current female heads of school and executive search consultants based in the United States, as these individuals were uniquely positioned to provide insight to answer the study's RQs. The data obtained in this study contain thick description so that comparisons to other contexts can be made.

I did not focus on understanding differences between men's and women's perceptions regarding barriers to the hiring of women. I also did not focus on the influence of demographic characteristics of candidates other than gender, such as age or race. This study was limited to female heads of school who rose through the teaching ranks to their current position in order to eliminate the variable of nontraditional candidacy, such as having a professional background in business or higher education. I

also limited this study to female search consultants to avoid an introduction of differences in perceptions by participant gender. Finally, this study focused on barriers to the hiring of women in kindergarten through Grade 12 (K–12) day schools and did not study the impact of school characteristics such as religious versus secular, single sex, school size, or school mission.

Limitations

I explored the perspectives of six current female heads of school and six female executive search consultants who conduct head of school searches. The small sample size may have affected saturation, and the findings may not be transferable outside of the United States. It is possible that some participants may not have experienced or observed the problem that I explored. Further, it is possible that some participants may have been reluctant to share their perceptions if they were concerned about their identity being deduced. Dependability and transferability were enhanced through alignment between the data collection plan and the RQs and the use of thick description. I used structured reflexivity processes to increase confirmability. The use of validity strategies, including member checks, peer debriefers, and an audit trail enhanced credibility.

Significance

This study fills gaps in the research by clarifying the perspectives of female heads of school and female executive search firm consultants regarding the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship. Although there is a substantial body of research regarding women's advancement to the top leadership position in public schools and higher education (Bohuslava et al., 2018; Calderone et al., 2020; Carbajal, 2018;

Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2018; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Hartman & Barber, 2020; Hogue et al., 2019; Zheng et al., 2018), significant gaps in the research remain. For example, limited research has been conducted within the setting of independent schools. Even more limited is research exploring the perceptions of executive search firm consultants who are intimately involved in filling the head of school position. In this study, I explored the perspectives of a different type of stakeholder, in combination with those of women executives, in an educational setting that has been largely overlooked in the research.

This study fills a gap in practice with its potential to diversify and deepen the talent pool for school leadership. Female leaders can have a positive effect on students' academic outcomes (Maranto et al., 2018), and their expertise may help address student achievement gaps. Additionally, gender diversity in leadership brings benefits such as new perspectives, viewpoints and solutions, and challenges to the status quo (Hunt et al., 2015). This is particularly relevant for independent schools, which rely on the retention and recruitment of tuition-paying students, as well as philanthropy, to remain viable. Additionally, with many current heads of school planning to retire in the next five to 10 years (Torres, 2017) growing the talent pool with nontraditional candidates, including women, is imperative to address the looming shortage of quality school leadership candidates.

The findings of this study have the potential to create positive social change. The gender imbalance in the independent school headship is inconsistent with workplace norms of equity (Maranto et al., 2018). After more than a century of activism for

women's rights in the United States, women do not share leadership equally with men in the field of education (Hinchcliffe, 2020; Torres, 2017). Very little progress has been made in the last 20 years despite efforts to increase the percentage of women in the headship (Torres, 2017). More must be done to understand the problem. In raising the next generation of leaders, schools play a role in disrupting the formation of unconscious bias by modeling for children and young adults a balanced representation of men and women in senior management (Maranto et al., 2018). Ultimately, this study provides insight to aspiring female heads of school, hiring committees, boards, and executive search firms about what the barriers are, why they exist, and how they might be addressed.

Summary

The hiring of women to senior management positions has been an historically intractable problem across most professions in the United States, despite women's rights movement and targeted efforts by hiring professionals to enhance diversity and inclusivity in the hiring processes (Hinchliffe, 2020; Krivkovich et al., 2018; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020a, 2020b). This gender disparity persists even in the field of education, where 75% of teachers are female and 67% of top senior leaders are male (Torres, 2017). This juxtaposition is especially concerning within the field of education, which should serve as a model for young people of a society in which gender does not define one's roles, aspirations, or access to power. Gender equality in leadership has other benefits, too. Research has shown that female leadership in an organization challenges the status quo, brings fresh perspectives, improves student achievement

outcomes, improves company profits, and helps to address a shrinking leadership talent pool (Hunt et al., 2015; Kane & Barbaro, 2016; Maranto et al., 2018).

Using a liberal feminist theoretical framework and an exploratory case study approach, I explored the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship from the perspective of key stakeholders whose viewpoints have not been thoroughly explored. Female independent school heads and female executive search firm consultants were interviewed about their perceptions about what the barriers are, why the barriers exist, and how they perceive those barriers might be addressed. This study has the potential to effect social change because its findings may provide insight and guidance to aspiring female heads of school, hiring committees, boards, and executive search firms about addressing gender-based barriers in hiring.

In Chapter 2, I explore the literature related to this study. The chapter begins with an overview of the literature search strategy used and the study's theoretical framework. An in-depth review of the literature related to key concepts is then provided: a historical perspective of feminism, the current status of women in leadership positions, barriers to gender equality, and executive search firms. An overview of the literature review is provided in the chapter's Summary and Conclusions section.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem addressed in this study is that the reasons that women continue to be significantly underrepresented in the independent school headship are not well understood. The purpose of this qualitative interpretative study was to explore the perceptions of female heads of school and executive search firm consultants, using a liberal feminist theoretical framework, in order to better understand why women continue to be underrepresented in the independent school headship. Chapter 2 contains an overview of literature search strategy used for this study; definitions of key terms; an in-depth exploration of the theoretical framework of liberal feminism; and a literature review of key concepts contained in this study, including a historical perspective of feminism, the status of women in leadership, barriers to gender equality in leadership, and the executive search process.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature review includes books and peer-reviewed journal articles. I retrieved these resources from Walden University Library databases, including the following: ERIC, SAGE Journals, Education Source, ProQuest Central, SAGE Premier, Taylor and Francis Online, and PsycINFO. Key search terms included *school*, *school leadership*, *school administration*, *educational leadership*, *educational administration*, *independent school*, *private school*, *head of school*, *headship*, *superintendent*, *superintendency*, *gender*, *women*, *female(s)*, *barriers*, *gender gap*, *gender equality*, *gender equity*, *social role theory*, *feminism*, *liberal feminism*, *executive(s)*, *recruitment*, *executive search*, *search firm consultant*, *headhunting*, and *headhunter*.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, I assumed that there are socially constructed barriers to women's access to the independent school headship. These barriers may consist of societal expectations, which serve to limit women's advancement. They may also be self-limiting beliefs that women have internalized and impose upon themselves. These assumptions are based on a liberal feminist theoretical framework that contends that gender plays a role in all aspects of the human experience, that gender roles affect individuals' worldview, and that gender equality has not yet been achieved (Acker, 1990, 2006). Given the persistent underrepresentation of women in the independent school headship (Torres, 2017), liberal feminism was an appropriate theoretical framework for an exploration of how gender influences women's career advancement.

Feminist theory operates on three assumptions regarding gender: (a) gender is a social construct (Acker, 2006; Kaliyath, 2016); (b) gendered differences in patriarchal societies disempower women (Acker, 1990); and (c) sexism, gender discrimination, and gender bias in organizations is not always overt (Acker, 1990, 2006). Of all the variations of feminist ideology, liberal feminism is the most widely known and mainstream (Hague, 2016). Liberal feminism focuses on the public sphere and a woman's right to gain access to and participate in the economic marketplace without restrictions based on prejudice or stereotype regarding gender (Beasley, 1999). The attainment of economic, educational, and civic equality with men in society is the central premise of liberal feminism.

Based on an assumption of equality between men and women, liberal feminists are not "at war" with men; rather, the focus is on supporting women in accessing what

men already have (Beasley, 1999). The female experience of being at a disadvantage for full participation in society is what feminists, and more recently liberal feminists, have sought for centuries to change. Liberal feminists seek a merit-based system, in which individuals are judged on their qualifications. Liberal feminists also believe that equality is a collective responsibility and recognize that some societal intervention, including governmental, may be needed to attain justice and equality (McLaren, 2019).

Despite more than 200 years of equal rights activism in the United States and in Europe, women have still not achieved equal access to positions of power in society (Grant Thornton, 2020). As the ideal of equality for women has not yet been attained, the theory of liberal feminism is still very relevant today. As such, liberal feminism provided the appropriate theoretical framework for this study's exploration of gender roles as a social construct, women's career aspirations, and equal access to positions of power and leadership in the independent school headship, as perceived by female heads of school and executive search consultants.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variable

Feminism: A Historical Perspective

In 2017, Merriam-Webster announced that its "Word of the Year," the most frequently searched word that year, was *feminism* (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Spikes in online searches in 2017 corresponded with news reports and events, such as the Women's March on Washington, DC, in January. The very definition of feminism became the subject of a news story during an interview with Kellyanne Conway at the Conservative Political Action Conference that same year when Conway declared that she was not a

feminist. Feminism holds interest and relevance today, just as it did over 200 years ago. Over the course of time, feminism has been defined in different ways, and its evolution has been informed by various schools of thoughts and "waves" that have emerged within the context of the social and cultural circumstances of the times (Abdul Karim & Azlan, 2019). Liberal feminism is a more recent development in feminist thought, having emerged from the contributions of many early feminist thinkers, including Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, and Harriet Taylor (Eisenstein, 1981). It was furthered through the notable contributions of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Simone de Beauvoir (Eisenstein, 1981), as well as more recent activists like Betty Friedan (Levine, 2015), Gloria Steinem (Michals, 2017), and Rebecca Walker (Snyder, 2008). A review of the history of feminism and progress for gender equality serves to establish the context for the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that influence women's participation in society to the current day.

In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) criticized barriers to education and economic opportunities for women (Dinerman, 1988). Wollstonecraft was years ahead of her time, writing the first book to argue that women should have the same rights as men. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Wollstonecraft (1792) argued that if women seem emotional, passive, and apolitical, it is because they have been raised in this way. She sought for women to view themselves as rational and independent beings whose sense of worth came from their own sense of self-worth and not from their appearance. Further, Wollstonecraft advocated for a national education system with mixed-sex

schools, for women's civil and political rights, and for women to have the ability to earn a living and support themselves when they are widowed.

John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) was informed by Wollstonecraft's work and became a well-known and prolific writer about many social issues, including feminism, during the 1800s (Robson et al., 1994). During his life, Mill credited his wife, Harriet Taylor, for inspiring, contributing to, and revising his work and for showing him the real-world implications of women's subjugation (Collini, 1984). At the time of their marriage, women could not own property and lived under their husband's governance. A common justification for this during Mill's and Taylor's time was that women were morally superior to men and therefore needed to be protected from the immoral influences of the world outside the home (Collini, 1984). Mill (1878) argued that this is illogical, stating, "There is no other situation in life in which it is . . . considered quite natural and suitable, that the better should obey the worse" (p. 142). As Mill and Taylor called for women's equal rights, the women of the time were not, by and large, demanding these rights for themselves. Although interest in Mill's feminist writings waned after his death, there was a renewed interest during the suffragist movement prior to World War I when his book *Subjection of Women* was reprinted and sold in large numbers (Robson et al., 1994). During the feminist movement of the 20th century, feminists again looked to Mill as a thought leader for their cause.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902) is said to be the founder of feminism in the United States (Abdul Karim & Azlan, 2019). Cady Stanton brought first-wave feminism to the country in 1848—not by writing a book, but by calling a meeting and writing a

speech (DuBois & Smith, 2007; History.com, 2019). When she and Lucretia Mott were excluded from attending the World Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840 in London, Cady Stanton and five others organized the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 (Foster, 1995). The forthcoming *Declaration of Sentiments*, of which Cady Stanton was the principal author, sought to apply the principles of the American Declaration of Independence to women. Cady Stanton was an admirer of Mill and, in fact, stated in her writings that all suffragists should thank John Stuart Mill for his contributions (Gordon, 2000). Cady Stanton drew from and expanded on the scope of Mill's work (DuBois & Smith, 2007). Specifically, Cady Stanton explored the ways in which the subordination of women played out across every institution in society and explored sexual, moral, and religious questions that Mill intentionally avoided and which he likely would have disagreed. Cady Stanton believed that every woman should govern herself and demanded the full recognition of women's rights in society, as well as freedom from the limitations of social, familial, and cultural norms (Gordon, 2000).

In the 20th century, Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) emerged as a leading modern feminist theorist in France and ushered in a new kind of feminism, liberal feminism (Tidd, 2009). De Beauvoir's emphasis on women's equal access to the opportunities afforded to men places her in the tradition of liberal, or second-wave, feminism. She demanded that laws, education, and customs be changed to achieve equality. One of de Beauvoir's most famous assertions was, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Tidd, 2009, p. 235). She dedicated much of her time to answering the questions "What is a woman?" and "What is a woman's lived experience?" The

central themes that emerged from de Beauvoir's research are that femininity is constructed and that woman is the absolute other—specifically, that society is constructed to perpetuate a patriarchal hierarchy in which women occupy a subordinate status to men (Osmanović, 2020; Simons et al., 2015). De Beauvoir argued that women are forced, over time, to relinquish their authentic selves and to accept lower status, passivity, and the monotony of having children and doing housework (Osmanović, 2020; Tidd, 2009).

In the United States, feminist writer and activist Betty Friedan (1921–2006) garnered attention with the 1963 publication of her book, *The Feminine Mystique*, which set the stage for the second wave of feminism in the United States (Levine, 2015). Similar to her predecessors, Friedan believed that women should be able to be more than mothers and housewives and, further, that women should be able to pursue and find purpose in careers outside the home (Levine, 2015). At the same time, journalist Gloria Steinem (1934–) was struggling to be taken seriously in male-dominated newsrooms (Michals, 2017). In the late 1960s, Steinem helped found *New York* magazine, for which she wrote about political causes, including the women's liberation movement. By the early 1970s, Steinem had fully embraced feminist activism. She testified at Senate hearings for the Equal Rights Amendment and joined forces with Betty Friedan to form the National Women's Political Caucus, whose mission, still today, is to support gender equality and get more women elected to public office (Michals, 2017). In 1971, Steinem cofounded *Ms.* magazine, a pro-feminist platform. Through her crusade, Steinem "quickly evolved from journalist to the face of the women's movement . . . an

indispensable force in reimagining the fate of American women for decades to come" (Dockterman, 2020, p. 92).

In the early 1990s, a young American woman and feminist named Rebecca Walker pushed back against some of the tenets of feminism and its lack of inclusivity. She differentiated herself in stating "I am the third wave" (Heywood, 2006; Snyder, 2008). In a piece written for *Ms.* magazine, Walker (1992) shared the story of then–Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas and his accuser, Anita Hill, asking

> Can a woman's experience undermine a man's career – Can a woman's voice, a woman's sense of self-worth and injustice, challenge a structure predicated upon the subjugation of our gender? Anita Hill's testimony threatened to do that and more. If Thomas had not been confirmed, every man in the United States would be at risk. For how many senators never told a sexist joke? How many men have not used their protected male privilege to thwart in some way the influence or ideas of a woman colleague, friend, or relative? (pp. 40).

The third wave of feminism, although clearly a continuation of previous feminist thought, is critical of perceived shortcomings of second wave feminism (Snyder, 2008). Specifically, third-wave feminism challenges the notion that all women share the same gender identity, socioeconomic status, race, culture, and experiences. These universalist claims about the female experience are rejected in favor of women's personal stories (Snyder, 2008).

From a legislative perspective, feminist activism in the United States began to make tangible headway in the mid-1800s (DuBois & Smith, 2007). In 1868, a major step

forward was the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which provided equal protection under the law for all citizens, including women. The amendment reads:

> All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws. (Library of Congress, n.d.-a)

Despite the new amendment's guarantee of protection, equal access for women was still not realized. In 1873, the Supreme Court upheld Illinois's ban on allowing women to practice law, stating that "The natural and proper timidity and delicacy which belongs to the female sex evidently unfits it for many of the occupations of civil life" and further that "the domestic sphere . . . belongs to the domain and functions of womanhood" (*Bradwell v. The State*, 1873, p. 141). Legislation that restricted women's employment was deemed to be justified on the basis that it protected women. Examples of this "protective legislation" includes *Cronin v. Adams* (1904), in which women were not allowed to purchase liquor; *Radice v. New York* (1924), which prohibited women from working in restaurants at night; and *Goesaert v. Clearly* (1948), which prohibited women from working as bartenders, unless their husband or father was the bar owner.

Despite these rulings restricting women's access to economic participation, a 1920 landmark decision gave women a victory in securing their right to vote. The 19th

Amendment to the U.S. Constitution states, “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex” (Library of Congress, n.d.-b). Progress, however, continued to be uneven. The Equal Rights Amendment of 1923 represented an opportunity to affirm equality based on sex, but the amendment never took effect due to a lack of votes for ratification by the states (Equal Rights Amendment, 2018). To this day, equal rights protections based on sex are not explicitly stated in the Constitution. Progress forward for gender equality in the United States continued with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Title IX in 1972 (Polka et al., 2008).

Women’s access to full participation in the workforce, unimpeded by gender, continues to be aspirational. Although there has been notable progress since the mid-1800s, that progress is slow, results are mixed, and equality remains unrealized (Steele Flippin, 2017). This assertion is substantiated by the fact that, although women have outpaced men in their academic accomplishments (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016), these academic accomplishments are not translating into equal representation in leadership positions (Hinchcliffe, 2020). Likewise, the case for progress without equality is strengthened based on the data of economic earnings. Specifically, income data show that women have significantly increased their economic power over time (Fry, 2015; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014); however, progress toward economic equality has stalled noticeably (Yavorsky et al., 2019). In fact, in their quantitative study, Yavorsky et al. (2019) found that women have not made any progress toward accessing top income-earning positions in over 20 years.

This paradox continues to persist in spite of many gender equality initiatives in the last decade, such as the Workplace Gender Equity Act of 2012, the HeForShe movement of 2014, and the Women's March on Washington, D.C., and the #MeToo movement of 2017 (Tarbutton, 2019). The complex and difficult work of achieving gender equality requires building on the foundations laid by early thinkers, leveraging the progress that has been made to date, and deepening the understanding of the barriers that continue to impede women's equal access to and participation in the workplace.

The Status of Women in Leadership

The goal of gender equality for women in leadership is a goal unmet. Even as women have gained access to civic participation, education, and the workforce, gender continues to be a predictor of one's attainment of leadership. In the last 50 years, women have outpaced men in their academic accomplishments (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Women now earn 60% of undergraduate degrees and 60% of master's degrees (Warner et al., 2018). Despite over a century of equal rights activism in America, however, these educational accomplishments are not translating into equal representation in leadership positions. Although there has been a rise in female CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, only 7.4% are led by a woman (Hinchliffe, 2020). Across all U.S. employment sectors, although women now make up nearly half of the workforce (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020a), they comprise only a little over a third of managers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020b). With progress toward leadership equality for women slowing or stalled (Fry, 2015; Hinchcliffe, 2020; Steele Flippin, 2017; U.S.

Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014), exploration of the topic continues to be timely and important.

Despite equal representation in the workforce, the pathway to career advancement is different for men than for women. For example, working women are less likely to be promoted into management positions. According to Kellerman and Rhode (2017), in their review of higher education, it is more likely for men to be clustered at the higher levels of the organization and for more women to be clustered at the bottom. This finding was supported by data from multiple other sources. For example, as of 2018, only 79 women were promoted into management for every 100 men (Krivkovich et al., 2018). As of 2020, that ratio had improved slightly, to 85 women for every 100 men (McKinsey & Co. & LeanIn.org, 2020). This lack of equal promotion of women into management has been called the "broken rung," and it bears a long-term impact on the number of women in the leadership pipeline. A 2019 quantitative study conducted by the American Bar Association confirmed that the broken rung exists for women in law as well. Liebenbert and Scharf (2019) analyzed the perceptions of men and women lawyers in private practice and found that women are more likely to be mistaken for lower-level employees and are given less access to business development and promotion opportunities. Ultimately, when there are too few women in the entry and middle levels of management, the leadership gap at the top cannot be closed and progress inevitably stalls.

