Accessibility of Women in Educational Leadership in K-12 Alberta

By

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Abstract

This capstone paper investigates the systemic and cultural barriers that limit women's access to leadership roles within Alberta's K-12 educational system. Utilizing leadership theory as a conceptual framework, a comprehensive literature review was conducted, with thematic analysis identifying five interrelated themes: implicit gender bias, intersecting barriers of race, class, and gender, insufficient mentorship and sponsorship opportunities, gendered organizational structures, and policy shortcomings. The findings reveal that, despite progressive policy initiatives, entrenched biases and structural impediments persist, hindering women's progression into senior leadership positions. This research underscores the need for targeted policy reforms, inclusive leadership training, and enhanced mentorship programs to create equitable leadership pathways. As a capping project for my Master of Education in Studies in Educational Leadership, this work deepens the understanding of gendered leadership dynamics. It provides actionable insights for fostering a more inclusive and supportive educational environment.

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Introduction

Gender disparity in educational leadership, particularly in K-12 settings, is a significant concern. Globally, women are underrepresented in educational leadership positions despite being the majority in the teaching profession. This disparity is evident in various statistics and studies highlighting the gender gap in leadership roles. For instance, although women comprise a significant portion of the teaching workforce, they are less likely to hold senior leadership positions, such as principal or superintendent (Women in Education Leadership, 2022).

In Alberta's K-12 system, the underrepresentation of women in educational leadership highlights persistent gender inequities. In the article Open the Door to Gender Inequality: Viewpoint, Magnusson (2017), an executive staff officer with the Alberta Teachers' Association, highlighted that "while 74 per cent of Alberta teachers are female, the same can be said of only 41 per cent of principals, 44 per cent of assistant and/or deputy superintendents and only 11 per cent of superintendents" (para. 9).

The Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) has recognized these disparities and has undertaken research initiatives to assess and address the challenges faced by women in educational leadership. A needs assessment survey conducted by the ATA Women in Leadership Subcommittee revealed striking disparities in leadership representation. The survey found that only 13% of school superintendents in Alberta are women, despite the majority of teachers being female. Similarly, at the 2019 Provincial Executive Council, 65% of the 19 elected representatives were men, while only 35% were women. Furthermore, throughout the Association's history, just 15% (8 out of 55) of provincial presidents have been female (ATA Research 2020 Women in Educational Leadership Needs Assessment Survey, 2022). As of 2025,

the Provincial Executive Council, which comprises 20 representatives, consists of 60 percent men and 40 percent women (Provincial Executive Council | Alberta Teachers' Association, 2025). To date, only 8 out of 55, or approximately 15 percent, of the Association's provincial presidents have been female (ATA History | Alberta Teachers' Association, 2018; Milne, 2023; Provincial Executive Council | Alberta Teachers' Association, 2025). These figures underscore systemic barriers that hinder the advancement of women in leadership roles within Alberta's education system.

Several interrelated factors shape the persistent gender imbalance in leadership. Normative gatekeeping practices prioritize established leadership norms favouring men, leading to preferential hiring processes and limited mentorship opportunities for women. Additionally, gender stereotypes contribute to the perception that leadership is a masculine trait, further discouraging women from aspiring to leadership positions. Work-family balance also plays a significant role, as women in their childbearing years often face implicit biases that question their commitment to leadership roles. These barriers collectively create a leadership pipeline that is disproportionately restrictive for women (ATA Research 2020 Women in Educational Leadership Needs Assessment Survey, 2022, Understanding the Women in Leadership Barriers | Alberta Teachers' Association, 2025)

Intersectionality further exacerbates these challenges, particularly for women from marginalized backgrounds, including racialized, Indigenous, and immigrant women, who face compounded barriers beyond gender-based discrimination (ElAtia et al., 2024). Leadership development programs often fail to address the distinct challenges women from diverse backgrounds encounter, reinforcing inequities in access to leadership positions (Weiner et al., 2022). The issue is not a lack of talent among women but rather the presence of systemic and

informal obstacles that rarely impede and, in some cases, advantage male leaders. Discrimination, the absence of family-friendly policies and leave practices, biased leadership pipelines, pay inequities, and prejudicial recruitment and hiring processes collectively create stronger headwinds for women at every stage of their careers. These challenges intensify as they ascend the leadership hierarchy, limiting their representation in senior roles (Women Leading in Education, 2023).