The Status of Women in Educational Leadership

A similar pattern of continued inequality and slow or stalled progress has occurred in the field of K–12 public school education. The percentage of female

superintendents has inched up from 24.1% in 2010 to 26.68% in 2020; however, this is in sharp contrast to the fact that 78% of K–12 educators are female (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). An important promotional stepping-stone position to the superintendency—the principalship—is also disproportionately male. Similar to the findings in other employment sectors (Kellerman & Rhode, 2017; Krivkovich et al., 2018; Liebenbert & Scharf, 2017; McKinsey & Co. & LeanIn.org, 2020), male teachers are more likely to be promoted to management than female teachers. Some quantitative analyses have found that, despite no differences in job-seeking behavior, women are less likely to attain the principalship (Davis et al., 2017; Fuller, Hollingworth, & An, 2016; Fuller, Reynolds & O'Doherty, 2016; Gates et al., 2003; Lankford et al., 2003) or the assistant principalship (Fuller, Hollingworth, & An, 2016; Fuller, Reynolds & O'Doherty, 2016). Of note, however, some studies have found differences in job-seeking behavior between men and women that may impede women's advancement (Brands & Fernandez-Mateo, 2017; Gipson et al., 2017; Hartman & Barber, 2020). This discrepancy is explored more thoroughly later in this literature review within the context of candidate aspirations. Regardless, the leadership gap at the top persists. Although women have made notable gains at all levels of school leadership (Hill et al., 2016), the C-suite position in the public schools—the superintendency—continues to be disproportionately male.

Similarly, in the arena of independent school education, women continue to be significantly underrepresented in the equivalent senior-most administrative position: the headship. Women comprise just 33%, and these numbers have remained flat for the last

20 years (Torres, 2017). Steele Flippin's contention from higher education (2017) holds true for the K–12 independent school headship as well: there has been notable progress for women, but it is slow and equality remains unrealized. Similar to other employment sectors, the career ladder of independent schools has its own set of broken rungs. In a non-peer-reviewed 2016 study, the NAIS found that executive search firms rank experience in the headship as a "must-have" qualification for head of school candidates. Given the stark underrepresentation of female heads, there are fewer female candidates who meet this qualification and are able to compete on this metric with male candidates. Outside of NAIS's studies, current peer-reviewed research on independent schools and the headship is decidedly sparse. This is especially clear when compared to the significant body of research available on women's access to the public school superintendency. It was therefore reasonable and necessary to draw from the research on women's access to leadership across various sectors of employment—including public schools, higher education, and business—to inform and guide this study of women's access to leadership within the arena of independent schools.

Barriers to Gender Equality in Leadership

The theory of liberal feminism uncovers ways in which social role incongruence, candidate aspirations, and access to power interact within a social organization to disadvantage women (Epure, 2014). These three barriers to gender equality in school leadership framed the literature review and sensitized the instrument, the data collection, and the development of inductive themes for this study's findings.

Social Role Incongruence

In 1984, when then–vice presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro was campaigning in Mississippi, state Agriculture Commissioner Jim Buck Ross called Ferraro "young lady" and asked her, "Can you bake a blueberry muffin?" (Weinraub, 1984, para. 11). Her retort was "Sure. Can YOU?" (Weinraub, 1984, para. 13) to which Ross replied, "Down here in Mississippi the men don't cook" (Weinraub, 1984, para. 14). Even as Ferraro faced male chauvinism, her response to his remarks lost her and her running mate votes in the conservative state (*The Washington Post*, 1986). Ferraro's supporters believed at the time that Ferraro had become a "lightning rod for what Miss Steinem calls 'free-floating hostility to women in power that couldn't be overtly stated'" (Dowd, 1984, para. 33). A year later, Ferraro shared in her memoir that she was "not prepared for the depth of the fury, the bigotry, and the sexism my candidacy would unleash" (Ferraro, 1985, p. 183).

Twenty-four years later, in 2008, vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin also received harsh gender-based scrutiny. An analysis of media coverage revealed inequalities in the tone of the coverage and in demonstrations of sexism, ranging from mention of her appearance and family to overtly gendered insults (Conroy et al., 2015). Coverage of Palin was pronounced in its objectification which, according to Heflick and Goldenberg (2009) and Heflick et al. (2011), resulted in perceptions of lower competence and morality and a decreased likelihood amongst Republicans to vote for the McCain–Palin ticket. According to Conroy et al. (2015), coverage of Palin was intensely misogynistic. She was the first candidate to have a blow-up doll created in her image that

included instructions to “blow her up and show her how you are going to vote” (Wheatley, 2008, as cited in Conroy et al., 2015, p. 583) and the first to have a pornographic film made in her likeness, which was titled *Nailin’ Palin* ().

In 2016, Donald Trump unexpectedly defeated Hillary Clinton in the presidential race. Although the reasons for Clinton’s loss were complex, gender featured prominently in the attacks against her. Slogans such as “Trump That Bitch!,” “Life’s a Bitch: Don’t Vote for One,” and “KFC Hillary Special: 2 Fat Thighs, 2 Small Breasts and a Bunch of Left Wings” appeared on everything from T-shirts to bumper stickers and pins (Brescoll et al., 2018). According to Conroy et al. (2020), Clinton was not able to appease the public’s desire for an appropriate amount of femininity and adherence to traditional notions of womanhood. During Biden’s presidential campaign of 2020, his vice presidential pick, Kamala Harris, was called “totally unlikable,” a “monster,” “aggressive,” and “an insufferable lying bitch.” A conservative website stated that Harris had “slept her way up,” and a T-shirt bearing the slogan “Joe and the Hoe” sold briefly on Amazon before it was taken down.

Ferraro’s and Harris’s vice presidential candidacies in 1984 and 2020 and Clinton’s presidential candidacy in 2016 were watershed moments in the United States and in the women’s rights movement. Nevertheless, these women, as have other women over the decades, paid a price for their displays of leadership (Brescoll et al., 2018). Prominent theories that address prejudice against female leaders based on gendered social roles include Heilman’s (1983) lack of fit model and Eagly and Karau’s (2002) role incongruity theory of prejudice. Although the “think manager, think male” paradigm

(Schein, 1973, 1975) has yielded somewhat to acknowledge more communal aspects of leadership over the years (Hoyt, 2010), most people, regardless of their own gender, still associate leadership with masculine characteristics (Koenig et al., 2011).

Research findings regarding the impact of gendered social roles and expectations on female leaders are strikingly consistent over time and across both employment and political sectors. Women who display confidence and dominance suffer social consequences because these qualities are not congruent with what society expects of them (Brescoll et al., 2018; Williams & Tiedens, 2016). The ensuing social penalties, which extend to economic penalties as well, are discussed frequently in the literature and are referred to as "backlash effects" (Brescoll, 2011; Brescoll et al., 2018; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010; Williams & Tiedens, 2016). Backlash effects come in the form of social penalties when women are described as "cold" and "unlikable" (Brescoll, 2011). Backlash effects exact economic costs as well. For example, women who do not conform to social roles receive lower pay and less favorable evaluations compared to men (Brescoll, 2016; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010). As was evidenced during the political campaigns of Palin, Clinton, and Harris, gender plays a role.

One theory about this emotional backlash against female leaders is the status incongruity hypothesis (SIH; Rudman et al., 2012). SIH aligns with Beauvoir's theory in the 1800s that society is constructed to perpetuate a patriarchal hierarchy in which women occupy subordinate status to men (Simons et al., 2015). SIH asserts that the penalties inflicted on women are driven by people's desire—either conscious or subconscious—to maintain the gender hierarchy of male superiority. Thus, when a person

encounters a dominant, agentic woman, they may experience negative emotions toward her because she poses a threat to the status quo (Brescoll et al., 2018). One example of a status quo that is maintained is the perpetuation of a male majority in senior leadership, as identified previously (Hinchcliffe, 2020; Kellerman & Rhode, 2017; Torres, 2017; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020a, 2020b). Men's advantage in being hired for management positions is an example of the similarity–attraction paradigm in practice (Byrne, 1971; Kanter, 1977) and how SIH serves to maintain a gender hierarchy. This is addressed more thoroughly later in this literature review regarding barriers to leadership.

Given the negative emotional backlash that can occur against women who strive to climb the ladder, women may be hesitant to challenge social roles. Behaving in ways that are within the boundaries of gendered social roles and norms, however, is not the answer for female leaders either. Although women who act in more agentic ways are at risk of being viewed harshly, women who act in more communal ways are at risk of being viewed as incompetent, in what Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1995) calls the "double bind." Conroy et al. (2020), in their study of gender stereotypes in politics, described the double bind as a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" dilemma (p. 211). Their assertions confirmed findings from other role incongruity studies that posited that prejudice rises against women who strive to attain a position that is assumed to be more congruent with men (Brescoll et al., 2018; Williams & Tiedens, 2016). Jamieson's double bind sets up a threat to gender hierarchy, as described by numerous researchers (Rudman et al., 2012; Simons et al., 2015), making it more complicated for women who aspire to succeed in climbing the ladder within the corporate and political spheres (Inesi & Cable,

2015; Teele et al., 2018; Zheng et al., 2018). Even in female-dominated professions such as education, gendered social roles and expectations play a role in access to leadership.

Consistent with findings in other employment sectors, female leaders in schools are judged as less well-suited to the demands of the top leadership position. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) cited an assumption that women are less authoritative and decisive, as well as assumptions about women's primary responsibilities in the home. Their findings extended the concept of role incongruity to include social expectations for work–life balance that also serve to disadvantage female candidates. Hill, McDonald, and Ward's research in education (2017) also connected the lack of fit and role incongruity theories to the assumptions about a woman's duty in the home; specifically, a woman's obligation to family is perceived to be incongruent with the work expectations of the school superintendency. Relatedly, in higher education, a substantial body of literature explores what is called the "motherhood penalty," in which mothers and pregnant women are rated as less competent and less committed to their work even when they have the same qualifications (Cuddy et al., 2008; Halpert et al., 1993; Williams, 2005). This is complicated by the fact that women's own internalization of gendered social roles also plays a role, as women are more likely to aspire to positions that they believe are appropriate for them (Hogue et al., 2019). Thus, the aspirations of women for advancement to senior leadership are also a consideration when exploring barriers to gender equality.

Candidate Aspirations

Aspiration to lead is a major predictor of career advancement (Tharenou, 2001), occupational status (Schoon et al., 2007), and career attainment (Schoon & Polek, 2011) and, therefore, is relevant to any exploration of barriers to leadership that women face. Research indicates that women are not attaining leadership positions in equal numbers due, in part, to lower career aspirations than men (Carbajal, 2018; Hartman & Barber, 2019; Nielson & Madsen, 2019). In their study of 13 public sector professions in Denmark, Nielson and Madsen (2019) found that the level of women's managerial aspiration varies significantly, with lower aspirations among those in helping professions, including elementary school teaching. Men, on the other hand, demonstrate fairly constant levels of managerial aspiration regardless of the profession (Nielson & Madsen, 2019).

Within the field of education, Gullo and Sperandio (2020) had similar findings. In their mixed-methods study of career paths to the Pennsylvania superintendency, they reported that women have lower aspirations to pursue the public school superintendency. Additionally, they found that women take fewer proactive measures to mold their own careers. This is consistent with the findings of numerous studies that note differences in job-seeking behaviors between men and women (Brands & Fernandez-Mateo, 2017; Gipson et al., 2017; Hartman & Barber, 2020) in contrast to a smaller number of studies that cite no differences in job-seeking behaviors (Fuller, Hollingworth, & An, 2016; Fuller, Hollingworth, & An, 2019; Fuller, Reynolds, & O'Doherty, 2016). Gullo and Sperandio's findings are also consistent with Eagly et al.'s 1994 findings that women

have lower motivation to lead than men. Aspirational differences may also stem from men valuing status, authority, leadership, and power more than women do (Konrad et al., 2000; Van Vianen & Fischer, 2002). In combination with fewer domestic responsibilities (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Krantz et al., 2005, McKinsey & Co. & LeanIn.org, 2016; Moreno-Colom, 2015), men may be positioned more favorably on both fronts to pursue advancement. The research is not in complete agreement regarding gendered differences in career aspiration. Singer (1991) found no evidence of such; however, these findings are isolated and stand in contrast to the majority of the meta-analyses on this topic (Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2017).

Self-limiting worldviews, as informed by internalization of gender identity and social roles (Bohuslava et al., 2018), also play a role in lowering women's aspirations for leadership. As such, gendered social role barriers are imposed on women not only externally but are also self-determined. As women internalize expectations for communal behavior over agentic behavior, they make decisions about pursuing roles that fulfill gendered outcomes (Diekman & Eagly, 2008) and that they view as appropriate for them (Hogue et al., 2019). For example, women prioritize their partner's career prospects over their own, resulting in women being less willing to make sacrifices, such as relocating for a promotion (Rivera, 2017). This aligns with the theories of lack of fit (Heilman, 1983) and role incongruity (Eagly & Karau, 2002), which posit that women eschew opportunities for leadership if they sense that it is incongruent with their gender role. The male-majority in leadership is further perpetuated as both men and women tend to self-select into positions that are populated mostly by their own gender (Hogue et al., 2019)

and in alignment with the similarity–attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971; Kanter, 1977). These beliefs of oneself are key influencers of aspiration.

Belief in one's own ability to be successful in a job influences one's decision to apply. This belief system is referred to in the literature as occupational self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). High occupational self-efficacy in the workplace positively influences career aspirations while low occupational self-efficacy leads to unwillingness to take risks (Bandura, 2003; Bordalo et al., 2019; Boushey, 2008; Heilman & Kram, 1978) and reduced career aspirations (Bandura, 1997; Bandura et al., 2001; Boushey, 2008; Litzky & Greenhouse, 2007; Powell & Butterfield, 2008; Sandberg, 2013). Men's higher occupational self-efficacy may be related to two findings in the research: (a) men value status, authority, leadership, and power more than women do (Konrad et al., 2000; Van Vianen & Fischer, 2002), and (b) men are more likely to view themselves as leadership material (Calderone et al., 2020; Martinez et al., 2020; Sampson et al., 2015; Young & McLeod, 2001). Notably, men do decide to pursue school administration, on average, 10 years earlier than women, and this has severe consequences for women's strategic preparation (Shakeshaft, 1989). Regarding leadership roles that are male-dominated, research shows that women have an even lower sense of occupational self-efficacy (Bandura et al., 2001; Barth et al., 2018). Finally, perhaps tied to both occupational self-efficacy and communal tendencies, women are less likely to take credit for their accomplishments, perhaps further blunting recognition of their own capabilities to do the job (Manfredi et al., 2019).

Not all research, however, supports the notion that women have lower occupational self-efficacy and thus diminished career aspirations. In their 2019 study *Women in the Workforce: The Effect of Gender on Occupational Self-Efficacy, Work Engagement and Career Aspirations*, Hartman and Barber found men's higher career aspirations are not related to any significant difference in men's and women's levels of occupational self-efficacy. They contended that women and men believe equally in their ability to fulfill the requirements of a position and that differences in career attainment are due to women's inaction in positioning themselves for advancement. Specifically, women do not apply for positions until they believe they are fully prepared for the role, whereas men pursue positions for which they do not have all the prerequisite experience or skills (Hartman & Barber, 2020). The reasons for women's inaction regarding career advancement may stem from past experiences with or perceptions of stereotypes, bias, and discrimination (Gipson et al., 2017; Brands & Fernandez-Mateo, 2017). Yet here again, however, it should be noted that there is some disagreement in the literature. Other studies—all by Fuller as the lead author—asserted that there is no evidence of differences in the job-seeking behaviors of men and women (Fuller, Hollingworth, & An, 2016; Fuller, Hollingworth, & An, 2019; Fuller, Reynolds, & O'Doherty, 2016); however, this finding does not represent the prevailing findings in the field.

Research also explores the role of home and family life in examining the leadership aspirations of women. Although men have taken on more domestic responsibilities since the 1960s, the workload is still far from balanced. Women still bear more of the responsibility for domestic or household tasks (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Krantz

et al., 2005, McKinsey & Co. & LeanIn.org, 2016; Moreno-Colom, 2015), have had to make sacrifices in their careers as a result of these responsibilities (Fanika et al., 2017), and domestic tasks are cited as an important barrier to women's career advancement (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Eagly & Carli, 2007; McCarty et al., 2005). Additionally, women are more likely to be hesitant about relocating school-aged children and are less willing to relocate due to their partner's employment (Calderone et al., 2020; Hill et al., 2017).

In their study of work–life balance, Fernandez-Corenejo et al. (2016) found that, on average, young women who are starting their careers are more likely than young men to predict that they will make sacrifices during their careers in order to achieve this balance. In this regard, the two barriers of social roles and candidate aspirations are interdependent. The internalization of gendered social roles creates conflict for women and lower aspirations due to a perceived obligation to put family before career (Cuddy et al., 2008; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Halpert et al., 1993; Hill et al., 2017; Williams, 2005). In fact, women of all ages who choose to pursue a leadership role expect there to be negative repercussions on their private lives (Cross, 2010; Ezzedeen et al., 2015; Killeen et al., 2006; Lips, 2000, 2001; McKinsey & Co. & LeanIn.org, 2016). Alternatively, women who grow up with a mother who worked 40 or more hours per week or who have less traditional attitudes about gender are less inclined to lower their career aspirations (Fernandez-Cornejo et al., 2016); thus, women's belief systems play a role. Ultimately, the effects of external and internal social role incongruence and gender hierarchies on occupational self-efficacy and job-seeking behaviors influence candidates'

career aspirations. These aspirations then provide the foundation for the third barrier to gender equality: access to power.

Access to Power

Women have less access to power than men in education (Fuller, Reynolds, & O'Doherty, 2016), as well as the corporate sector, and the reasons for this have been discussed in the research in metaphorical terms. Exploring this terminology serves to expose the various ways in which diversions on the road to career advancement have served to thwart women's ascension. These obstacles have come to be known in metaphorical terms—"the broken rung," "the leaky pipeline," "the glass ceiling," "the glass cliff," "the glass escalator" and "the labyrinth"—in both popular culture and in the research literature (Darouei & Pluut, 2018; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Liu et al., 2019; Loden & Rosener, 1991; Morgenroth et al., 2020; Williams, 1992). The literature identifies barriers to the hiring of women across both public and private employment sectors. Further, the barriers cited in the literature align with three categories of barriers identified by liberal feminist thought: social role incongruence, candidate aspirations, and women's access to power (Epure, 2014).

One of the most popular terms used to describe barriers to women's advancement is "the glass ceiling." This term was coined originally by Loden and Rosener in 1991 and has been well-documented in high-profile S&P 500 positions and in the field of education (Warner et al., 2018). The glass ceiling metaphor suggests that women face structural inequalities that serve to impede their hierarchically advancement within organizations. These inequalities gatekeep women—both intentionally and unintentionally—so that they

do not enter the superintendent pipeline (Fuller, Perrone, et al., 2019; Grogan, 2000; Tallerico & Blount, 2004; Ward et al., 2015) and, thus perpetuate the status quo of male-majority leadership. This gender hierarchy, sometimes known as the "old boys' network," is one of the key structural inequalities associated with the glass ceiling. It is explored in this literature review more deeply within the context of social roles.

Another barrier to women's access to power is known metaphorically as the "glass escalator." The term glass escalator was introduced by Christine Williams in her article, "The Glass Escalator: Hidden Advantages for Men in the 'Female' Professions" (1992). The glass escalator theory posits that organizations promote men at even higher rates than women in female-dominated occupations. As the field of education is majority female, there is evidence that the glass escalator may play a role in favoring which teachers advance from the teaching ranks to the principalship and the superintendency. Specifically, research supports that White men are more often identified as having leadership potential in the field of education than women (Cognard-Black, 2004; Myung et al., 2011). Likewise, men move up the ranks more quickly than women (Williams, 1992). When women are passed over for a promotion, it can cause a "leaky pipeline"—a metaphor that has historically been used to describe the loss of female talent in the science and technology fields (Liu et al., 2019). As generalized to career advancement in education, female talent is lost when women do not get into the leadership pipeline or when they enter the pipeline but then leave it before making it to the other end.

More broadly, the complexity of women's paths to positions of power and the interplay of barriers they experience has been described using the metaphor of "the

labyrinth" (Eagly & Carli, 2007). The labyrinth metaphor contends that women's advancement is difficult and that it requires effort, time, and special navigation with greater risk of failure (Eagly & Carli, 2015). Women are more likely to get stuck or hit dead ends during their careers—thus, the leaky pipeline. The walls of the metaphorical labyrinth represent barriers to power that are constructed by societal expectations for role congruity: women are perceived as less competent (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Hill et al., 2017), they try to overcome this by acting in male-stereotyped ways (Brescoll et al., 2018; Williams & Tiedens, 2016), which then leads to emotional backlash for role incongruity (Brescoll, 2011; Brescoll et al., 2018; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010; Williams & Tiedens, 2016) and puts women in a double bind of being perceived as less likable or less competent (Teele et al., 2018; Zheng et al., 2018). The labyrinth metaphor for describing the difficulty women experience in accessing power illustrates the interplay and interdependence of social role incongruence and candidate aspirations.

The challenge of navigating the labyrinth does not end once women are seated in positions of leadership. First, women are more likely than men to be appointed to risky leadership positions (Ryan et al., 2016). These so-called glass cliff positions are leadership roles in organizations that are experiencing a crisis (Darouei & Pluut, 2018; Morgenroth et al., 2020) or, in the case of school districts, have a higher percentage of students in poverty and with disabilities (Robinson et al., 2017). Although women are overall more risk-averse (Morgenroth et al., 2020), women are more willing to accept precarious glass-cliff positions than men due to lower levels of occupational self-efficacy

and their perception that fewer promotional opportunities are available to them (Darouei & Pluut, 2018). Additionally, women are more likely than men to be offered glass-cliff positions since communal leadership qualities are perceived as more important when an organization is in crisis (Morgenroth et al., 2020). The challenges of the labyrinth then continue as female leaders are offered fewer resources to perform well in the job while being expected to deliver the same results (Ellemers, 2014; Ellemers et al., 2012).

In summary, the three barriers to equality for women, according to the theoretical framework of liberal feminism, are social roles, candidate aspirations, and access to power (Epure, 2014). The premises and theoretical underpinnings of these barriers overlap and are interdependent, such that one barrier cannot stand alone; rather, each intersects with the others and serves as drivers for the others. Further understanding of these barriers and their influence on women's access to the headship requires an examination of the executive search process itself and the executive search firm consultants who run them.

Executive Search Firms

Independent schools are governed by a board of trustees, which has the ultimate responsibility for the independent school's philosophy, resources, and program, as well as filling vacancies when the CEO—the head of school—departs (Kane, 1992).Because the board of trustees operates as a "self-selecting and thus self-perpetuating group" (Kane, 1992, p. 7), the individual that the board of trustees selects as their next head of school is a reflection of the trustees' ideals, as well as the school's (Brown, 2016). Filling this role is extremely important and, as such, a great deal of care and scrutiny goes into the hiring

process. Consequently, most schools use an executive search firm (ESF) that specializes in recruiting heads of school and overseeing the entire process through the new head's placement (Brown, 2016; NAIS, n.d.-b). Search firms serving independent schools across the United States vary in size, location, and the number of searches they run each year, but they have one thing in common: they are predominately owned by or employ former independent school educators (Barbieri, 2011). For those consultants specializing in head of school searches, almost all of them are former heads of school because of the professional contacts that these former heads of school have with sitting heads of school, board members, and other school administrators (Barbieri, 2011).

Search firms wield significant control in determining who is in the leadership pipeline, as well as who emerges from the other end, given that they have a role in deciding which candidates to recruit and short-list to become semifinalists (Brown, 2016). Despite the influential role of ESFs on hiring outcomes (Manfredi et al., 2019), limited research has been conducted on ESFs and the role that they play. Research about hiring practices has focused almost exclusively on private corporations and on the company's own role in influencing gender diversity in the CEO position—without examination of the role that external agents like ESFs play (Manfredi et al., 2019). Although a small body of research has focused on the impact of ESFs in higher education and public school systems, there is little research, current or otherwise, regarding ESFs in independent schools. In order to provide a solid research foundation for this study of the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship, it is essential to examine the research on ESFs within a variety of organizations—higher education, public

school systems, and private corporations—in order to provide sufficient depth and breadth.

An oft-cited study on the executive search process for the public school superintendency—and perhaps most relevant for this study—is Marilyn Tallerico's *Gaining Access to the Superintendency: Headhunting, Gender and Color* (2000). Tallerico studied the school executive search process with a critical feminist lens. Tallerico's findings document the existence of selection criteria that are complex, largely unwritten, and which shape the search and hiring process. These "unwritten rules" are the real-world manifestations of gendered social role theory, such as the theories of lack of fit (Heilman, 1983) and role incongruity (Eagly & Karau, 2002). A complacency about acting affirmatively, often manifested in private conversations and interviews, results in headhunters and board members defining candidate quality in terms of past job titles, stereotyping by gender, and hyper-valuing feelings of comfort and chemistry (Tallerico, 2000). All three of these unwritten rules put female candidates at a disadvantage.

Regarding the unwritten rule of quality, numerous studies find that ESFs judge candidates' quality according to past job titles that are held less frequently by women and that over-arching leadership skills and ability are less frequently used as an indicator of quality (Grogan & Henry, 1995; Tallerico, 2000). Within the field of higher education, these findings are substantiated by Shepherd (2017), who found that higher education institutions expect candidates to have prior experience in the senior role and that this reduces the chance that search consultants will reach out beyond the traditional pool of White men to a more diverse group of applicants. In the 2019 study of the financial

sector, *Overlooked Leadership Potential: The Preference for Leadership Potential in Job Candidates Who Are Men vs. Women*, Player et al. found that past leadership performance is preferred for female candidates whereas men are ranked more favorably based on perceived potential despite lacking a requisite performance history. Therefore, despite the importance of past job titles for all candidates, women are penalized more than men when they do not have previous experience in the role that they seek.

Further, Player et al. (2019) found that, even when a male and female candidate are equal in job performance and work history, the disadvantage for women persists. This aligns with Tallerico's (2000) finding of the second unwritten rule of hiring: stereotyping by gender. Women are held to a higher standard during the hiring process due to gendered perceptions that their leadership potential is lacking when compared to men's (Player et al., 2019). Likewise, Lyness and Heilman's research (2006), also conducted in the financial sector, substantiated that women's leadership potential is devalued because women have to overcome the disadvantage of negative gender stereotypes, particularly in male-majority positions. Earlier research by Riehl and Byrd (1997) also affirmed that cultural norms regarding a woman's role are often the basis of selection biases. Diminished perceptions of women's capacity for leadership is an example of the barrier of social role incongruence (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 1983) operationalized during the hiring process.

Tallerico's third unwritten rule in hiring—the "hyper-valuing feelings of comfort and interpersonal chemistry with the successful candidate" (2000, p. 37)—is consistent with the theory of the similarity–attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971; Kanter, 1977). This

theory contends that hiring officials are drawn toward others who have similar demographic characteristics, as these characteristics are interpreted to indicate similarity in attitudes and beliefs; thus, there is a perpetuation of men hiring men. The bounded rationality theory, first introduced by Herbert Simon (Simon, 1957), is similar in that it contends that the human brain seeks familiar patterns to simplify complex decisions. "The comfort syndrome" is how Magretta (1997) referred to this proclivity that people have to bond with those with whom they are most accustomed to working. Gronn and Lacey (2006) dubbed it the "cloning effect" when organizations appoint leaders who are similar to those already seated in positions of leadership within the company. Bin Bae et al.'s study (2017) of state agencies in the United States found that men, to a greater degree than women, prefer and feel more secure in work environments with less gender diversity. Additionally, there is abundant research to indicate that the similarity–attraction paradigm also influences the job candidates themselves, as both men and women tend to self-select out of positions that are populated mostly by the opposite gender (Hogue et al., 2019).

The similarity–attraction findings hold true for the field of education as well. In the world of male-dominated senior school leadership, male search consultants and school leaders are most accustomed to working with White men (Tallerico, 2000). Hofhuis et al. (2016), in their examination of culture, provided a more contemporary affirmation of the research on the similarity–attraction paradigm, having shown that perceived dissimilarity between a school hiring official and a job candidate results in decreased interpersonal attraction and an increased sense of threat and, further, that this

results in reduced chances of the dissimilar candidate receiving a job offer. Although a 2018 study by Jarrett et al. did not find evidence of school board members' biases as a major cause of hiring barriers for women in the public schools, these findings were isolated, examined only the initial invitation to interview, and were based on a simulation, not real-world data.

Given the role of ESFs as important arbiters and guides during the executive search process, an exploration of hiring processes and decision-making would not be complete without exploration of the gatekeeping theory. Similar to the metaphor of the labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2007), gatekeeping theory, as developed by Lewin (1947) and expanded on by Shoemaker (1991), posited that hiring decisions involve passage through various channels. For example, early in the head of school search process, entry into a channel (i.e., the gate) may be self-nomination or recruitment. From there, Lewin contended that each channel has different entry and exit points along the way as decisions are made. These "gates" are controlled by a set of rules (for example, those identified by Tallerico in 2000) or by people with varying degrees of power to influence the outcome (Lewin, 1951). The channels ultimately converge as one person emerges as the successful candidate. Although Lewin's gatekeeping theory was originally developed for application to food consumption habits post–World War II, its applicability was expanded upon and applied to school leadership by Shoemaker (1991).

Shoemaker's expansion of Lewin's work accounts for the sometimes invisible systemic, cultural, and social-psychological dynamics that control access to the superintendency (Tallerico, 2000), as well as the perpetuation of organizational norms

and routines (Shoemaker, 1991). This occurs when a school board hires a search consultant who best represents its interests in the gatekeeping process and then advances candidates accordingly. Because men still occupy most positions of power in the workplace, they continue to dominate the decision-making process and outcomes (Acker, 2012; Connell, 2006; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Faulconbridge et al., 2009; Graves & Powell, 1995) and the recruitment process continues to be fraught with gender bias (Bohnet, 2016; Tallerico, 2000). Bohuslava et al. (2018) found that, as a result of the ongoing gender disproportionality, stereotypes continue to result in low representation of women and that women are limited in their ability to affect the structure. Although Bohuslava et al.'s research was conducted in Slovakia, its findings are consistent with and provide more contemporary substantiation of earlier international and U.S.-based research findings.

Although the intermediary, gatekeeping role of executive search firms can serve to maintain the status quo and reinforce the "old boys' network," ESFs can also be impactful in increasing gender diversity. Doldor et al. (2016), in their U.K.-based study in the financial sector, referred to ESFs as "accidental activists" when they helped their clients achieve a competitive edge through more gender-balanced leadership (p. 298) and asserted that ESFs have the capacity to effect a change in gendered outcomes. In research specific to the field of higher education, ESFs have opportunities at several junctures in the hiring process to take equality considerations into account (Manfredi et al., 2019). During the early phases of procurement of candidates, research in higher education, as well as in the male-dominated construction industry, has shown that executive search

firms can bring forward and encourage so-called passive candidates—those who may not have considered applying for the position, especially if the candidate feels that she hasn't met every requirement (Manfredi et al., 2019; Wright & Conley, 2018). ESFs can also have an impact through actively building more diverse networks that will expand the funnel of candidates, as well as acting as a critical friend by challenging their clients' biases, rather than being deferential to them (Manfredi et al., 2019).

As intermediaries in the process of matching candidates to schools, executive search firms are uniquely situated to observe and directly participate in policies, procedures, and practices, as well as the unwritten rules, that influence hiring outcomes. Despite their important role, the perceptions of ESFs about hiring for senior leadership positions are not well studied in the research. In regard to the independent school headship specifically, the perceptions of ESFs are largely ignored.

Summary and Conclusions

For more than 2 centuries, women have sought to attain equal economic and civic participation in society on par with men. Beginning with early thinkers and activists in the late 1700s, feminists have challenged traditional patriarchal norms and hierarchies that have served to disadvantage and disempower women (Eisenstein, 1981; Levine, 2015; Michals, 2017; Snyder, 2008). Feminist activists have garnered some key victories in the pursuit of equality, such as the right to own property, the right to vote, and the right to work outside the home in a profession of her choosing (DuBois & Smith, 2007; ERA, 2018; Library of Congress, n.d.-a, n.d.-b); yet, there is more work to be done (Flippin Steele, 2017). Career advancement into senior leadership roles across all sectors of

employment, such that women share leadership equally with men, is not yet a reality (Hinchliffe, 2020; Torres, 2017). Extensive international research on the barriers to women's advancement to leadership points to no single obstacle; rather, the research uncovers a multitude of obstacles that exist throughout a woman's career, and which are simultaneously complex, contextual, varied, and interdependent.

Social role incongruence, candidate aspirations, and access to power do not stand in isolation from one another; rather, they are inextricably interwoven and interdependent. Society's association of leadership with male characteristics results in social role incongruence for aspiring female leaders, which disadvantages female candidates in the hiring process (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 1983). These same gendered social roles can become internalized by women and serve to lower women's aspirations for their own career advancement (Carbajal, 2018; Hartman & Barber, 2019; Nielson & Madsen, 2019), as well as to lower women's occupational self-efficacy (Hartman & Barber, 2019). Together, social role incongruence, which results in lowered candidate aspirations and self-efficacy, impedes women's access to power. Researchers describe women's access to power as series of barriers wherein women are perceived as less competent (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Hill et al., 2017) and that they then try to overcome this by acting in male-stereotypical ways (Brescoll et al., 2018; Williams & Tiedens, 2016), which then leads to emotional backlash for role incongruity (Brescoll, 2011; Brescoll et al., 2018; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010; Williams & Tiedens, 2016) and which puts women into double binds (Teele et al., 2018; Zheng et al., 2018).

Current research on women's access to senior leadership has been conducted almost exclusively in corporations, higher education, and K–12 public school systems. Noticeably lacking in the research is a focus on independent schools and women's advancement to the head of school position. This represents a gap in the research that is addressed by this study. Additionally, of the research that has been conducted within the field of education (including higher education and K–12 public and private school systems), the focus is on the perceptions of female candidates and leaders regarding the barriers they have faced. Almost entirely overlooked in the research are the perceptions of an important and influential intermediary in the CEO hiring process—executive search firm consultants. Therefore, this too represents a gap in the research and one that is addressed by this study.

Through semistructured interviews with six sitting female heads of school and six female executive search consultants, perception data was gathered and analyzed thematically to identify emic themes. This study has the potential to make a positive contribution to the field as it addresses identified gaps in the literature by deepening understanding about what female heads of school and male and female executive search firm consultants perceive regarding the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to explore the perceptions of female heads of school and female executive search consultants regarding the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship, why they believe why these barriers exist, and how they perceive that they might be addressed. Qualitative research was an appropriate research method because it seeks to listen to, interact with, and understand people who have expertise and experiences related to the topic of the research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I explored the perceptions of the heads of school and executive search consultants through a priori, in vivo, and axial coding of their semistructured interview responses to identify categories and emergent themes.

The theoretical framework of liberal feminism served to sensitize the interview instrument, the data collection, and the development of inductive themes for this study's findings. In this chapter, I provide a description of and rationale for the research design of this study. I also explain the role of the researcher and discuss participation selection; instrumentation; procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection; the data analysis plan, trustworthiness, and ethical standards. The chapter concludes with a summary of the chapter's main points and an introduction to Chapter 4.

Research Design and Rationale

The purpose of this qualitative, exploratory case study was to explore the ways that current female heads of school and female executive search consultants perceive the head of school recruitment and hiring process and how they make meaning of the barriers that women experience in being hired for the independent school headship. The RQs for

this study were as follows: (a) What are the perceptions of female heads of school regarding the barriers that women face in being hired for the independent school headship? and (b) What are the perceptions of female executive search firm consultants regarding the barriers that women face in being hired for the independent school headship?

Qualitative researchers explore the ways in which study participants experience the world and make meaning of their experiences related to the concept in question (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Specifically, I examined the lived experiences of female heads of school and female search consultants to better understand their perceptions about barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship. For this exploratory case study, I used a thematic inductive approach to analyze the interview data and to identify themes in participants' responses. This study was influenced by my critical conscious approach. Willis et al. (2008) described the critically conscious researcher as one who challenges the barriers to social change, inequity, and inequality in ways that resist reproducing ideas, values, and assumptions of groups that are privileged and dominant.

Liberal feminism, the theoretical framework of this study, provided the following assumptions for this research: (a) gender is a social construct (Acker, 2006; Kaliyath, 2016); (b) gendered differences in patriarchal societies disempower women (Acker, 1990); and (c) sexism, gender discrimination, and gender bias in organizations are not always overt (Acker,1990, 2006). I used three core constructs of liberal feminism, as identified by Epure (2014)—social roles, candidate aspirations, and access to power—to sensitize the inductive instrument, data collection, and analysis process. This served to

align the study's theoretical framework with the RQs, research design, and goals (see Saldaña, 2016). Coding was done thematically, using a bottom-up approach, so that codes, categories, and themes emerged from the raw data of the participants' responses. The final findings of this study were a product of the thematic analysis of each participant group's responses in answering the two RQs for this study.

Role of the Researcher

The primary instrument for constructing the concepts, goals, and findings of a qualitative research project is the researcher (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). It is essential, therefore, for the researcher to be able to understand how their own organic theories—implicit biases, belief systems, guiding assumptions, self-interests, and so on—shape their worldview, the topic of study, how it is considered, and how the data are interpreted. At the time that this study was conducted, I had retired from my position as the assistant head of school in an independent school in Southern California, working directly under a male head of school. I believe that my retirement served to minimize concerns of self-interest, power differentials, and conflicts of interest that may have existed between my participants and me. Additionally, because I have never worked directly with or for any of the study participants and the study did not take place in my work environment, there were no obvious conflicts of interest or power differentials to address in the research setting.

Of personal note, I have experienced gender discrimination in the workforce on two occasions in the mid to late 1990s. On one occasion, I was fired from a part-time private-sector position when my boss learned that I was pregnant. On another occasion, a

school principal suggested to me that I not wear makeup and dye my hair brown so that I would “look more plain” during interviews with hiring committees. These experiences were very upsetting and served to fuel my interest in gender equality for women in the workplace.

I addressed issues of positionality through memos, reflective journaling, contact summary forms, and dialogic engagement. Throughout the data collection process, I wrote informal memos in real time to help formulate and clarify the meanings. These memos provided data that I referred back to frequently. In addition, reflective journaling was used prior to, during, and after data collection and included notes about reflections, questions, and ideas that developed during the course of the study. After each interview, a contact summary form was used to immediately capture verbatim statements, patterns, preliminary codes, and insights. A peer debriefer reviewed the contact summary forms after each participant interview, as well as the codes and themes that emerged after all the interviews were completed to consider if and how my biases or assumptions may be reflected in the findings. Each study participant was asked to engage in a member check of the analysis and interpretations of the interview data. Six participants responded with five of those participants affirming the findings as stated and one participant providing additional information and context to the findings.

Methodology

Participant Selection

Two participant groups participated in the study. The first participant group was comprised of six sitting female heads of school who work at coeducational K–12

independent day schools. The second participant group included six female executive search firm consultants who conduct head of school searches across the United States. I made an intentional decision to include only female participants in this study for two reasons: (a) to keep this study manageable in its scope and (b) to protect the focus and alignment of the data with the RQs. Although it would be worthwhile to explore the differences in perceptions between men and women about the barriers to the hiring of women for the headship, that was not the purpose of this study. Therefore, all participants were female.

The two participant groups yielded 12 study participants. According to Guest et al. (2006), when interview structure and content are standardized and a purposive selection of participants results in a fairly homogenous group, data saturation commonly occurs after 12 interviews. Therefore, I estimated that 12 interviews would be appropriate for this study. I performed an internet search to identify individuals who had been hired into their current head of school position in the last 5 years. Participants were identified based on their professional experiences with and knowledge of the head of school hiring process and their ability to provide information specific to my RQs. A snowballing technique was used wherein study participants were asked to recommend additional study participants based on their professional networks. In addition, "cold-call" emails were sent to potential participants who fit the established criterion for the study based on information that was publicly available online.

All head of school participants were within their first 8 years of employment as a head of school and within 2 years in their current position. The rationale for this criterion

was to capture perceptions based on more recent head of school searches. I assumed that recent perception data would yield findings that would be more relevant and transferable to executive searches that will occur in the coming few years. Four of the six head of school participants rose through the K-12 teaching ranks to their current position of head of school. I prioritized recruiting these participants to minimize the variable of nontraditional candidacy in the search process and to focus on career advancement within the field of education. Finally, all head of school participants worked in K–12 coeducational day schools. The K–12 setting captured both the lower grade setting, where women are more likely to lead, and the upper grade setting, where men are more likely to lead (Torres, 2016). Coeducational settings eliminate the predetermined preference for a school leader who is the same gender as the students. A day school setting, as opposed to a boarding school setting, provided greater transferability of the findings and also eliminated any variables of gender preference for leadership specific to schools where students live on campus. All head of school participants worked in secular schools with the exception of one. Head of school participants were neither included nor excluded from the study based on age or race.