Although global and national initiatives advocate for gender equity in leadership, disparities remain deeply entrenched, reflecting broader systemic inequities beyond individual ambition or capability. Given these findings, it is crucial to examine the systemic barriers that limit women's access to leadership positions in Alberta's K-12 education system.

Purpose and Significance

This literature review examines the challenges and opportunities influencing women's accessibility to educational leadership in Alberta's K-12 system. The review of the literature aimed to examine systemic barriers, explore intersectional influences, and evaluate policies and mentorship programs. The literature review findings aimed to contribute to the ongoing discourse on gender equity in educational leadership and provide actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and institutions to develop inclusive leadership pathways.

The question guiding the review of the literature

The question that guided this literature review was: What factors influence women's accessibility to leadership roles in education? The guiding sub-questions were:

- What systemic barriers hinder women's leadership progression?
- How do race, class, and gender intersect to impact women's leadership opportunities?

- What policies or mentorship programs support women's advancement in educational leadership?

Positionality Statement

As an international student and a woman of colour studying educational leadership, my perspective is shaped by firsthand experiences of navigating systemic barriers in leadership roles. My learning in the field of Studies in Educational Leadership informs my understanding of gender disparities in leadership. While I advocate for gender equity, I acknowledge potential biases in analyzing policies and mentorship programs. To mitigate this, I rely on a rigorous literature review and diverse perspectives from scholarly sources.

Scope of the Review

This review focuses on women's accessibility to leadership positions within Alberta's K-12 educational system. It examines systemic barriers, intersectionality, and policy-driven solutions, excluding leadership in higher education and corporate sectors. The study primarily analyzes literature from the past to ensure relevance to contemporary challenges and developments.

Overview of Theoretical Framework

The research employs leadership theory as a conceptual lens to examine the systemic and cultural barriers that shape women's access to leadership in Alberta's K-12 education system. Traditional leadership theories have historically been male-centric, reinforcing biases that limit women's advancement (Jogulu & Wood, 2006). Transformational leadership, as developed by Burns and further expanded by Bass (Northouse, 2021), provides an alternative framework that emphasises vision, mentorship, and collaboration, aligning with feminist leadership principles (Eagly & Carli, 2003). Additionally, an intersectional perspective acknowledges that women's

leadership experiences are shaped by race, class, and institutional structures, further complicating access to leadership roles (Bano & Fatima, 2016). This capstone paper integrates these perspectives to critically analyse gendered leadership barriers and explore how transformational leadership can foster inclusive and equitable leadership pathways in Alberta's educational landscape.

Method guiding the review of the literature

This capstone paper employed thematic analysis to review the literature. The literature analysis I reviewed revealed five interrelated themes that explore systemic barriers and opportunities for women in educational leadership in K-12 education: gender equity, policy and systemic structures, intersectionality, leadership development and mentorship, and organizational culture.

Data sources included program readings, leadership frameworks, and external scholarly literature, all of which were selected for their relevance to gender equity, intersectionality, and educational policy. This approach allowed for a structured and comprehensive understanding of how key barriers and opportunities intersect and contribute to the broader accessibility challenges in educational leadership.

Literature Search Strategy

I utilized the University of Alberta Library's online search system to ensure a comprehensive and well-founded literature review. I accessed scholarly databases relevant to educational leadership, gender studies, and policy research. The search focused on identifying peer-reviewed sources that examine women's leadership experiences within the Canadian education system, particularly in the province of Alberta.

The primary databases consulted included ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), Education Source (EBSCOhost), JSTOR, ProQuest Education Database, Web of Science, Scopus, Canadian Business & Current Affairs Database (CBCA), and SAGE Journals. These databases were selected for their extensive coverage of educational leadership, gender equity, and policy studies.