In a 2021 review of 10 U.S.-based executive search firms who specialize in head of school search services (NAIS, n.d.-c), there were 124 executive search consultants, 70 of whom were male and 54 of whom were female. Compared to the pool of potential female head of school participants, this was a much smaller pool from which to draw. Nevertheless, there was no difficulty in recruiting six female participants. All search consultant participants in this study worked for U.S.-based search firms to increase the

transferability of findings to independent schools operating in the United States. All participants, with the exception of one, have led five or more K–12 head of school searches within the last 5 years, which served to ensure sufficient breadth of experience to inform their perceptions. The group of six search consultants represented three different search firms to increase transferability of the study findings. Executive search participants were neither included nor excluded from the study based on race.

Instrumentation

Qualitative research is a process that "creates the conditions for you to holistically understand and convey the most contextualized picture of the people and phenomena in focus possible, maintaining a fidelity to the complexity of participants and their experiences" (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 145). The purpose of this research was to explore the perceptions of female heads of school and female executive search firm consultants regarding the barriers women face in reaching the independent school headship. Given the alignment of the purpose of the research and the research design, semistructured interviews were an effective means of delving into the behavior, attitudes, and beliefs of participants and, further, for interpreting the nuanced meaning of their perceptions. The researcher-produced interview questions for the heads of school (see Appendix A) and executive search firm consultants (see Appendix B) were aligned with the RQs and informed by the theoretical framework of liberal feminism.

For the purpose of ensuring the rigor and validity of the interview protocol, one retired female superintendent and one active female executive search consultant, both of whom I have known for 2 years, reviewed the interview protocols for content validity and

participated in pilot interviews. I modified the RQs based on their feedback to create greater alignment, ensure no major gaps in information, and invite alternative points of view and various perspectives (see Rubin, 2012). Throughout piloting, detailed memos were taken to describe the process and the ways in which the process shaped and refined the interview protocol and the research design. According to Ravitch and Carl (2012), this careful, reflective process helps to achieve a high level of validity and rigor for the study. A sufficient level of refinement was attained after two pilot interviews.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

In February 2020, I attended a NAIS conference session on women's leadership journey to the independent school headship. The presenters on the panel included three female heads of school in California and three U.S.-based executive search firm consultants. These individuals served as my initial contacts for participant recruitment. Additionally, I reached out to other female heads of school who I had come to know through my employment in an independent school for the last 7 years, as well as a broad range of executive search consultants I had met as a result of attending conference presentations, job fairs, and networking events over the years. Additional participants were identified by reviewing the websites of the NAIS, executive search firms, and individual schools. These websites provided information about executive search firms, all active and recently completed head of school searches, names and email addresses of heads of school and search consultants, and descriptions of school types.

During the participant recruitment process, I provided all potential participants with the title and purpose of the study; the RQs and information about what participation

in the study would entail, including time commitment; how data would be handled; who would have access to the data; the benefits and risks of participation; the voluntary nature of participation; and my contact information. A detailed informed consent form was sent to each participant to be reviewed, and the participant was asked to reply to the invitation email with the words "I consent." There was no difficulty in recruiting the required number of participants for this study, as the majority of the women I emailed were willing to participate and expressed interest in the topic. Of the 18 invitation emails sent, 12 people responded, and all 12 agreed to participate.

After obtaining informed consent to participate, I established mutually agreeable dates and times for the interviews and sent calendar invitations with video-conference links. To begin each interview, I introduced myself, thanked the participant for her time, and requested the participant's permission to audio-record and transcribe. I then restated the topic of the research and provided information about the length and structure of the interview and the confidentiality measures that would be used. The participant was then informed that she could end the interview at any time. Initial questions asked were easy to answer, with a goal of building trust. Those questions were followed by more difficult and substantive questions aligned with the RQs. To ensure a satisfactory level of detail in participants' responses, I asked follow-up questions when the responses were too broad or general (Rubin, 2012). Participants were asked to provide multiple examples of points they made in order to enhance the richness and nuance of the information they were sharing (Rubin, 2012).

I used reflective journaling prior to, during, and after data collection that included reflections, questions, and ideas that developed during the course of the study. I used Zoom for video-conferencing, QuickTime Player to audio-record the interviews, Otter.ai to transcribe the interviews in real time and Evernote to capture my notes as the interview was occurring. Google Docs was used to create precoding memos. Immediately following the interviews, additional notes were made as a means of reflecting on key points and themes from the interview. The audio-recordings of the interviews were reviewed within 48 hours of the interview, at which time analytic memos were expanded based on additional observations, reflections, and analyses. Saldaña (2016) described this kind of note-taking as a means of capturing unanswered questions, problems with the analysis, and meaningful connections in a conversation with oneself about the data, which ultimately contribute to the thick description in the study's analysis and the production of an audit trail.

After each interview, a contact summary form was used to immediately capture verbatim statements, patterns, preliminary codes, and insights. Finally, dialogic engagement was used. A peer debriefer reviewed the contact summary forms after each participant interview, as well as the codes and themes that emerged after all the interviews were completed to consider if and how the researcher's biases or assumptions may have been reflected in the findings.

In a process called member checking, the participants were invited to review the analysis of their interview to validate the findings and eliminate researcher bias (Saldaña, 2016). Each participant was provided with the contact summary form so that they could

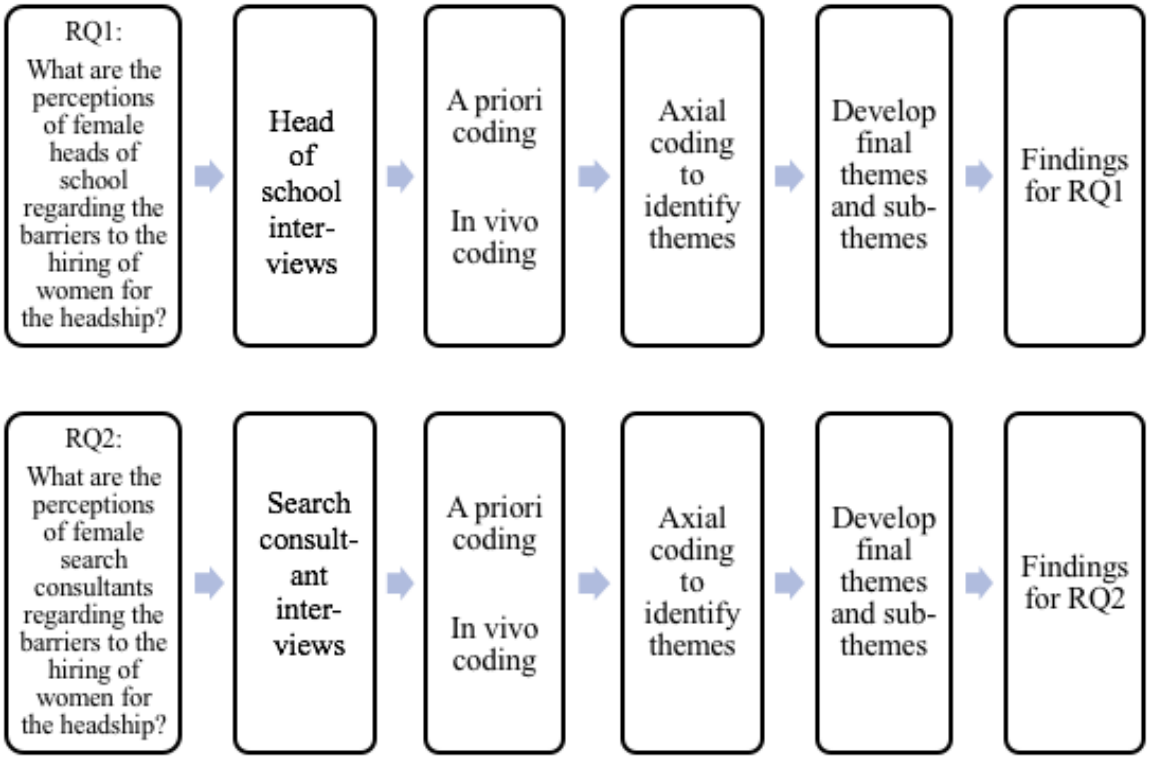
engage with, add to, or clarify their responses and the interpretation of their responses. New information and insights gained through member checking were incorporated into the memos and field notes. Once member checking was completed, the participants were thanked for their time and they exited from the study.

Data Analysis Plan

In the view of Trede and Higgs (2009), "research questions embed the values, world view and direction of an inquiry. They also are influential in determining what type of knowledge is going to be generated" (p. 18). I kept the RQs central to my inquiry at all times to ensure that I was generating the right type of knowledge. As such, the analysis of the interviews was conducted using the constant comparative method. Specifically, to inform all phases of data analysis process, repeated reference was made back to the study's RQs: (a) What are the perceptions of female heads of school regarding the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship? and (b) What are the perceptions of female executive search consultants regarding barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship? I used a thematic analysis approach to identify emic themes that emerged from participant responses. Data from each participant group were analyzed separately to identify themes that aligned with the RQ for each participant group (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Data Analysis Process



In qualitative research, codes represent the first step in assigning meaning to data from an interview transcript and can be a word or phrase that identifies what is occurring. According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), codes can be based on what is central to the RQ, what is raised by interviewees, and what is suggested by prior research. I incorporated all three through the use of constant referencing to the RQs and the theoretical framework. Member checking and peer debriefing ensured that participant responses were accurately captured and reliably interpreted. Throughout the process of analysis, data were captured, sorted, and analyzed using QuickTime Player, Otter.ai, Evernote, Google Docs, and Quirkos to yield greater accuracy and perspective. The thematic data analysis process for

this study included a priori coding, in vivo coding and axial coding. This process occurred separately for data from each of the two participant groups.

A Priori Coding

Once an interview had been conducted, the audio transcript was reviewed and corrected for any errors in the speech-to-text translation captured by Otter.ai. A priori began with repeated readings of the interview transcripts, field notes, and analytic memos from each interview (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Immersion in data reading and reflection helped to develop a sense of the "gestalt," or whole data set, for each participant group while ensuring reflexivity (Azungah, 2018). The a priori process involved seeking out connections to the RQs and theoretical framework. After completion of all 12 interviews, a coding memo was created for each participant group's data in a Google Docs. The coding memo for each participant group included emerging learnings, lingering questions, positionality, initial thoughts about codes, and confirmation of or challenges to the theoretical framework (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

In Vivo Coding

In vivo coding then commenced and stayed close to the raw data through the use the participants' own words and phrases (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In the first pass of in vivo coding, an unstructured reading of each female head of school interview was done. The interview text was highlighted, and notes were made in the margins to identify segments of data and assign words and phrases. In the second reading of the transcripts, additional memos and codes were generated, with consideration of each participant's demographics. A contact summary form was then completed to capture verbatim

statements, patterns, preliminary codes, and insights that were emerging. A peer debriefer reviewed the contact summary forms for each of the participant interviews and, through a process of dialogic engagement, considered if and how the researcher's biases or assumptions may have been reflected in the findings. Study participants were given the opportunity to review the analyses to ensure that the data and interpretation were accurate. Coding resumed with a third reading and was framed and refined by the RQ pertinent to the participant group. All transcripts were uploaded into Quirkos, and the codes were created with corresponding excerpts from the transcripts. In the fourth reading, the responses to each interview question were read across all six participant interviews within the group to determine if additional codes should be considered. The codes in Quirkos were reviewed and adjustments made. Reflective journaling was conducted between each pass of in vivo coding to ensure that questions were captured, and positionality was explored. The in vivo coding process was then repeated in the same manner using the transcripts from the executive search consultant interviews. Two sets of in vivo codes—one for each participant group—were created.

Axial Coding

Axial coding was a two–step process and was the final stage of coding. It was conducted separately for each participant group. Axial coding was done for female heads of school data first and with executive search consultant data second. In the first step, axial coding involved the use of connecting strategies, sometimes into hierarchical groups called categories, to develop the context of the data and to find relationships between the in vivo codes. Saldaña (2016) describes a process of codeweaving, "the actual integration

of key code words and phrases into narrative form to see how the puzzle pieces fit together" (p. 276). This iterative process involved actively constructing and deconstructing emic categories. This was done for each interview and then across the set of interviews for each participant group. Axial codes for each group were reviewed again with a focus on determining if data were emerging to answer the RQs. Axial codes were then represented in Quirkos and visual displays were further developed to aid in the refinement of categories and the identification of new categories. Two sets of axial codes—one for each participant group—were created. A peer debriefer reviewed the in vivo and axial codes to provide feedback on positionality. If adjustments in coding were made based on dialogic engagement at any time, the changes and the rationale were described in detail in the field notes.

The second step of axial coding involved looking for patterns among the categories to form themes. This phase of coding began with a rereading of all transcripts, codes, and categories and started to tell the story of the data as the overarching themes emerged. Through thematic analysis, the RQs and theoretical framework provided a lens through which to evaluate the relationship of codes to themes, to determine what was missing, and to develop subthemes (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Data were identified to confirm and disconfirm the themes and the themes' alignment with the broader context of the data, the literature and the theoretical framework. Through the connection of theory to the findings, a switch from inductive language and analysis to deductive language and analysis, sensitized by the study's theoretical framework, occurred naturally (Woodell, 2014). Thick description—both a form of data analysis and data gathering—provided

sufficient depth and richness so that a reader can evaluate the applicability of the study's findings, thus increasing transferability (Thomas, 2017). Thematic analysis culminated with one set of themes based on the female heads of school interviews and one set of themes based on the female executive search firm consultant interviews. These themes answered each RQ with two of the themes in common to both participant groups.

Trustworthiness

High-quality qualitative research must meet the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004). All four criteria depend on the creation of a solid research design. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of female heads of school and female executive search firm consultants regarding the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship. The quality and validity of the research findings were ensured through constant comparative analysis, member checks, peer debriefing, analytic memos, reflective journaling, reflexivity, field notes, and thick description. Questions and concerns about the study's limitations are discussed in Chapter 5.

Credibility

In qualitative research, credibility is perhaps the most important of the four factors. It relates to the degree to which the study actually measures what is intended (Shenton, 2004). Credibility for this study was increased through tight alignment with the problem and purpose statements, the RQs, the researcher-developed interview questions, and the methodology. A process of constant comparative analysis was used throughout the study, with one of the readings of the data focusing specifically on codes that answer

the RQs. The process of analytic memo writing and reflective journaling during all phases of data collection and analysis contributed to the development of a detailed audit trail. The use of a peer debriefer and member checks also enhanced credibility through a process called progressive subjectivity (Burkholder et al., 2016).

In remaining vigilant about my role as the "instrument" in this qualitative study, I engaged a former school district superintendent, who also holds a Doctor of Philosophy degree in educational leadership, to serve as the peer debriefer during all phases of the research. This created an iterative process of questioning, challenging, and informing the themes and the insights drawn. In the writing of study findings, Rubin and Rubin stated, "You make your writing credible by providing solid evidence for each key point and then making sure you describe how carefully you designed—and redesigned—your study" (2012, p. 226). This was accomplished by providing textual evidence of all codes, categories, and themes and by thoroughly documenting the data sources, instrumentation, and data analysis in this study.

Transferability

Trustworthiness is also increased through transferability—the extent to which readers of the study can transfer or apply the findings to their own settings (Burkholder et al., 2016). This requires sufficient contextual information about how the study was conducted to enable such transfer. According to Shenton (2004), the information that should be provided in a qualitative study to ensure transferability includes number and type of participants, the data collection and analysis methods used, the number and length of the interview sessions, the interview questions, and the time period over which the data

are collected. All of this information has been provided in detailed tables, figures, appendices, and thick description of the instrumentation and analysis of data.

Analytic memos and reflective journaling supported the creation of an audit trail, which was used to describe the research process clearly to the reader. Thick description, including descriptions of settings and participants, detailed descriptions of findings, and adequate evidence from the raw data, was used in the writing of the audit trail and throughout the study. Finally, transferability of this study's findings was increased through the inclusion of two distinct types of participant groups—heads of school and executive search consultants—instead of just one.

Dependability

Qualitative studies that demonstrate stability and consistency over time are considered dependable (Burkholder, 2017). Additionally, dependability relies on a strong rationale for how data are collected and the degree to which the findings answer the RQ (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). According to Shenton (2004), credibility and dependability are closely related and demonstration of one provides assurance of the existence of the other. An audit trail was created, which will provide details about every step of the data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes and will be available for other researchers to view.

Interviews were conducted in as consistent a manner as possible. During the data analysis process, codes, categories, and themes were generated through multiple readings of the interview transcripts and were accompanied by reflective journaling and analytic memos as described in the data analysis plan. Constant comparative analysis was used to

ensure alignment with the RQs. The interpretation of the data at each level was viewed from multiple vantage points through the use of a peer debriefer. Any adjustments in the methodology for this study were documented and explained in detail.

Confirmability

The degree to which the research is free of researcher bias is the measure of a study's confirmability. Ravitch and Carl (2016) recognize that the identity and life experiences of the researcher shape how the researcher makes meaning of information and therefore shape the data and findings. A reflexive approach, called receptive sensibility, ensures that the researcher maintains an open mind, continuously monitors for objectivity, and resists allowing one's worldview to direct critical aspects of the research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Through reflective journaling, analytic memo-writing, field notes, member checks, and peer debriefing, confirmability was enhanced. The audit trail contains detailed notes about decision-making throughout the research process and is available to other researchers for review upon publication of the study.

Ethical Procedures

To ensure the highest ethical standards during this research, I followed all procedures required by Walden University's Institutional Review Board and was granted permission to conduct my study (approval number 05-13-21-1-19516). All participants received information about the study's topic, purpose, RQs, methodologies, the voluntary nature of participation, the treatment of data, and the protections for confidentiality. A written informed consent form was provided in advance. At the beginning of each interview, participants were again told that participation was voluntary and that they

could end their participation at any time. Verbal permission was sought to record and transcribe the interviews at the beginning of each interview, and all participants had the opportunity to review the analysis of their interviews and to make any clarifications or redactions that they wish through a process called member checking. All interview data, participants' identifying information, field notes, and the audit trail have been stored on a password-protected laptop computer and backed up on a password-protected drive and will be stored for at least five years.

Special attention was taken to ensure the ethical treatment of the participants. Since heads of school and executive search consultants operate in a fairly tight professional circle, it is recognized that, despite the use of pseudonyms in the study, it may be possible for others in the field of independent school education to deduce their identity. This was acknowledged in the informed consent form so that the participants know that their anonymity cannot be guaranteed. No minors were involved in this study.

Summary

In this qualitative exploratory case study, I examined the perceptions of six female heads of school and six female executive search firm consultants regarding the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship. The RQs addressed in this study were (a) What are the perceptions of female heads of school regarding the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship? and (b) What are the perceptions of female executive search consultants regarding the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship? Following two road-test interviews to test and modify the instrumentation, 12 semistructured interviews were conducted, and

the data were analyzed thematically through a priori, in vivo, and axial coding methods for the purpose of identifying major themes in each of the participant group's responses. The major emic themes for each group were then considered in relation to the study's theoretical framework of liberal feminism to determine if the themes should be further sensitized or refined by the framework. The themes derived from the thematic analyses have served as the final findings for this study. Trustworthiness was ensured through constant comparative analysis, member checks, dialogic engagement with a peer debriefer, analytic memos, reflective journaling, an audit trail, reflexivity, and thick description. In Chapter 4, I will present the findings of this research. The chapter will include descriptions of the setting for the study and the data collection methods, detailed analysis of the data in narrative and table form, analysis of the findings, and evidence of trustworthiness.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to explore the perceptions of female heads of school and female executive search consultants regarding barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship. The RQs were (a) What do female heads perceive as the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship? and (b) What do female executive search consultants perceive as the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship? In Chapter 4, I provide detailed descriptions of the research setting, data collection methods, data analysis procedures, findings, and evidence of trustworthiness.

Setting

Twelve female study participants contributed to this study. They represented two unique participant groups: female heads of school and female executive search consultants. I identified participants through my professional network, through referrals from participants, and through cold-call emails sent to individuals who were identified as meeting the study criteria based on an internet search.