A strategic keyword approach was employed to refine the search. Key terms included "women in educational leadership" AND "Canada," as well as broader phrases such as ("gender equity" OR "gender bias") AND "educational leadership." Additional searches incorporated terms related to mentorship, leadership development, intersectionality, and policy reforms to ensure a multidimensional exploration of the topic.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were carefully applied to maintain the relevance and quality of the sources. The review focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and reports that examine women's leadership in Canadian education. Studies unrelated to education, non-peer-reviewed sources, and research centred on corporate leadership were excluded. Filters were applied to prioritize peer-reviewed sources, with a focus on Canadian and Alberta-based studies to further enhance the search. Citation tracking from key articles was also used to identify additional relevant literature. This systematic search approach ensured the literature review was grounded in credible, current, and contextually relevant scholarship.

Literature Review (Thematic Analysis of Literature)

In Alberta, women's accessibility to leadership positions within the K-12 educational system reveals persistent gender disparities despite significant progress in gender equality. Major findings indicate that women face systemic barriers, including unconscious bias, a lack of mentorship, and a lack of encouragement to develop as leaders (ATA Research, 2020 Women in

Educational Leadership Needs Assessment Survey, 2022). In this review, five recurring themes provide a comprehensive understanding of the systemic barriers and opportunities that shape women's pathways to leadership roles.

Implicit Gender Bias and Stereotypes in Educational Leadership

Gender bias and stereotypes continue to shape leadership trajectories across various sectors, including educational administration. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR, 2014) defines gender stereotypes as "a generalized view or preconception about attributes or characteristics that women and men possess or the roles that men and women perform" (para. 2). These stereotypes often operate at an implicit level, reinforcing deeply ingrained biases that influence perceptions of leadership. Carlana (2019) conceptualizes implicit gender bias as the unconscious associations and attitudes that influence individuals' understanding, actions, and decisions related to gender. These biases frequently manifest through stereotypes, which ascribe specific characteristics, attributes, and leadership roles to men and women, thereby perpetuating systemic barriers to gender equity in leadership. Traditional leadership attributes, such as assertiveness, decisiveness, and dominance, are often associated with traditional notions of masculinity. In contrast, traits such as empathy, collaboration, and nurturance, which are typically regarded as feminine, often receive undervalued attention in leadership contexts (Eagly & Carli, 2003). As a result, people often perceive women in leadership, particularly in the K-12 educational system, as less competent or practical due to the divergence of their leadership style from the conventional masculine archetype (Northouse, 2021). Implicit biases also influence performance evaluations; research indicates that organizations frequently hold women to higher standards than their male counterparts and that evaluators often undervalue their achievements (Mataboge, 2024).

Consequently, these biases hinder women's progression into senior leadership roles within the education sector.

Additionally, societal expectations concerning familial responsibilities further constrain women's career advancement. People often expect women to prioritize domestic and caregiving duties, which can limit their availability for leadership roles that require extensive time commitments and continuous professional engagement (Akinola & Naidoo, 2024). These structural barriers, rooted in societal norms, contribute to the persistent underrepresentation of women in top-tier leadership positions in education.

Empirical evidence underscores the pervasiveness of gender biases in educational leadership. Women Leading Ed (WLE) conducted the 2024 Insight Survey to investigate gender-based bias in education leadership. The survey, conducted between November 2023 and January 2024, gathered responses from over 110 women leaders across 81 school systems in 28 states, collectively serving nearly eight million students (Women Leading Ed, 2024). The findings revealed that 82% of women leaders reported experiencing external pressure regarding their appearance, speech, or behaviour due to their gender. Women of colour reported experiencing this pressure more (55%) than white women (36%). Moreover, 57% of respondents indicated they were overlooked for leadership advancement opportunities that male colleagues received instead, while 53% of superintendents reported that their gender influenced salary negotiations (Women Leading Ed, 2024). These findings highlight how perceptions of systemic gender biases manifest in concrete workplace disparities.

Recent scholarship further elucidates the implications of gender stereotypes for women's career trajectories in educational leadership. Sil and Lenka (2025) assert that gender role stereotypes shape how women perceive themselves and influence how their colleagues evaluate

them, impacting their professional mobility. This aligns with research by Essiomle et al. (2024), which examines gender biases within Alberta's K-12 education system, highlighting that women often experience slower career progression due to systemic barriers, including maternity and parental leaves. These interruptions frequently delay women's advancement into senior leadership positions. Similarly, Alhalwachi et al. (2024) discuss the glass ceiling effect within Oman's public sector, wherein institutionalized biases restrict women's upward mobility and perpetuate gender disparities in leadership pipelines. Hlatshwayo et al. (2022) argue that this persistent underrepresentation not only reinforces gender stereotypes but also legitimizes the belief that men inherently suit high-status leadership positions. These findings align with Alhalwachi et al.'s (2024) research in Oman, where entrenched gender biases continue to influence societal and institutional perceptions of leadership, ultimately discouraging women from pursuing executive roles.