At the time of data collection, all six of the head of school participants were working at K–12 coeducational day schools. Five of the head of school participants were completing their first or second year in their current headship (having started in either July 2019 or July 2020). Four of these five participants had held headships previously, and one of the five was in her first year as a head of school. The sixth participant was slated to begin her headship in July 2022 and had not previously served as a head of school. Four of the participants rose through the teaching ranks in independent schools.

Two of the participants came to the headship through alternate pathways—one through higher education and one through business. Although not a criterion for participation in this study, it is noteworthy that five of the six had previous administrative experience in Grades 6–12 (called "upper school") before attaining a K–12 head of school position. The six participants came from five different states in the United States within two geographical regions: Western and Southeastern. One of the participants was a person of color.

Of the two participant groups for this study, female heads of school were harder to recruit. To address this issue, I expanded the participant criteria to ensure sufficient participation as noted in Table 1. First, although I originally intended to include only heads of nonsectarian schools, one head of school from a faith-based school participated in this study. Second, the original study criteria stated that all head of school participants would rise through the ranks as teachers; however, two of the six head of school participants did not come from K–12 teaching backgrounds.

Table 1

Head of School Participant Demographics

Participant no.	No. of years in current headship	No. of years as a head at any school	Grades 6–12 leadership experience prior to first headship?	Prior experience as a kindergarten–12 classroom teacher?
Participant 1	2	8	Yes	Yes
Participant 2	2	7	Yes	Yes
Participant 3	0	0	Yes	Yes
Participant 4	1	1	No	No
Participant 5	2	2	Yes	Yes
Participant 6	1	5	Yes	No

Of the executive search consultant participants, all six were working as search consultants in the United States and had 1 or more years of experience working on key administrator searches, including head of school searches, at the time of this study. The median years of search consultant experience for the six participants was 5.5. The six search consultant participants represented three executive search firms that specialize in head of school searches for K–12 independent schools in the United States, as well as abroad. Three of the six search consultants were retired heads of school. Two of the search consultants were persons of color. Table 2 provides demographic information on search consultant participants.

Table 2

Search Consultant Participant Demographics

Participant no.	# of years as search consultant	Previously a school head?
Participant 1	7	Yes
Participant 2	6	Yes
Participant 3	> 10	No
Participant 4	5	No
Participant 5	3	No
Participant 6	1	Yes

Data Collection

Six female heads of school and six female executive search consultants participated in this study. Prior to their interviews, all participants received the Informed Consent Form and provided their consent to participate to me via email. After receiving the signed consent form, I scheduled each participant for a one-on-one, video-conference

interview with me at a mutually convenient time. At the beginning of each session, the participant was greeted and thanked for her time. Information regarding the purpose of the study, measures to ensure confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of participation was verbally shared, and consent to participate was again confirmed. Permission was then requested to audio-record the interview, and, with the participant's approval, audio-recording commenced using QuickTime Player. I activated the online software tool Otter.ai to simultaneously generate a transcript of each interview using speech-to-text technology.

Interviews with participants took place between May and July 2021. Each participant took part in one individual, semistructured interview that lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. For the interviews, I used the set of questions developed for each of the two participant groups (see Appendices A and B). Follow-up and probing questions were asked to ensure sufficient clarity and depth, as well as to elicit specific examples and explanation where needed. A separate note-taking file for each participant was used within Evernote, an online note-taking tool. Each file contained the prewritten semistructured interview questions and served as a location where I could take notes and enter follow-up questions and probes during the course of the interview.

Following each interview, the participant received an emailed summary of initial analysis of the data collected from their interview. I invited participants to provide clarifications, corrections, or additional information to the findings. Two of the six heads of school and four of the six search consultants provided responses to the member check email. Of the six member check responses received, five participants affirmed the

findings as stated, and one participant provided additional information and context to the findings. Each participant was thanked for her participation and exited from the study. No variations or unusual circumstances were encountered during the data collection process.

Data Analysis

The thematic data analysis process for this study included a priori coding, in vivo coding, and axial coding of the data for each participant group. This process occurred separately for each interview and for the set of interview data from each of the two participant groups. I developed codes based on the RQs, the responses of the participants, and what was suggested by prior research and the theoretical framework. I used member checking and peer debriefing to ensure that participant responses were accurately captured and reliably interpreted.

Once each interview was completed, I downloaded the speech-to-text transcript generated by Otter.ai as a Microsoft Word document, which I then compared to the QuickTime Player audio-recording and made corrections. The corrected transcript was then uploaded into Quirkos, an online qualitative research tool. A priori coding began with repeated readings of each transcript, as well as the field notes and analytic memos. Analytic memos for each interview, including emerging learnings, questions, reflections about positionality, initial thoughts about codes, and confirmation of or challenges to the theoretical framework, were entered into Quirkos in the toggle menus panel.

In vivo coding then commenced through the generation of initial codes using the raw data of each participant's words and phrases. In the first pass of in vivo coding, I performed an unstructured reading of each interview. Within the Quirkos platform, the

interview text was then highlighted, and memos were recorded in order to identify segments of data that aligned with the RQs, as well as to assign words and phrases taken from the interview texts. Codes, called "quirks" in the Quirkos software, were formed, and text was assigned to each. In the next reading of the transcripts, additional words and phrases were noted and assigned to codes, more memos and codes were generated, and a few codes that were determined to be synonymous were combined. Then the data were searched for repetition of words, phrases, and concepts. Tabulations were made regarding the frequency of repetitions.

I then completed a contact summary form to capture patterns, preliminary codes, and insights that had emerged. A peer debriefer reviewed each contact summary form at the time that it was generated and, through a process of dialogic engagement, considered if and how any researcher bias was reflected in the findings. Through this process of dialogic engagement, minor revisions were made to the interpretations of three of the 12 contact summary forms. Study participants were then emailed the initial findings from their interview and given the opportunity to member check the content to ensure that the data and interpretations were accurate. Six of the participants responded to the member check email. Five participants confirmed the interpretations, and one of these participants provided additional information and context to the findings.

In vivo coding resumed with another reading of the transcripts, which was specifically and narrowly framed by the RQ pertinent to the corresponding participant group. In the next step, I read the responses to each interview question across all six interviews within each participant group to identify similarities and differences and to

determine if additional codes should be added. Reflective journaling was conducted between each pass of coding to ensure that questions were captured and positionality was explored.

Axial coding was the next stage of data analysis and was again conducted separately for each participant group. Axial coding involved the use of connecting strategies to develop the context of the data and to find relationships between the parts and the whole of the data that could formulate categories. The iterative process was aided by the visual and interactive Quirkos tool, which showed the amount of textual evidence attributed to each code and category, allowed for data to be assigned to multiple codes, and supported various queries of the data including the identification of synonyms. Similar codes were merged and grouped together to create categories and graphic representations in the canvas of Quirkos, which aided in the discovery of categories.

After an individual analysis of each interview transcript, the axial codes were reviewed across interview data for all participants within each group. Through reflective journaling and analytic memos, axial codes were refined with a focus on the emergence of more dominant patterns that were aligned with the RQs and which represented patterns of similarity containing the greatest amount of textual evidence. A set of axial codes was created for each participant group. A peer debriefer reviewed the axial codes to provide feedback on positionality. No adjustments in coding were made.

In the second phase of axial coding, the overarching themes began to emerge through a rereading of all transcripts, codes, and categories, as well as through additional refinement of the organization and grouping of categories within Quirkos. I read data

specific to each theme to ensure relevance and to create analytic memos about how the themes fit into the broader context of the data, as well as how they related to and were informed by the RQs and theoretical framework. The number of participants who addressed each category and theme, as well as the number of text excerpts, was tabulated to analyze the relative strength of each category and theme.

At this juncture, the liberal feminism theoretical framework provided an important lens through which to consider the three emergent inductive (emic) themes considering the three established deductive (etic) categories of liberal feminism. The three etic categories of liberal feminism are social roles, candidate aspirations, and access to power (Epure, 2014). I noted and considered similarities, differences, and overlaps between the emic and etic themes. Analytic memos were shared with the peer debriefer. The dialogic engagement resulted in a refinement of my thinking about what to name each inductive theme. The themes for each participant group were compared to identify similarities and differences, especially as related to the supporting codes and categories for each.

Results

Thematic analysis culminated with the emergence of two themes from the female heads of school interviews (RQ1: What are the perceptions of female heads of school regarding the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship?) and three themes from the female executive search firm consultant interviews (RQ2: What are the perceptions of female executive search consultants regarding the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship?). Each theme was comprised of two or

three subthemes which are supported with textual evidence from the semistructured interviews.

Research Question 1

RQ1 focused on the perceptions of female heads of school regarding the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship. Two themes emerged from the six semistructured interviews conducted with the female heads of school. The heads of school perceived that there are two primary barriers (identified as themes) to women's attainment of the headship. These are (a) societal gender bias and (b) limitations that women place on themselves. The themes consist of two or three subthemes that provide greater specificity into the ways in which the barriers manifest during the headship search and hiring processes. Two of the three major themes answer both RQs. Table 3 shows the themes and subthemes associated with RQ1.

Table 3

Research Question 1 Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme 1	Subtheme 2	Subtheme 3
Theme 1: Societal Gender Bias	Bias that heads of school are male	Bias that women aren't tough enough for the job	Bias that motherhood will interfere with work
Theme 2: Women Place Limitations on Themselves	Delaying or opting out due to motherhood	Lack confidence that they are ready/qualified	

Theme 1: Societal Gender Bias

Societal gender bias was identified frequently by female head of school participants as a prominent barrier to the hiring of women for the headship. These biases arise from assumptions about traditional social roles and women. The following three biases, identified as categories, were the most prominent contributors to this barrier: (a) heads of school are male, (b) women are not tough enough for the job, and (c) motherhood will interfere with work.

Heads of School Are Male. Five of the six heads of school (P1, P2, P4, P5, and P6) stated that one of the biggest barriers to women attaining the headship is overcoming the preconceived image held by many that a head of school is a man. One participant (P4) shared,

> Everyone calls me headmaster. I hate that term. You know you're either a headmaster or headmistress. I think it should be just head of school, and it's taken a lot of education to get my school to change that. Because headmaster . . . it's a really outdated and inappropriate term.

All four participants attributed this bias to the historically patriarchal nature of the headship, which continues to fuel conscious and unconscious bias today. One participant (P1) shared,

> We still live in a world where a man—truly a White man—is seen as inherently a better leader, as better under pressure, as better at making decisions, they're better at looking at data. That's the stereotype we live in.

Another participant (P6) discussed the traditional White male identity of heads and, further, made a connection to the traditional White male identity of the search consultants. She stated, "Many search consultants are retired White men, former heads who were teachers/division heads previously, who hold an unconscious bias against alternative pathways to headship."

Two heads of school (P2 and P4) gave firsthand accounts of how the default thinking of a man as head of school was experienced during their job searches. One head of school (P4) described what unfolded during her finalist interviews as "painfully obvious" that the school was unaccustomed to the idea of a female head:

> They were used to having a male head of school and then the wife kind of comes along. They had things organized for the female spouse being taken out and about for the day. They tried to set up a few different things for my husband, but they just simply were not used to having a female candidate come for an interview.

The other head of school (P2) recalled her experience as a finalist for a headship stating, "My gender has never, was never, so salient as it was in those three days." Regarding not making it to the finalist round, she said, "I wasn't like heartbroken or anything. I mean, it was just like, yep, of course I didn't." She reported telling the search consultant, "I'm telling you; I'm not making it further. There was nothing wrong with my interview. They are not going to pick a woman for this school. It is so clear to me that they aren't ready for a woman." This candidate described herself as a "dark horse" during the process even as she pressed forward with her goal of making it to number two—something she wanted to do to break ground for other women. When another candidate

dropped out, she was eventually invited to the next level and was ultimately selected for the position, making her the first female head in the school's history.

Two participants (P2 and P5) described the point in time when they had a self-realization that their gender affected their career progression. Participant P2, who had previously worked in an all-girls school, shared:

> As a woman, I think it's been since college, that I felt that gender plays such an important role in my life. You know . . . when you're in a girls' school as a woman and you're having conversations about girls' issues, it's kind of like you're a fish in water, right? The fish doesn't see or feel the water. It's just what it is. That's their environment. But it's when you get taken out of that water—and all of a sudden you realize you're a fish.

Participant P5 had a similar experience after having attended all-girls schools as a student:

> Ironically, I just assumed that I had the confidence to do the job. I was bizarrely blind to, and may still be somewhat blind to, what is going on because I just assumed that you should treat people as people and that the person who has the skills will be rewarded.

Two participants (P2 and P5) noted differences in the degree of this bias depending on the region of the country. Participant P5 shared, "Someone encouraged me to look in California and I did start to realize that there were far more men in East Coast headships and slightly more women in West Coast headships." Participant P2 stated,

> I know that my interactions with folks will be different depending on where they come from, that there's a different paradigm about . . . what it means to be the head of a school or what it means to be a woman or what it means to be a man.

Finally, two of the six female heads of school (P1 and P4) specifically commented on the tendency of schools to make "the safe choice" when it comes down to the final decision about who to hire as their next head of school. Participant P4 shared:

> The board can start out having a very big agenda for what they want. They want something different. They want to go in a new direction and they're willing to consider women, candidates like me. But then when it comes down to it, then they pull back in, and then they start to get nervous towards the end of the search. That person doesn't look like the head of school that we've had, that we thought we'd always have.

Participant P1 had a firsthand experience with this bias when the board chair called her after she did not get a headship she'd applied for. The chair said, "In these uncertain times, we need to go with a safe choice." Relatedly, participant P5 shared,

> It's interesting to also sort of look at how far schools are willing to push their boundaries, their comfort zones and boundaries and agendas, and there may be ethical conservativism that's coming, even as we also feel certain schools take the leap.

Participant P4 concluded, "It will ultimately come down to what they are used to and what their comfort level is."

Women Lack the Requisite Toughness for the Job. Three out of the six female heads of school (P2, P3, and P4) stated that women are often viewed as not being tough enough to handle the demands of the headship. Two of the six participants (P2 and P4) spoke extensively on this topic. Toughness was characterized as a woman's ability to stand her ground, to make hard decisions, to be direct, and to be forceful when needed. Participant P4 shared a time when a male board member asked for examples of her ability "to be really forceful and hold your ground." The way the questions were being asked "implied that I was a female and therefore I didn't have it in me." Participant P4 further shared that, especially in schools that have always had a male head of school, women need to present themselves as "tough, tough as nails" in addition to "thoughtful and considerate and empathetic." In contrast, she shared, "Men don't need to go to these lengths" and that it is "unfortunate that as a woman you have to go the extra mile to make that point." Another participant (P2) shared that, during the finalist round of interviews, a high school student asked her, "Being the headmaster, you need to have an iron fist. And, you know, women have a reputation for being soft and gentle. How do you think you could do it? How do you see yourself doing it?" In response, the participant described to the student how the two leadership styles are complimentary, not mutually exclusive. "I talked about my leadership style, which is very much that I do lead with a lot of kindness, and a lot of heart. But you also don't mess with me, you know?"

Relatedly, two of the six participants recounted treatment that was dismissive and patronizing by men in positions of authority. Participant P2 shared an interaction with a male member of the search committee:

> It was sort of a comment that made me go, "wow." At the time, it stood out for me. And it was something about "You educators, you're sort of—" and I don't remember the exact words, but it was sort of like, "You all have these bleeding hearts. And that's nice, isn't that nice?" Pat, pat, pat. Those weren't the exact words, but I remember that feeling of "I think I just got dismissed."

Another participant (P3) shared an interaction with a male board member: "Some of the men on our board, it feels like father–daughter, like you're the daughter." She went on to explain that "there's something that makes it feel like they don't view a woman as professionally as they would view a man in the role." She went on to share, "I don't know if they would view a male head of school as, like, 'Oh, he's like my son,' you know, if men would be treated in the same way."

Women's Responsibilities in the Home Will Interfere With Work. All five of the six participants, who are also mothers (P1, P2, P4, P5, and P6) described those biases held by hiring officials about women's domestic responsibilities are a barrier to women being hired for the headship. Further, they perceived that being a parent creates doubt about a woman's candidacy that does not apply to men who are parents. Participant P1 recounted her firsthand experience. In that incidence, she had not been selected for a headship and later heard from a search committee member that they were relieved that she was not chosen:

> And by that point it was out that I was pregnant, and they were very clear that they had dodged a bullet because, I mean, "We wouldn't want to have a pregnant

head of school. Because that means she's not going to have time to do her job. She's not going to be able to do her job."

Another participant (P5) had an experience during her interviews that compelled her to volunteer information about her family. She stated, "I don't remember now whether it was point-blank asked." She then went on to share, "It didn't really bother me because I was expecting the question, I think I knew to anticipate it. And I knew to be clear that we were done having kids." She knew it was important to volunteer this information to secure the jobs she wanted, stating: "And that gender piece in particular. I talked about how I've gone the extra mile and always arranged for really good child care. The feedback I've gotten is that it was very helpful and really important to say those things."

Participant P4 shared that interruptions or delays in a woman's career for family reasons also hurt a woman's candidacy: "It doesn't matter how blazingly obvious it is that women may have interruptions in their career for family. They look at a resume and say, 'Oh, well that doesn't fit the box or doesn't fit the mold.'" Participant P2 explained that those traditional molds still exist in independent school families: "There are certainly a number of people in our community where the wife stays home. They're very wealthy. The husband is, you know, the breadwinner jetsetter. There are far fewer families where the woman is the main breadwinner." These family structures may serve to reinforce patriarchal views about women's roles with those who participate in hiring decisions.

Theme 2: Women Place Limits on Their Own Career Advancement

In addition to the barrier of gender bias that is externally imposed on women who aspire for the headship, study participants also spoke extensively about barriers that women impose on themselves. This second major theme consists of two contributing subthemes: (a) women opt out due to concerns about work–life balance and (b) women lack confidence in their qualifications and readiness.

Opting Out Due to the Demands of Work and Home. All five of the participants, who are also mothers (P1, P2, P4, P5, and P6), shared their perception that women delay or decline to pursue the headship considering the demands of the headship and their responsibilities as a mother. Of these five participants, three participants (P1, P4, and P5) had school-aged children and two had adult children (P2 and P6). One participant (P2) shared that the headship "is so all-consuming." One of the participants with adult children (P6) commented, "How many women have really decided that they want to be heads of school? Because they see what a pain in the neck it is to be one and the long hours involved." Participant P4 shared, "You make choices. You have to make choices when you have a family, and even now in my job, you know I have to."

Considering the time-intensive demands of the headship, participant P1 shared, "They [women] are struggling with how they perceive their time will be spent as a head of school that will disallow them from being able to parent in the way they want to parent." She went on to share, "My own advantage was that I was a head of school before I was a parent so I understood where the give and take could happen." Participant P4

shared a delayed timeline due to parenthood. She stated that she delayed applying for the headship "because I couldn't do it any quicker and I didn't want to be the absent mother."

Participant P5 spoke of anticipating bias as a young female leader who was starting a family, as well as her preemptive attempts to manage the bias. She recalled giving birth to her first child during her first year as a division head and then to a second child 2 years later. She shared the following:

> I was really conscious of the need to prove my ability to be in a leadership role. I came back after 5½ weeks with both kids, and I could have taken more time on paid leave, but I had this self-imposed pressure. It shows them that this isn't going to be anything more than skipping a half step in your beat, then you're going to jump right back in, in terms of the headship.

Finally, one of the participants with young children (P1) summarized her impressions about how and why concerns about balancing home and work play out in women's lives:

> They choose not to because they realize it's going to be really hard. And there are a lot of really smart, capable people who don't want to do things that are really hard for a variety of reasons, too. If you don't have the right spouse, this is not going to work. I think there are women who opt out because they realize their spouse is not on board, they don't want them to outshine them, for their wife's job to be the primary dominant job. There are a lot of women in that space, and they don't want to say that out loud, because then it might call into question their marriage and the choices that they've made.

This same participant remarked that her compensation as head of school gives her the ability to hire out many domestic tasks to make the work–life balance manageable: "I don't pick up my dry cleaning, grocery shop, very seldom put gas in my car. I'm not running around trying to get that last load of laundry in."

Women Lack Confidence in Their Qualifications for the Job. Four of the six heads of school (P2, P3, P5, and P6) shared that female candidates often will not apply for a headship if they do not meet every, or almost every, criterion listed in the job description. One participant (P3) shared, "We all seem to have this 'I know I can do 90% of the job. But if there's 10% of the job I can't do then I probably should wait till I can do 100% before I apply.'" Another participant (P2) shared, "I think as a woman, I am very, very stereotypically female in the sense that I always felt like I couldn't apply for a job unless I had ticked all the boxes and qualifications." A third participant (P6) stated, "I think that there are some times when women are more timid and don't appreciate what they bring to the table." The consistency in the participants' descriptions regarding a woman's confidence and their need to "check all the boxes" before applying made this finding especially noteworthy.

The participants also shared the specific qualifications that the majority of aspiring female heads lack or perceive that they lack. One participant (P5) stated that "Some of the things that you do as a head of school you don't get to do when you come up through the classroom, through the division-level headship." Specifically, women's perceptions that they lack qualifications in the areas of governance, finance, and

advancement were identified as causing many women to self-doubt and to not apply. Participant P2 shared:

> In many school roles, you're really not in a place to work with the budget. At my previous school there was sort of a philosophy on the part of the board that they didn't want a lot of people in the boardroom. So, I did not have a whole lot of access. So that was one area that was a real area where I felt very insecure.

Another participant (P6) shared: "One of the challenges of traditional aspiring heads of school who are female is that they lack comfort with doing the advancement. The fundraising, the capital campaigns, construction, the finance side." Additionally, she shared, "I told the Board of Trustees that . . . when it comes to finances, I would need a lot of support." When asked what the biggest barrier to her confidence in applying for the headship was, she replied "That would have been it. Honestly, it was around finance, school finance." Participant P3, who at the time of this study had been appointed to the headship but had not yet started in the role, shared:

> The big one sticking in my mind constantly is like we're at the point we need to start thinking endowment. I know little to nothing about fundraising and endowments. I know just enough but not enough. How much do you need? How do you know? How do I know when I go meet with you? Like, how much am I asking you for? Am I supposed to ask you for a certain amount? The fundraising piece is definitely the piece that I think this is going to be interesting.

Three of the six participants (P3, P4, and P6) also discussed managing self-doubt. Participant P6 shared how women should respond to questions about their qualifications

even if they are not feeling confident: "'Do you know how to do this?' And if you've done it once, the answer is 'Yes. Oh yeah, I've done that, I know how to do that.'" Participant P3 advised, "Hey, be the idiot who says yes. When you get asked if you want to do it, say yes, even if you're not sure you can, because that is, quite frankly, how a man would respond." Further, she asserted that "Nobody knows 100% of what they're doing when they walk into this job. And that's okay." Finally, participant P4 stated the importance of women growing in their sense of confidence: "Especially when you're in the interview stage, that stuff actually can become big stuff for you. Because if you don't feel confident, you are never going to be able to get through the head of school interviews."

Research Question 2

RQ2 focused on the perceptions of female executive search consultants regarding the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship. Three themes emerged from the six semistructured interviews conducted with the search consultants. According to the search consultant participants, the three predominant barriers that affect women's attainment of the headship are (a) societal gender bias, (b) limitations that women place on themselves, and (c) a lack of female representation on hiring committees and teams. There are two subthemes for Themes 1 and 3 and three subthemes for Theme 2. The subthemes of Themes 1 and 2 have some similarities with differing evidence for support. Table 4 shows the themes and subthemes associated with RQ2.

Table 4

Research Question 2 Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme 1	Subtheme 2	Subtheme 3
Theme 1: Societal Gender Bias	Bias that heads are male	Less favorable views of a woman's potential	
Theme 2: Women Place Limitations on Themselves	Lack confidence in qualifications	Speaking in tentative/timid manner	Delaying or opting out due to motherhood
Theme 3: Underrepresentation of Women as Hiring Decision-Makers	Women on school search committees	Women on consultant search teams	

Theme 1: Societal Gender Bias

Societal gender bias was identified frequently by female search consultant participants as a prominent barrier to the hiring of women for the headship. These biases arise from outdated perceptions of what it takes to be a good head of school relative to the characteristics that female candidates are presumed to bring to the table. Two categories of societal gender bias were the most frequently referenced: (a) expectations that a head of school is a man and (b) less favorable views of a woman's potential to fill the role.

Heads of School Are Men. All six of the search consultants discussed the preconceived notion in many of their school clients' minds that heads of school are men. The participants' perceptions and examples were closely aligned. Two participants tied this bias to the patriarchal history of independent schools. One participant (P6) shared,

> It used to be the guy with the leather patches, the *Dead Poets Society* . . . the leather patches, and the glasses and the poetry book, maybe the bow tie. That was the head of school, the headmaster, the head teacher, you know, Master-being-ness, an emperor teacher.

A second participant (P1) also referenced the historical connotations of the job's title. She remarked:

> It's the "head of school," which is still just a shortened version of headmaster. I don't know how we get away from that but essentially their jobs, and the way the job is, the functions of the job, are still things that we think of as male in this society.

Participant P2 echoed a similar perception when she stated, "As we look at the leadership, it's been pretty populated with elderly, White men who have been and who continue to share the power of independent schools."

Three participants (P1, P3, and P5) talked about the images that school stakeholders have in their minds about what a head of school looks like. Participant P5 shared,

> How much has the board examined its own biases? Its own tendency to lean in a particular direction of thinking what a leader looks like? Does a leader in their mind look like a White male? And this is hard to pinpoint because people don't say their biases out loud. No, they might not even know them. They just carry them.

Participant P1 echoed the theme of closing one's eyes to get a mental image of a head of school. She stated,

> It's subtle, but it's clear. You've got to check your own bias. And I would say that to a search committee too. It's hard to do. But, you know, if you close your eyes, can you see a woman sitting at the head of the table?

Participant P3 also described how school officials enter into the search process with their own personal biases and perspectives: "They have in their head the perfect head of school, and whether that's someone they met, someone they know, their current head, whatever. They have this hypothetical perfect person."

Similarly, Participant P4 also described school committee members' preconceived ideas about who fits the role and, further, made a connection to independent school parents' own experiences growing up in independent schools. She shared,

> Think about who's on search committees. It's really driven by the board and what the board's and search committee's usual vision is of a head of school. And think about if they attended independent schools, they think about their own heads of school and the current head. And just the numbers show you it's going to be a White guy. That's the numbers. I don't know how quickly a search committee or even a board would name that. But if you ask them, "Who do you imagine? Who do you think of as the head of school?" they're going to think about who exists in the space right now. Or who existed in those spaces, you know, when they were in school. And chances are it was a man.

One search consultant (P3) shared an experience in which she was just starting her work with a school's hiring team. She recounted, "The chair of the search committee, right at the get-go, said, 'We want a church-going family man.'" Another consultant (P1) shared that these kinds of belief systems are entrenched. She stated, "People think of someone leading an enterprise as a male. It takes time to change their perception. People say, 'You know our head? She's a woman.' Surprise, right? Our new woman head."

Finally, Participant P6 shared that, even though there is more awareness of bias these days, there is still a reluctance on the part of school hiring officials to break from tradition when it comes down to making the major decision of who to hire for the headship. She stated,

> In many instances, I think these schools are reluctant to step away from the formula that has worked for generations, which is sort of the prep school model where there's a male head. And I think they want to repeat that, a male management style. I think it's familiarity. I think it's what people are used to, I think it's what parents look for, what schools expect. It's like a lot of other things that other groups have had to crack through. It's in the process of being opened up, but I don't think it's there.

Less Favorable Impressions of Women's Potential. All six of the search consultant participants shared one or more ways in which gendered assumptions about a woman's fit for the job can penalize women in their candidacy for the headship. The three reasons cited most frequently why women's potential is perceived to be lower

included (a) motherhood will interfere with a woman's ability to do the job, (b) women lack skills in key areas, and (c) women are less likable when they exert authority.

Motherhood Interferes With Women's Ability to Do the Job. Three of the six consultants (P3, P5, and P6) spoke about implicit bias against female candidates who are mothers of young children. Shared one participant (P6), "I do think that there are questions about women that still linger, particularly women who, you know, for the headship who may have families or young children. . . . I think that if the kids are grown, that's fine." Another participant (P5) shared, "The home–work balance does come up. It varies quite a lot I would say." The examples that the participants shared were related to having young, school-aged children.

When thinking about times when the topic of family responsibilities did arise during work with a school committee, one participant (P3) stated: "You didn't ask about Joe's and Bob's ability to do their job, and they have kids." This same participant shared her approach when she was the mother of young children and applying for a headship herself:

> When I was interviewing for jobs in schools and administrative jobs, I was kind of quiet about the number of kids I had. I didn't want people judging my ability to do my work, like making assumptions. To me—and I say this to search committees—she has been doing that job for X number of years. If she wasn't able to juggle that job and her parenting responsibilities, she wouldn't have kept the job.

There was evidence in participants' responses of ways in which this bias can be challenged. Participant P5 referenced the role of women on hiring committees: "The more women professionals that are on the board the better, because most of them have juggled the exact same question, right?"

Women Lack Skills in Key Areas. Two of the six consultants (P1 and P2) gave examples of areas where women may be viewed as less qualified for the headship by school hiring decision-makers. Participant P2 shared,

> The corporate leaders on the board come from Fortune 500 companies. The expectation is a strong manager, a strong budget manager, and someone who can raise money, as well as follow through on construction and renovation. I think the perception of trustees is that we, as women, have difficulty raising money. It's difficult for us to do reconstruction and capital campaigns and manage money. There's a perception out there that women can't do it.

This participant also shared her experience as a candidate for a headship. She recalled, "They wanted someone of color because 64% of the student body was of color. But they said, 'She doesn't know how to raise money. She doesn't know how to do construction or renovation.'" Similarly, participant P1 stated, "People don't expect a woman to be able to run a construction job or to bid those jobs."

In describing some of the skills for the headship for which men are often assumed to be more qualified, participant P1 shared: "We expect the head to stand up in front of a large group of people and speak. We expect the head to ask for money. We expect for the head to sit at the head of the table." She also described sitting in a construction meeting

with all men around the table: “I mean, I looked around that table, it was a whole group of guys, and I know for a while they thought, ‘Oh really, what does she know?’” Both participants spoke to the importance of female candidates anticipating and preempting this bias. Specifically, participant P1 shared:

> You want to be able to address the embedded bias, the embedded biases that you don’t know anything about finance, that you can’t be tough when toughness counts. And that money in general is an issue so I think women have to be able to demonstrate that, recognize what the bias is going to be, and address it before somebody asks you about it.

Participant P2 suggested that aspiring female heads, “Spend a week with your business manager, get to know your balance sheet, get to know all of the metrics of your budget.” Participant P1 offered a similar suggestion:

> Here’s the thing for women: People make assumptions which is that women don’t know much about the business aspect of the school, so I always say that women should be sure they get the right vocabulary. People assume that some man knows about the business of the school. So, be comfortable talking about the business of the school, be able to walk somebody through a financial statement, be able to walk yourself through a financial statement.

Another perception about skill sets that negatively and disproportionately affects female candidates is that leading a K–12 school requires having experience as an upper school division head. Participant P6 shared, “They’re very worried about their high schools. The focus is on the upper school and college admissions always. And I think

they're scared to step away from that." Participant P1 shared, "They want somebody who has breadth of experience and preferably somebody with knowledge of an upper school . . . because that's where all the trouble lies." Participant P5 shared, "If your experience is in lower or middle, you're just not perceived as having the knowledge or authority to run a high school."

Strong, Agentic Women Can be Off-Putting. Three of the six consultants (P1, P4, and P5) mentioned that women are sometimes viewed as less likable when they act in ways that come across as too strong or agentic. One participant (P4) stated, "That idea of a strategic man being bold and having a vision and going for it. Versus does a woman get seen as like, 'Well, she's bossy?' The whole thing about being plastic, right?" Another participant (P5) shared:

> It's acculturation. I think we get socialized. That to be demanding, or to be overtly ambitious, is to be all the labels that get applied to women like that—a bully, selfish, willing to step on other people to get what you want. I think there's a lot of loaded imagery in our culture.

In her former job as a head of school, one participant (P1) recalled sitting in a meeting with all men. She asked herself, "How do you assert yourself in that setting, and do it in a way that isn't off-putting?" She described women's unique challenge of striking the right balance:

> So, people want to know that you're going to be kind and loving and warm and caring and on the other hand, the embedded bias is that nobody thinks we're going to be tough enough, right. And if you're too tough they think "Oh, that's

> not right." So, in a way you have to balance something that men don't have to balance. I think that's the hardest thing.

Theme 2: Women Place Limits on Their Own Career Advancement

In addition to the barrier of gender bias that is externally imposed, all six study participants spoke about various limitations and barriers that women impose on themselves. This second major theme is comprised of three contributing categories. Women were perceived to impede their own advancement in the following ways: (a) lacking confidence in their qualifications for the job, (b) acting in tentative or timid ways, and (c) opting out of the headship due to the demands of motherhood and the headship.

Women Lack Confidence in Their Qualifications for the Job. Participants perceived that women's low confidence can manifest in two ways: (a) women hesitate to apply (or do not apply at all) and (b) women do not always speak about their qualifications in a confident manner. Five out of six consultant participants (P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6) reported that female candidates are hesitant to apply or do not apply at all for the headship due to lack of confidence in their qualifications and readiness for the job. Many of the participants used the expression "checking the boxes" to describe women's hesitancy. For example, one participant (P2) shared that women say,

> "Oh, my gosh, I'm not ready yet. I need another five to seven years at assistant head or division head," whereas a lot of men wouldn't have done that. But it's that whole, like, "Am I checking all the boxes?" I think it does reflect some of the internal pressures that may get in the way.

Similarly, another participant (P4) shared:

> I think there was a study about this, and I see it too—the way men and women look at the job descriptions. And men will say "I've got 50 to 60%, I'll jump in," whereas women will hold themselves back and wait until they can say, "All right, I've got 80 to 90%" before moving in.

Supporting this finding, a third participant (P6) shared a similar observation from her experiences as a search consultant:

> I think that, for the most part, women want to be sure. There's that awful imposter syndrome thing where they want to be sure that they have ticked all the boxes of all the requirements. I don't think anybody has all of these. But I think that women are hesitant to apply for a job where they don't feel like they've got 100%.

Two of the participants (P3 and P4) used the words "not ready" to describe how many women feel about applying for the headship. One (P4) shared, "I reached out to individuals that should be thinking about headships. They will say, 'I'm not ready, I need another job.' And I'm like, 'Well, what is it that you think you need to learn still?'" Another participant (P5) contrasted women's sense of readiness to men's sense of readiness. She shared:

> Men will say, "Well, you know, I've been in this position for a while. So now I'm ready. I'm just ready." With women, it's more like, "Well, I've done a lot, but I still feel like there's so many things that I need to check off the list before I'm ready. Am I ready?" There's a lot more self-doubt there. There's a lot more of

> "What if this happens? What if that happens? What if I'm not able to answer this question?"

Another participant (P3) also discussed men's propensity to jump in early and women's tendency to hold back. She shared:

> I think it remains 100% true that many men believe they're ready to be a head, before they're ready to be a head. And many women don't think they're ready, when they are ready. And I absolutely continue to see that male candidates feel like because they went to NAIS Aspiring Heads or got their graduate degree in education from Klingenstein or Harvard, like, "Well, I studied this, so I'm ready."

Participant P2 shared a similar experience: "I do a lot of one-on-one consultation with women and male candidates. With men, they read the position statement, they throw their hat in the ring, there's never a question." Participant P6 also drew the contrast between men's and women's approaches. In speaking to a newly appointed head, she asked:

> "Do you feel ready? Do you feel qualified to be the head?" And he said to me, he goes, "I'll tell you the truth. I've never been fully qualified for any job." And I thought that was just so stereotypical—what I've heard a million times. Men will apply when they're sort of there, they'll step out into that void and just do it. And a woman in that same position, with that same resume, might not.

Several participants expressed their opinion that women should not wait. "This is perhaps the best time there's ever been for women to jump in—with a tidal wave of retirements happening, there are more openings than ever," shared one participant (P2).

Quipped another participant (P4), "I worry that some women are waiting to be discovered, you know, like, this is not old Hollywood. You're not going to be found on Hollywood and Vine, right?"

The second manifestation of women's low confidence is evidenced in women's ways of speaking about their qualifications. Four out of the six search consultants (P2, P3, P5, and P6) shared the perception that women do not always speak about their qualifications and present themselves in a confident manner. The search consultants used words such as "tentative," "timid," and "apologetic" to describe the ways in which women interact with them and with hiring committees. Participant P5 provided an example of a recent conversation with a woman she was encouraging to apply for a headship:

> So, I wrote to her and said, "You know, someone nominated you to be head of school. Would you like to have a conversation?" And she wrote back, "Well, I, you know, I'd probably never apply. But sure, if you have time and if it's not too much of a bother, I don't want to take your time." You know, it was all very apologetic. Then I said, "Why don't I just send you the candidate questionnaire and you don't have to commit to anything." And she said, "Well, I would be wasting your time." So, I feel like this is not an entirely uncommon situation where women are almost apologizing to me for wasting my time. And I'm saying "Hey, wait a minute. You already are a leader. Why are you not actively exploring opportunities? What's holding you back from doing that?"

Participant P5 contrasted that to her conversations with men: “They’re asked to submit their materials and men tend to say, ‘Oh, yeah, oh, yeah. Yeah, I’ve, I’ve done that.’ Or, ‘I can figure that out.’”

Perhaps contributing to an air of timidity, women were described as hard on themselves and showing emotions in ways that do not enhance their viability as a candidate. Participant P2 shared, “Women are much more thoughtful and hard[er] on themselves. We pay dearly for it.” She also shared, “For women, we show emotion. Sometimes it may offend a search committee member, especially if the search committee member is a corporate leader.”

Participants reported that confidence matters. Shared participant P6, “What you present is what people respond to. Present confidence that you can do it and are ready for this. You know, you have a lot better chance if you kind of fake it till you make it.” Similarly, participant P5 shared, “You need to practice saying these things so that when you’re not feeling confident in front of an interview committee, you can fake your confidence.” Women were also encouraged to take full credit for their accomplishments because, as participant P3 stated, “Really. Because men do. They do.”

Women Opt Out of the Headship Due to Motherhood. Four out of the six participants (P1, P3, P4, and P6) described a third way in which women create a barrier to their own advancement: opting out. Participants reported that women are concerned about the time demands of the job and how the headship may take them away from time with their family. One participant (P6) shared, “The headship, it takes a special kind of

person, a special kind of ambition. A real willingness to do it. Headships often consume so much of people's lives." Shared another participant (P1),

> If you're a woman, and you've got a family, and it's the K–12 school demands, here's what keeps women out of it—the demands are "I would be out four nights a week to like five or six." By the time you go to basketball games, meetings, arts activities, parent meetings, whatever, it's a 24-7 job, I don't care what anybody says.

A third participant (P4) depicted the demands of the headship and women's concerns in a similar manner:

> The demands are so much greater. And I've worked with so many heads of school, who are up at four, you know, working on email at five, and then they're going, going, going, they've got meetings into the evening, and they're at the volleyball game or the play. And their days are going 18 hours. And again, women who are concerned about their families are like, "Yeah, I don't want that." The expectations are such that a lot of women, especially because they're worried about their kids, are thinking, "Yeah, I don't want to do that."

The same participant shared about three female leaders who had decided to not pursue a headship: "They all have capacity, and all would be amazing heads of school. And they've opted out because they look at the job and say, 'That's not for me.' Even though they would be amazing."

Other women delay pursuing the headship instead of opting out entirely. This perception was shared by two participants (P3 and P4), who observed that men in

"aspiring heads" professional development programs are in their 30s while women are in their 50s. Participant P3 shared that some women decide that they aren't going to look for headship until their youngest child is in high school. Shared participant P4,

> I think women, for the most part, will hold off until their family is in a good situation. Their kids are older, and maybe don't need as much parental attention, given all the challenges and demands of headship, like women think long and hard about that. And think about, "are my kids ready for that, is my family ready for that?" Men certainly think about that, too. But I feel like it comes up more often with women.

In contrast, however, one of the six participants (P3) agreed that while women do opt out, they do not need to. She shared, "So I do think that women sometimes get in their own way saying, 'I can't, it's not the right time of my life.'" Then she continued by stating:

> I'd like to see more women throwing their hat in the ring and stepping up. I don't want to do a Sheryl Sandberg *Lean In* thing, but I do think it's a job you can do with children. You know, men do it all the time.