Intersectional Barriers – Race, Class, and Gender

Intersectionality refers to how multiple forms of discrimination due to overlapping social identities based on gender, race, sexuality, disability, and class overlap and interact with one another (Crenshaw, 1991). This significant contribution by Kimberle Crenshaw led to the recognition that women's experiences in accessing leadership roles vary significantly and that multiple intersecting factors influence these experiences (Moorosi et al., 2018). Women from minority backgrounds encounter particularly distinct challenges in leadership due to systemic barriers in various professional fields, including education. ElAtia et al. (2024) assert that "intersectionality must be used as the lens through which to better observe and understand the complicated factors and ideologies at play within the experiences of women in educational leadership" (p. 106).

Research indicates that gender deeply interconnects with broader social structures, leading to compounded forms of workplace discrimination (Macias & Stephens, 2019). Dominant groups disproportionately occupy leadership roles within the education system, while racialized women face significant underrepresentation (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002). According to Fuller et al. (2019), race and gender critically influence whether educators from visible minority groups secure leadership positions. In the context of educational leadership, understanding the multifaceted challenges women face, particularly those from diverse backgrounds, proves crucial. The intersection of gender and race creates significant barriers for women of colour and Indigenous women who seek leadership positions in education. Findings suggest that racial and ethnic attributes inhibit women from obtaining leadership positions, making it even harder for women of colour to achieve higher-level success (Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017).

ElAtia et al. (2024) noted that some women from marginalized backgrounds may refrain from pursuing leadership roles due to the intersectional challenges they face. The education system in Canada has historically built itself on colonization and the exploitation of Indigenous people, which perpetuates systemic racism that affects both students and educators (Ajele & McGill, 2020). Socioeconomic background plays a crucial role in accessing leadership opportunities. Women from low to middle-income families face additional barriers that hinder their ability to afford resources needed for career advancement, particularly in post-secondary education. The financial burden and loss of work hours due to family responsibilities, including maternity and parental leave, restrict women's career progression more than that of men (ATA Research, 2020 Women in Educational Leadership Needs Assessment Survey, 2022).

In the United States, studies on gender and racial intersections highlight disparities between non-racialized and racialized women, particularly among Black women seeking senior leadership roles in education. Even as school leadership becomes more diverse at the assistant principal level, racialized women and men continue to experience lower chances of promotion to principal positions compared to their white male counterparts (Aaron, 2020; Johnson, 2021). Canada strives to be an inclusive society where people of all backgrounds can live and work together harmoniously; however, black women work twice as hard to prove themselves against racial and gender discrimination (Itai, 2025). Scholars such as Zajicek et al. (2020) advocate for an intersectional lens when examining workplace gender disparities, especially within racialized communities. Fuller et al. (2019) also emphasize the need to centre marginalized voices to counteract efforts that fragment shared experiences and hinder collective progress.

Lack of Mentorship and Sponsorship Opportunities

Mentorship is a developmental relationship in which a more experienced individual provides guidance, support, and advice to a less experienced person, fostering their personal and professional growth. Through mentorship, mentees develop essential skills, navigate career challenges, and build confidence in their abilities. In contrast, sponsorship involves a senior leader actively using their influence to promote a protégé's career advancement. Mentorship includes advocating for promotions, recommending mentees for high-profile projects, and creating opportunities that facilitate professional growth (Leadership Girl, 2024). Research indicates that mentorship and sponsorship are crucial for women's career advancement. Women who access mentors and sponsors are more likely to advance in their careers and attain leadership positions (Ehrich, 1995).