She recommended that women who are considering the headship look to women in the headship who have succeeded in balancing their family with the headship, and she points out that head of school compensation can go a long way toward caring for the family and hiring out domestic tasks.

Theme 3: Underrepresentation of Women as Hiring Decision-Makers

The final barrier to the hiring of women for the headship, as perceived by the female search consultant participants, was the disproportionately small number of women participating in and managing the search and hiring processes. All search consultant participants spoke about the gender composition of one or both of the important decision-making groups—school teams (i.e., the board of trustees and the hiring committee) and the search consultancy team.

Female Representation on School Hiring Teams. Five of the consultant participants (P1, P2, P3, P5, and P6) discussed outcomes for female candidates related to the composition of hiring teams at the school, specifically the school's board of trustees and search committees. Asked if the gender composition of the board or search committee affects hiring decisions, one participant (P6) responded, "I think that there's still some of that, you know, like attracts like. If you're on a board, if you're male, you can relate better to a man." Two participants (P1 and P5) described women's participation on the school teams as "a critical piece." One of them (P5) shared:

> It matters whether there's a board chair who's a woman, or a search committee chair who's a woman, because I think when you get the women in those seats, they are more likely to ask search consultants like me, "Why aren't there more women in the pool?" And they are more likely to make sure during the interview process that men and women are being treated equally and respectfully. So, you have to look at the composition of a board in order to predict whether they are

> ready for a female leader. Because the board is going to have the final say in this hire. It's not the teachers, it's not the leadership team. It's the board.

Participant P2 shared that school hiring committees want to see diverse candidates. Further, they want to hire a search firm that has a track record of inclusive hiring practices. She shared, however, that schools need to start by looking at themselves. She asks her school clients, "How many women are on your board? How many women are people of color?" Participant P2 continued, "That's really telling for us . . . these are people who are going to make the selection and the appointment."

Participant P1 shared that when women are heading the school's search committee, female candidates are more likely to get the job. She stated,

> One of the things that eliminates it right away is when you have a woman who is either chairing the search committee or chairing the board. I find that there's much greater likelihood for a woman to get the job. That's the case more and more. Those jobs are falling to women. And that's not to say a woman can't be hired by a man, but somebody is actually thinking about that for you.

One of the participants (P3) gave an example of how women on school hiring teams can help mitigate the barriers for female candidates:

> I feel like women in the room will call people on that. Someone might make a comment, like, "She's got these three young kids." It's always better if someone else in the room knocks that comment down than if I do. I've worked on search committees with super capable, professional, powerful women. And so, they don't, oftentimes, they don't allow that kind of line.

Female Representation on Consultant Search Teams. Four of the six study participants (P1, P2, P4, and P5) discussed the composition of search consultant teams and the role that women can play as a search consultant assigned to a school. Shared participant P2, "If you look at the beginnings of search consultants . . . it was started by White men. And they served White boards, and they selected White men." Respondents shared that female search consultants can play a role in encouraging and coaching potential female candidates and in helping colleagues and school teams discern gender bias during the process. One participant (P5) shared her personal advocacy for women:

> I think because I'm a female search consultant, I tend to really encourage the women to apply. Having my own awareness of this problem, this issue. So, I probably tilt the scales more toward female applicants and advocating for them as my desire to be a part of the solution.

All participants agreed that although search firms have historically hired retired heads of school as consultants—who, by default, have been older, White men—search firms have been making an intentional shift toward including women, even though they may not have served as a head of school. One participant (P1) shared, "Although there were some women, search consultants were primarily men. And now having a man and a woman on a search is really desirable." Participant P4 shared that, as a female consultant, she was an "early guinea pig" at her firm. A third participant (P5) shared that she was a women hired as a consultant without previously holding the position of the headship. Responding to schools' priorities for diversity was a factor shared by this same participant. She stated that schools are asking, "Why aren't there more women in the

pool? Why aren't there more people of color in the pool?" She recommended starting with the search firms' statistics. Specifically, "Who's getting placed? And how many women did I place as a search consultant? How many men?" Another participant (P2) stated, "By looking at statistics of individual firms, you can see who is really promoting women and promoting people of color. There's a sea change going on in boards. And it's welcome. I mean, this is really important."

One participant (P4), however, qualified the amount of influence that search committees can have on the final hiring decision. She stated,

> So, as much as I am a cheerleader for those who are underrepresented in leadership, I also have to say that my influence only goes so far. Right? I can only reach out so far, I can support and bring in. But at some point, I hand the baton off to the search committee. And then it's really their search. As much as I can love a candidate and want to support them, don't forget my client is the school. So, there is a transactional piece of like, I'm getting paid. And it's their choice. Yeah, and it's their search. It's their search. And so, it's sometimes hard to balance those things.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of female heads of school and female executive search firm consultants regarding the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship. The quality and validity of the research findings were ensured through thematic analysis, member checks, peer debriefing, analytic memos, reflective journaling, reflexivity, field notes, and thick description.

Credibility for this study was increased through tight alignment between the problem and purpose statements, the RQs, the researcher-developed interview questions, and the methodology. A process of thematic analysis was used throughout the study, with readings of the data that focused specifically on codes and categories that answered the RQs. The process of analytic memo writing and reflective journaling during all phases of data collection and analysis contributed to the development of a detailed audit trail. The use of a peer debriefer and member checks created an iterative process of questioning, challenging, and informing the themes and the insights drawn.

Transferability was increased through sufficient contextual information about how the study was conducted to enable such transfer. Information to ensure the transferability of this study includes the number and type of participants, the data collection and analysis methods used, the number and length of the interview sessions, the interview questions, and the time period over which the data were collected. All of this information has been provided in detailed tables, appendices, and thick description of the instrumentation and analysis of data. Thick description, including descriptions of settings and participants, detailed descriptions of findings, and adequate evidence from the raw data, was used in the writing of the audit trail and throughout the narratives of this study.

To increase the dependability of the findings of this study over time, a strong rationale for how data were collected was provided and alignment of the findings with the RQs was ensured through a process of thematic analysis. Interviews were conducted in as consistent a manner as possible, and no anomalies in the process occurred. During the data analysis process, codes, categories, and themes were generated through multiple

readings of the interview transcripts and were accompanied by reflective journaling and analytic memos. An audit trail was created that provides details about every step of the data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes, and it is available for other researchers to view. The interpretation of the data at each level was viewed from multiple vantage points using a peer debriefer. Any adjustments in the methodology for this study were documented and explained in detail.

Confirmability was enhanced through a reflexive approach to ensure that the researcher maintained an open mind, continuously monitored for objectivity, and did not apply personal biases and worldviews to the analysis of raw data or development of categories and themes. Confirmability strategies, including reflective journaling, analytic memo writing, field notes, member checks, and peer debriefing, were utilized with fidelity. The audit trail contains detailed notes about decision-making throughout the research process and is available to other researchers for review upon publication of the study.

Summary

This qualitative exploratory case study explored the perceptions of six female heads of school and six female executive search firm consultants regarding their perceptions of the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship. The RQs that were addressed in this study were (a) What are the perceptions of female heads of school regarding the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship? and (b) What are the perceptions of female executive search consultants regarding the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship?

Twelve semistructured interviews were conducted: six for RQ1 and six for RQ2. The data were analyzed thematically through a priori, in vivo, and axial coding methods for the purpose of identifying major themes in each of the participant group's responses.

Regarding RQ1, the female heads of school identified two primary barriers to the hiring of women for the headship. The barriers were social gender bias and limitations women place on themselves. Regarding RQ2, the female search consultants identified three primary barriers to the hiring of women for the headship. The barriers were societal gender bias, limitations women place on themselves, and the underrepresentation of women on the teams that make key hiring decisions. Themes 1 and 2 are the same for both RQs; however, they have differing support from the data.

Chapter 5 provides an interpretation of the findings of this study. It describes the ways in which the findings confirm, disaffirm, or extend knowledge in the discipline and provides an analysis of the findings relative to the context of the theoretical framework of liberal feminism. Additionally, limitations, recommendations, and implications of this study's findings are provided.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to examine the perceptions of female heads of school and female executive search consultants regarding the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship, why they believe these barriers exist, and how they perceive that the barriers might be addressed. The two RQs were (a) What do female heads of school perceive as the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship? and (b) What do female executive search consultants perceive as the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship? The theoretical framework of liberal feminism served to sensitize the interview instrument, the data collection, and the development of inductive themes.

Regarding RQ1, two main barriers emerged from the data for women in the pathway to the headship. The first barrier identified was societal gender bias against women, which is the manifestation of three specific biases: that heads of school are assumed to be men, that women are not tough enough for the job, and that motherhood will interfere with women's ability to fulfill the demands of the job. The second barrier identified by the heads of school participants was that women place limitations on their own advancement to the headship. This barrier was described as manifesting in two ways: women delaying or opting out of the headship due to motherhood and women lacking confidence in their qualifications.

Regarding RQ2, female search consultant participants perceived that there are three main barriers for women's advancement to the headship. The first barrier identified was societal gender bias against women, which is the manifestation of two specific

biases: that heads of school are assumed to be men and that female candidates' qualities and characteristics are viewed less favorably. The second barrier identified was the limitations that women place on themselves. This barrier was described as manifesting in three ways: women delaying or opting out of the headship due to motherhood, women lacking confidence in their qualifications, and women presenting themselves and their candidacy in ways that are timid and tentative. The third barrier identified by the search consultant participants was the underrepresentation of women on the teams responsible for hiring decisions, specifically on school hiring committees and boards and on search consultancy teams.

Interpretation of the Findings

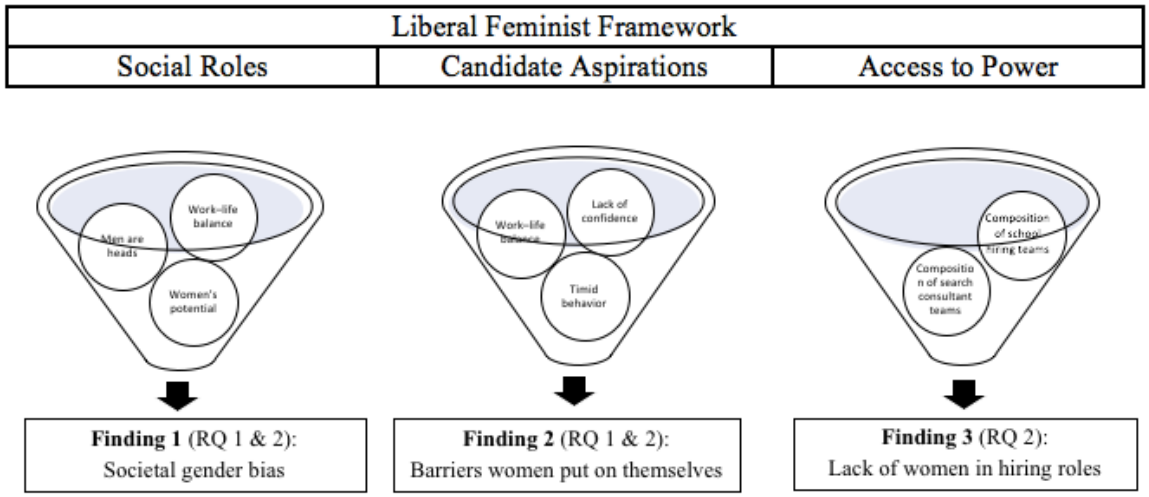
During the course of this study, I assumed that there are socially constructed barriers to women's access to the independent school headship. Because gender plays a role in all aspects of the human experience and affects each person's worldview (Acker, 1990), women experience a confluence of both external and internal barriers to their advancement. My exploration of the perspectives of female heads of school and female search consultants revealed two findings supported by data from both the heads of school and search consultants and one finding supported by the search consultants alone. Two of these findings represent externally imposed barriers, and one of these findings represents an internally imposed barrier. Within each finding, the perceptions of each participant group are further refined into subthemes.

All three findings of this study align with the three constructs of the theoretical framework of liberal feminism; however, there were differences in the amount of

evidence for each contract and by participant group (see Figure 2). Although the findings provided in Chapter 4 were organized by participant group and by RQ, the interpretation of the findings in this chapter is organized by finding, with a synthesis of the data from both participant groups. This was done intentionally to provide clarity of key takeaways and to help readers identify the most important implications for practice. The three findings are societal gender bias, limitations women place on themselves, and the underrepresentation of women as hiring decision-makers. In each subsection, I compare and contrast the findings relative to each participant group and describe ways in which the findings confirm, disconfirm, or extend knowledge in the discipline. Reflection about the findings in relation to the framework of liberal feminism is also provided.

Figure 2

Study Findings Relative to Liberal Feminist Thought



Theme 1: Societal Gender Bias

The first finding of societal gender bias was an external barrier. Both heads of school and search consultants spoke extensively about the ways in which societal bias,

whether conscious or unconscious, puts women at a disadvantage in their candidacy for the headship. This theme corresponds closely with the barrier of "social roles" as identified by the theoretical framework of liberal feminism. Specifically, the finding of societal gender bias confirmed two of the premises of liberal feminism: (a) that gendered differences in patriarchal societies disempower women (Acker, 1990) and (b) that women's access to economic participation is restricted based on gender (Beasley, 1999). Societal gender bias takes two forms for women who are pursuing the headship: preconceptions that heads of school are men and less favorable views of women's candidacy as compared to men's candidacy.

Heads of School Are Men

In this study, the most referenced example of social role bias was the automatic association that a head of school is a man. This finding was evident across both participant groups and was referenced by 10 of the 12 study participants (four of the heads of school and all six of the search consultants). Female heads of school discussed their firsthand experiences with a mismatch between their gender and what the school was accustomed to in its leader. Search consultants discussed their experiences working with search committees and boards who, when they think of or envision their next leader, think of a man. This bias toward men was described by participants as unconscious and implicit and is aligned with the literature, most notably, the "think manager, think male" paradigm (Schein, 1973, 1975), the lack of fit model (Heilman, 1983) and the role incongruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Koenig et al., 2011). Search consultants specifically attributed this association to the traditional patriarchal nature of independent

schools, which create images of a *Dead Poets Society* masculine hierarchy for many people. This finding served to extend findings from other employment sectors, such as business, higher education, and public schools, to the independent school arena.

Even as school leaders are increasingly seeking diverse head of school candidates, a tendency to retreat to choosing a "safe" candidate (specifically, a White man) was discussed by three of the six heads of school and one of the search consultants. Several researchers have examined the pattern of hiring White men relative to the similarity–attraction paradigm (e.g., Byrne, 1971; Hofhuis et al., 2016; Kanter, 1977; Lacey, 2006; Magretta, 1997; Simon, 1957; Tallerico, 2000). In reviewing the literature, I found no studies supporting the premise that schools seek out diverse candidates but then digress to make the "safe" choice to hire a White man. This finding may be suited for further study and have the potential to extend knowledge within the discipline.

Less Favorable Views of Female Candidates

Another consequence of societal gender bias was that female candidates' potential is viewed less favorably than male candidates' potential. The two reasons underpinning this bias were that motherhood may conflict with work and women may lack the qualities and skills needed. The bias regarding women's domestic role was identified by seven of the 12 participants (four of the heads of school and three of the search consultants) and was specific to women with young children. The bias related to women's qualities and skills was comprised of two biases: women are not tough enough for the job and women do not possess key technical skills. These biases were named by one or more participants from each participant group.

Regarding the perceived negative effect of home life on work, members of both participant groups shared that being the mother of young children is a disadvantage to a woman's candidacy that does not apply to male candidates with young children. The finding is substantiated by research conducted within public school systems that shows that a woman's obligation to family is perceived to be incongruent with the work expectations of the school superintendency (Hill et al., 2017). This finding is also affirmed in studies of higher education and dubbed "the motherhood penalty" (Cuddy et al., 2008; Halpert et al., 1993; Williams, 2005); however, the framing was slightly different. The motherhood penalty in higher education asserts that candidates who are mothers are judged as less committed to their work. Although no participants in this study used the specific words "less committed" to describe school hiring officials' bias about female candidates, there were similarities in the connotation; specifically, having less time for the job could be associated with being less committed. Knowledge in the discipline is extended by this study's finding that, like higher education and K–12 public education, bias against mothers occurs in the independent school arena as well. On the other hand, no confirmation of previous studies associating lower competence with motherhood was found. Instead, perceptions of women's competence were discussed more globally and not just in relation to a woman's role as a mother.

Participants in both groups expressed the view that women are perceived less favorably when compared to men in the areas of toughness and technical skills. Of note, there were some important differences in the strength of this competency bias according to participant group. With regard to "toughness" (i.e., the ability to make hard decisions

and stand one's ground) the finding was supported by more evidence from search consultant participants (five out of six discussed perceptions of women's inability to be tough) than it was by heads of school (two out of six discussed this). Overall, participant perceptions again confirmed the literature and extend it to independent schools regarding social role congruence (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Koenig et al., 2011), the "think male, think manager" paradigm (Schein, 1973, 1975), role incongruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Koenig et al., 2011), and the status incongruity hypothesis (Rudman et al., 2012). Additionally, the findings of Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) that women are assumed to be less authoritative and decisive were confirmed.

I also confirmed research on the double bind of women being perceived as less likable when they act with authority and strength (see Teele et al., 2018; Zheng et al., 2018); however, this finding emerged only from search consultant interviews for RQ2. Notably, the double bind was not described at all by heads of school. With regard to the emotional backlash finding in the research (Brescoll, 2011; Brescoll et al., 2018; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010; Williams & Tiedens, 2016), three of the search consultant participants described emotional backlash for role incongruity, but only one head of school participant did. Although the executive search consultants referenced emotional backlash as a difficulty for women, those same consultants shared that women should act with greater strength and confidence (discussed in greater detail under the second study finding, limitations women place on themselves). These data from search consultants provide affirmation of the existence of the double-bind literature in which

Conroy et al. (2020) asserted that women are "damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don't" (p. 211).

Bias that women do not possess the technical skills for the job emerged as a reason that women's potential for the headship is viewed less favorably; however, this finding was not as evident. Three of the 12 study participants (two heads of school and one search consultant) shared that school hiring officials view women as being less competent in areas such as finance, fundraising, governance, and/or facilities management. Interestingly, a finding that emerged as a part of this study (limitations women place on themselves) shows that women's internalized stereotypes about their own skills and qualifications may be more of a barrier to their advancement than the stereotypes held by others. These findings confirm previous research showing that women are viewed as less competent for leadership overall (Cuddy et al., 2008; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Halpert et al., 1993; Hill et al., 2017; Teele et al., 2018; Williams, 2005; Zheng et al., 2018).

Theme 2: Women's Creation of Barriers for Themselves

The second finding of this study is regarding the existence of an internally imposed barrier; specifically, both participant groups shared that women put limitations on themselves that hinder their advancement to the headship. This theme corresponds closely with the barrier of "candidate aspirations" as identified by the theoretical framework of liberal feminism. According to multiple sources in the literature, societal gender bias is internalized by women, which can then result in lowered career aspirations and self-efficacy (Carbajal, 2018; Hartman & Barber, 2019; Nielson & Madsen, 2019).

According to the findings, there are two specific ways in which women are perceived to create barriers for themselves. Specifically, women opt out of the headship due to work–life demands and women lack confidence in their readiness and qualifications for the job.

Women Opt Out of the Headship for Family Reasons

Overall, 10 out of the 12 study participants (five heads of school and five search consultants) shared very similar perceptions that female candidates' sense of responsibility for domestic tasks is an important barrier to their career advancement and, further, that the time demands of the headship are perceived to be incompatible with work–life balance. This finding confirms an extensive body of research that internalized social roles are a barrier (Carbajal, 2018; Cuddy et al., 2008; Fernandez-Corenejo et al., 2016; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Halpert et al., 1993; Hartman & Barber, 2019; Hill et al., 2017; Nielson & Madsen, 2019; Williams, 2005) while disaffirming Singer's 1991 study that there are no differences between men's and women's career aspirations. Additionally, two search consultants pointed out that women restrict their search geographically for family reasons far more often than do men, and this is confirmed by Rivera (2017).

On the other hand, the findings did not confirm previous studies that reported that women have lower aspiration to lead in general (Carbajal, 2018; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Hartman & Barber, 2019; Nielson & Madsen, 2019) or that they do not value status, authority, leadership, and power as much as men do (Konrad et al., 2000; Van Vianen & Fischer, 2002). This study extends knowledge in the discipline by providing a unique perspective for women to consider about compensation and the independent

school headship. Two search consultants and one head of school shared that the significantly higher level of compensation for the head of school (oftentimes three to four times that of a division head) can lessen many challenges related to work–life balance by giving women the freedom to hire out many domestic tasks.

Women Lack Confidence in Their Qualifications for the Job

Seven of the 12 participants addressed the barrier of women's lack of confidence in their qualifications for the job, with more search consultants holding this perception than heads of school (five search consultants versus two heads of school). Participants described that when women lack confidence in their qualifications, they are far less likely than a man to apply for a job. The phrase "checking all of the boxes" was commonly used by both participant groups to describe the standard by which women evaluate themselves. Three of the five search consultants used the words "timid" or "tentative" to describe how low confidence manifests. All five of the search consultants also specifically remarked that men do not hold themselves to the same standard and, further, that men are more likely to apply when they are not ready.

This finding is aligned with the conclusions of Hartman and Barber's 2020 study that found that women in corporate America do not apply for positions until they are sure they meet all or the great majority of the job criteria. Also affirmed are findings in the literature related to "occupational self-efficacy"—the belief in one's ability to be successful in a job influences one's decision to apply (Bandura, 1997). Extending knowledge to the discipline of independent school education, this study provides evidence that hesitancy to apply for the headship is a barrier for women. The literature

also showed that women's inaction can be attributed to past experiences with stereotypes, bias, or discrimination (Brands & Fernandez-Mateo, 2017; Gipson et al., 2017); however, no confirming evidence of past experiences resulting in inaction was found in this study. Finally, this study disaffirms three studies by Fuller et al. (Fuller, Hollingworth, & An, 2016, 2019; Fuller, Reynolds, & O'Doherty, 2016) that there are no differences in job-seeking behaviors between men and women. Based on this study, there are important differences in job-seeking behavior between male and female head of school candidates.

As noted, women's low confidence in their qualifications is evidenced in women's interactions with search consultants and hiring committees. Four out of the six search consultants shared their perception that women are timid or tentative about vying for the headship and sometimes even openly apologetic and that this behavior has been observed throughout all stages of the process. Relatedly, women are more likely to focus on their shortcomings and are often slower to take credit for their accomplishments. These findings provide further confirmation of the literature on occupational self-efficacy (Darouei & Pluut, 2018; Hartman & Barber, 2019). Interestingly, although four of the heads of school recalled having doubts about their own qualifications for the headship, none of them shared that they acted in timid, tentative, or apologetic ways. It is possible that the head of school participants for this study did not act in this way and therefore do not perceive this barrier, as evidenced by the fact that they were ultimately hired into the headship. Nevertheless, how women present themselves during the process was an important finding given that women may not be aware of how they are presenting themselves to the search consultants who decide who makes the first cut.

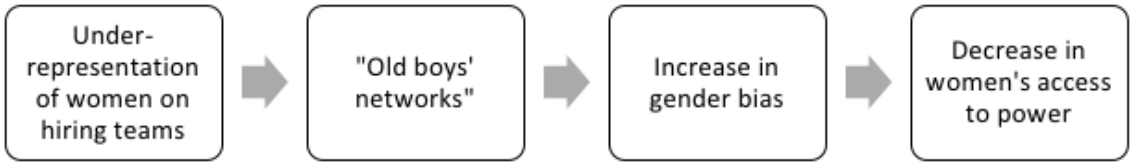
Theme 3: Underrepresentation of Women on Hiring Committees and Teams

The third finding of this study was that the underrepresentation of women on school boards of trustees, school search committees, and on executive search consultant teams creates a barrier to the hiring of women for the headship (see Figure 3). This finding emerged from the interviews with the search consultant participants in response to RQ2. This finding did not emerge from the interviews with head of school participants in response to RQ1. All six of the search consultant participants spoke about how male-dominated school hiring teams are more likely to hire men for the headship and, in doing so, perpetuate the status quo of male heads of school.

This finding aligns most closely with "access to power" from the theoretical framework of liberal feminism (Epure, 2014). Access to power difficulties are rooted in societal gender bias. Specifically, the underrepresentation of women on hiring teams results in structural barriers to women's access to power and, by extension, the independent school headship (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 1983). This finding about the importance of women as hiring decision-makers confirms and extends the literature about the barrier of social role incongruence to independent schools; namely, the similarity–attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971; Kanter, 1977), the status incongruity hypothesis (Rudman et al., 2012), the comfort syndrome (Magretta, 1997), the lack of fit model (Heilman, 1983), the bounded rationality theory (Simon, 1957), the cloning effect (Gronn & Lacey, 2006), and the "think manager, think male" premise (Schein, 1973, 1975).

Figure 3

Effects of Underrepresentation of Women on School Hiring Teams



Literature related to the glass ceiling (Loden & Rosener, 1991; Warner et al., 2018) and the labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2007, 2015) speak to the underrepresentation of women in management and access to power difficulties. These studies were confirmed or partially confirmed by this study. Literature related to the glass escalator (Cognard-Black, 2004; Myung et al., 2011) and glass cliff (Darouei & Pluut, 2018; Morgenroth et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2017) were not confirmed or were not specifically addressed by this study. The glass ceiling, commonly referred to as the "old boys' network," was named using both terms by one of the search consultant participants as a barrier for women to the headship. The other five participants described a glass ceiling and an old boys' network at length, but without using these specific terms. While the underrepresentation of women creates the problem of the glass ceiling, it was the participants' perception that greater gender balance on hiring teams is a key to shattering it. As such, the search consultant participants described women's involvement in hiring as both the barrier and the solution.

In terms of the gender composition of school teams, such as the board of trustees and the search committee, participants discussed the value of women not only sitting on these teams but also holding key positions like the board presidency and the search

committee chair role. The reasons were cited as two-fold: women can be disrupters of unconscious bias, and schools with women in leadership positions are presumably more open to the idea of a female head of school. This is supported by research showing that decision-making and recruitment processes continue to be fraught with gender bias when men occupy most positions of power (Acker, 2012; Bohnet, 2016; Connell, 2006; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Faulconbridge et al., 2009; Graves & Powell, 1995; Tallerico, 2000).

In the case of two-person search consultancy teams, the participants shared that having a man and a woman on the team is beneficial for women's candidacy, as opposed to the most common arrangement of two male consultants. Participants described how female search consultants can draw out and encourage so-called passive candidates, like women, who are more apt to question their qualifications. This finding confirms similar such findings by Manfredi et al. (2019) and Wright and Conley (2018). Additionally, the search consultant participants noted that they make special efforts to advocate for female candidates and that they can play a role in interrupting bias during the search process. This finding confirms the research of Doldor et al. (2016), which was conducted in the financial sector of the United Kingdom and which asserted that search consultants play an important role in affecting women's chances of being hired into leadership positions.

Finally, the metaphor of the "labyrinth" (Eagly & Carli, 2007) is used in the literature to depict the more complex process that women face when navigating career advancement and accessing power. The findings of this study showed that the proportion of female decision-makers on teams can make the labyrinth difficult for female candidates. Importantly, all the search consultants' comments about women serving on

hiring teams were infused with explanations of how women can play a role in disrupting structural inequities and increasing female candidates' access to power.

Limitations of the Study

The extent to which readers of this study can apply the findings to their own settings may be affected by a few factors. First, there was a small sample size of 12 total participants, with six participants in each of the two groups. A second limitation of this study is that it does not consider the variable of race and the influence that race may have on a woman's experience in attaining the headship. A third limitation of this study is that it focused on K–12 coeducational day schools; therefore, the findings may or may not be transferable to schools with a different demographic profile, such as schools serving a smaller age range of students, boarding schools, or single-sex schools. A fourth limitation is that this study was conducted with participants based exclusively in the United States and not all regions of the country are represented.

Recommendations

There are four recommendations for further study, which may extend knowledge within the field of independent school education. First, a similar study could be conducted that is inclusive of the perceptions of male heads of school and male search consultants. It may be informative to understand the perspectives of men regarding the barriers to the hiring of women for the headship and to compare them to the perspectives of women. Second, race is not well-understood in terms of how it may present unique barriers to women's advancement to the independent school headship. Incorporating an examination of the perspectives of diverse women into a future study would be in

alignment with what Snyder (2008) has dubbed the "third wave" of feminism, which rejects universalist claims about the female experience. Third, the perception amongst some of this study's participants that schools have been observed to seek out diverse candidates but then retreat to make the "safe choice" to hire a White man merits further exploration. This dynamic was not found in the literature reviewed for this study; therefore, it likely presents a gap in the literature. Fourth and finally, some head of school participants described backlash for coming across as too confident or assertive. Search consultants, on the other hand, stated that female candidates are not confident and assertive enough. This dichotomy of perceptions is not discussed in the literature and may be worthy of further exploration.

Implications

This study was an exploration regarding the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship from the point of view of both heads of school and executive search consultants. Because very few studies explore search consultants' perspectives, this study fills an important gap in the literature. As such, this study has the potential for social change that could affect women who aspire to the independent school headship, search consultants and consultancy firms seeking to grow their talent pools through inclusive practices, and schools striving to diversify their leadership team.

For women who are considering the headship, or who are already actively applying for the headship, the findings from this study provide valuable insight as to the barriers that women may face and, further, equip them with information that may help them do three things more effectively: (a) anticipate that societal gender bias and their

own self-doubts will likely surface during the search process, (b) preempt bias and self-doubt by getting prepared in areas such as governance and finance and by looking to successful female heads of school who are balancing home and work, and (c) navigate the process more effectively by finding a sponsor and proactively reaching out to search consultants for career guidance. Of value, this study provides female candidates with an inside investigation of the thoughts and experiences of the search consultants. As candidates' first point of contact in the process, the support and advocacy of search consultants is critical to a female candidate being recruited and moving forward in the process. Male search consultants may also benefit from this study through gaining a greater understanding of the barriers perceived by their female consultant-colleagues, as well as those of the female candidates. For search consultant firms, this study has the potential to help them see the value of increasing the number of female search consultants in their employ, as well as the value of placing a female consultant on two-person search teams whenever possible. Finally, this study has the potential to help schools as they embark upon a head of school search process. The findings may spur boards of trustees and search teams to explore unconscious bias and to involve more women as members and leaders on teams tasked with hiring decisions.

Conclusion

Gender equality in the workforce—and particularly in senior leadership—continues to be an aspirational goal in the United States. Despite centuries of activism and decades of legislation, gender equality has not yet been achieved. Within the field of education, women make up 78% of the teaching force (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics,

2020), but only 33% of the heads of school (Torres, 2017). Although some progress has been made, results have been mixed and there are clear signs that progress has stalled (Steele Flippin, 2017). Research within the field of independent education is limited in comparison to other employment sectors. Further, the perceptions of executive search consultants—important gatekeepers in the head of school hiring process—have been largely ignored. Thus, this study helps to address a significant gap in the literature.

This study explored the perceptions of female heads of school and female executive search consultants to better understand the barriers that women face in being hired for the independent school headship. Interviews with heads of school were designed to answer RQ1: What are the perceptions of female heads of school regarding the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship? Interviews with the search consultants were designed to answer RQ2: What are the perceptions of female executive search consultants regarding the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship? The two RQs together revealed three findings. Two of the findings emerged from the interviews with both participant groups. One of the findings emerged from the interviews with the search consultants only. The three barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship were identified as (a) societal gender bias (perceived by heads of school and search consultants), (b) limitations women place on themselves (perceived by heads of school and search consultants), and (c) the underrepresentation of women as hiring decision-makers (perceived by search consultants only).

Societal gender bias continues to play a significant role as a barrier to women's advancement. Automatic associations with men as leaders can be intractable and difficult for female candidates to overcome. Women also must overcome biases that motherhood will interfere with their job performance, as well as biases that they are less competent than men and not tough enough to make hard decisions. Study participants recommended that women be intentional about building their knowledge and confidence in key areas such as governance, budget, and advancement. Although these biases are frustrating for women, it is important for women to acknowledge their existence and to be strategic in their thinking about how to preempt and navigate them to their advantage. School hiring teams should recognize the role that unconscious bias plays in each member's worldview and be ready to engage in reflection and anti-bias training and, further, to challenge each other's thinking. Search consultants should help hiring teams catch and address bias when it does arise.

The second finding of this study was that women place limitations on themselves. Like the first finding, there was a great deal of consistency in the perceptions of both participant groups, thus making both barriers particularly worthy of attention. Qualified female candidates fear that they aren't qualified enough and, in a crisis of confidence, put roadblocks in their own way. Despite efforts by search consultants to coach and encourage female applicants, women's low self–confidence can persist. Women are also concerned about the demands of the job relative to the demands of parenting, and some choose not to apply. Study participants encourage women to look to sitting female heads of school who are successfully managing the work–life balance. Some participants also

suggested that the higher salary as a head of school affords women the freedom to outsource many domestic tasks. Additionally, female candidates were encouraged to seek mentors and sponsors who will help them network and prepare.

The third barrier emerged from interviews with the search consultants as a result of their experiences working with a variety of hiring teams and committees on numerous head of school searches. Consultants perceived that male-dominated hiring teams serve to reinforce and replicate the status quo of male heads of school. In their experience, having women involved as hiring decision-makers on boards of trustees, search committees, and on consultant teams can help to disrupt bias, increase advocacy for female candidates, and improve the chances that a woman will be hired for the headship. Beyond committee membership, the search consultants particularly advocated for having more women in key school leadership positions, such as president of the board and chair of the search committee.

During the course of their interviews, female heads of school and executive search consultants provided additional suggestions and takeaways that they wished to share with women who are considering the headship. First, several of the participants noted that this is an excellent time for women to apply for a headship. With what they are experiencing as a big wave of head of school retirements—called a "tsunami" by one of the search consultants—the demand for quality head of school candidates is growing. As schools seek more diversity in the applicants, there simply aren't enough women in the pool. Second, women should identify mentors and sponsors who can support their advancement to the headship in various ways, such as networking, career advice, and

interview practice. Third, female candidates should be their authentic selves during interviews and not pretend to be someone they aren't in order to get a job. Fourth, women who are considering the headship in the future would benefit from gaining experience in upper school leadership roles such as the upper school division headship. And fifth, women should take the initiative to reach out to consultants to inquire about positions and to seek help with planning their career trajectory for the headship.

Although societal gender bias persists and the headship remains male dominated, signs of change are appearing on the horizon. Executive search firms are hiring more female consultants and, as a result, more female consultants are running head of school searches. Additionally, many search firms are now offering anti-bias training to schools. As search firms work to fill a growing number of openings, more candidates are needed. Further, as schools demand greater diversity in the slate of candidates presented to them by the search firm, search firms are actively seeking to identify and build relationships with prospective female head candidates. Finally, it is important for aspiring female heads of school to recognize that one of the three barriers identified by this study is within their control. Women can improve their chances of attaining a headship by proactively reaching out to and networking with search consultants, finding career mentors and sponsors, building skills and experiences in important new areas, applying for headships before feeling 100% ready, and approaching the hiring labyrinth with greater confidence, determination, and pride in one's accomplishments.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol for Heads of School

Thank you for your willingness to be interviewed for my study regarding the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship. Based on your role in your school, your perspective and participation will help me with my research project. As you know, I am a doctoral student at Walden University. Before we begin, have you reviewed the consent form and do you have any questions about the process or the consent form?

This interview will last about 45–60 minutes. Everything you discuss with me during this interview is confidential so please feel free to speak openly. In order for me to accurately record our conversation, I would like to audio-record the interview so I can later transcribe the interview verbatim. The recording will not be shared with anyone else. If there are points during the interview where you would like me to stop recording, please feel free to simply let me know. You are also free to end the interview at any time.

Do you have any questions before we get started? If not, let's begin.

Interview Questions:

1. Please share why and how you chose to enter the field of education.
2. Describe the path you took from where you started in your career to today.
    a. How many years have you been a head of school?
    b. How many headships have you had?
    c. When was it that you realized that you wanted to become a head of school?
3. What factors have encouraged you on your career path?

4. What factors have discouraged you on your career path?
5. Regarding your current headship, please describe your experiences during the recruitment and search process starting with your initial contact about the position through to being offered the position?
    a. What personal characteristics or other factors do you think contributed to your appointment?
    b. Did you experience any difficulties during the process? If so, what?
6. Have you been a candidate in a search for a headship which you did not get? If so, please describe your experiences during that process and how they were similar or different to the process you experienced for your current position.
    a. What factors do you think contributed to you not getting the appointment?
    b. If you were selected for all/both appointments you applied for, why do you think you were selected each time?
7. Have you experienced as a woman in your advancement to the headship? If so, what were they and why?
    a. Internal barriers (self-imposed)
    b. External barriers (societally imposed)
8. How have you addressed the barriers, both personally and professionally, that you encountered?
9. Please describe any barriers that other women whom you know may have experienced in their career advancement to the headship.
    a. Internal barriers (self-imposed)

b. External barriers (societally-imposed)

10. What advice would you give to anyone who may be considering becoming a head of school?
    a. Would you advise a woman differently than a man? If so, how?
    b. What advice might you give to a woman that you would not give to a man?
11. What advice would you give to women who are entering a head of school search process?
    a. Would you advise a woman differently than a man? If so, how?
    b. What advice might you give to a woman that you would not give to a man?
12. What role do you believe executive search consultants play in determining who progresses through the search process?
13. What advice would you give to executive search firms and their consultants about how they might reduce or eliminate barriers for women?
14. What advice would you give to boards of trustees and school hiring committees about how they might reduce or eliminate barriers for women?
15. Is there anything else you'd like to share with me that I haven't asked about?

I want to make sure that I have captured what you have shared accurately and will be sharing with you a written copy of my analysis and interpretations for your feedback and I will welcome your feedback. Thank you for your time today!

Appendix B: Interview Protocol for Executive Search Firm Consultants

Thank you for your willingness to be interviewed for my study regarding the barriers to the hiring of women for the independent school headship. Based on your role in your school, your perspective and participation will help me with my research project. As you know, I am a doctoral student at Walden University. Before we begin, have you reviewed the consent form and do you have any questions about the process or the consent form?

This interview will last about 45-60 minutes. Everything you discuss with me during this interview is confidential, so please feel free to speak openly. In order for me to accurately record our conversation, I would like to audio-record the interview so I can later transcribe the interview verbatim. The recording will not be shared with anyone else. If there are points during the interview where you would like me to stop recording, please feel free to simply let me know. You are also free to end the interview at any time.

Do you have any questions before we get started? If not, let's begin.

Interview Questions:

1. Please share why and how you chose to begin working as an executive search firm consultant.
2. Tell me about your work as an executive search firm consultant –
    a. How long have you been doing it?
    b. Do you specialize in any specific type of school or region of the country?
    c. How many head of school searches have you participated in?
3. What do you find to be the most challenging aspect of the work and why?

4. Regarding the head of school search process, please describe the recruitment and search process starting with your initial contact with a potential candidate through to a finalist being selected.
5. What personal and professional characteristics contribute to a candidate's appointment?
6. In your experience, are these helpful characteristics more common in male candidates or female candidates? What do you attribute differences to?
7. What personal characteristics do you think contribute to a candidate *not* getting an appointment?
8. In your experience, are these unhelpful characteristics more common in male candidates or female candidates? What do you attribute differences to?
9. Do you perceive that there are barriers that women face in their career advancement to the headship? If so, what are they and why do they exist?
    a. Internal barriers (self-imposed)
    b. External barriers (societally imposed)
10. Do executive search firm consultants try to mitigate the barriers women face? If so, which barriers and how?
    a. Internal barriers (self-imposed)
    b. External barriers (societally imposed)
11. What advice would you give to women who may be considering becoming a head of school?
    a. Would you advise a woman differently than a man? If so, how?

   b. What advice might you give to a woman that you would not give to a man?

12. What advice would you give to women as they are entering a head of school search?
   a. Would you advise a woman differently than a man? If so, how?
   b. What advice might you give to a woman that you would not give to a man?
13. What advice would you give to trustees and school hiring committees about how they might eliminate barriers for female candidates in their own headship searches?
14. Is there anything else you'd like to share with me that I haven't asked about?

I want to make sure that I have captured what you have shared accurately and will be sharing with you a written copy of my analysis and interpretations for your feedback and I will welcome your feedback. Thank you for your time today!