According to Mori (2024), mentorship programs provide women with valuable guidance, feedback, and support from experienced professionals in the field. These relationships help aspiring leaders navigate the complexities of educational administration and refine their leadership skills. Moreover, mentorship fosters networking opportunities, which are crucial for career development and professional advancement. Since leadership networks in education often remain male-dominated, mentorship helps women gain access to these informal yet influential circles. Networking opportunities empower women to overcome barriers associated with exclusion from leadership circles and foster professional relationships that support their career growth. Women Leadership in Higher Education (2025) discusses the enablers and challenges from the perspective of middle-level academics. It identifies that mentorship supports skill development by equipping women with key leadership competencies, such as strategic planning, adaptability, and team leadership. These targeted skills prepare women for the challenges associated with leadership roles. Confidence-building is another critical benefit, as mentorship helps women overcome self-doubt and improve their leadership potential. Confidence leads to increased visibility, resulting in greater recognition and promotional opportunities within the educational sector (Cheptanui et al., 2024).

Despite the benefits of mentorship, women in K-12 educational leadership in Alberta continue to face significant barriers in accessing mentorship and sponsorship opportunities. The Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) offers mentorship programs and resources for school leaders; however, several structural and societal factors contribute to the limited mentorship and sponsorship opportunities for women in leadership roles (ATA Research, 2020). Women in Educational Leadership Needs Assessment Survey (2022). One of the primary challenges is the 'mini-me' bias, where senior leadership positions, predominantly held by men, tend to favour

mentoring and sponsoring other men. Studies reveal that men often receive more mentorship and sponsorship from senior leaders who are predominantly male. This bias perpetuates the cycle of male-dominated leadership, limiting women's access and restricting their professional growth and career progression (Wikipedia Contributors, 2024, para. 1; Women Leadership in Higher Education, 2025). Another challenge is balancing family responsibilities with career advancement. Women often cite family commitments as a primary barrier to seeking leadership roles or participating in mentorship programs. Work-life balance challenges limit women's access to structured mentorship programs, further restricting their professional development. Furthermore, some perceive a lack of encouragement for women to run for elected positions within educational associations, discouraging them from pursuing leadership opportunities.

Additionally, some women believe they will not be taken as seriously as their male counterparts in leadership positions, further deterring them from seeking mentorship or sponsorship (Women Leading Ed, 2024). Moreover, the absence of strong female role models in leadership positions discourages aspiring women leaders from pursuing similar paths (Ehrich, 1994; Women Leading Ed, 2024). Representation matters, and visible female leaders can inspire the next generation of women in educational leadership. Research examining the role of professional mentorship in supporting women educators in government schools highlights the consequences of the lack of mentorship and sponsorship opportunities. Without sponsors advocating for them, women often find themselves excluded from high-level leadership positions. Many women receive mentorship and develop leadership skills, but lack the sponsorship needed to secure leadership roles. The scarcity of female leaders in administrative positions discourages aspiring women from pursuing leadership careers (Ehrich, 1995).

Gendered Organizational Structures

Gendered organizational structures in Alberta's K-12 education system continue to hinder women's access to leadership roles by reinforcing traditional leadership models and structural barriers that disproportionately impact women. Research shows that these organizational norms favour hierarchical, assertive leadership styles typically associated with male leaders, making it difficult for women to progress into high-level positions such as principal or superintendent (Moodly, 2024).

One significant challenge is the expectation that leadership roles require long hours, evening commitments, and administrative responsibilities that conflict with societal expectations of women as primary caregivers (Hoff & Mitchell, 2008). Robbins (2010) explores the tensions between equity and excellence in Canadian education. It suggests that women in educational leadership frequently face increased scrutiny and are expected to provide more evidence of their competence than men to be considered for leadership roles. This unequal standard results in slower career progression for women, often delaying their entry into leadership until later in their careers (ATA Research, 2020 Women in Educational Leadership Needs Assessment Survey, 2022).

Maternity leave and career interruptions exacerbate these issues further. Hoff and Mitchell (2008) examine the gender factors that influence school administration leadership, highlighting that family responsibilities often disrupt women's leadership trajectories, resulting in fewer opportunities for advancement. In Alberta, policies surrounding parental leave remain inadequate in addressing the long-term impacts of career breaks on leadership accessibility. A review of equitable school leadership suggests that revising these policies to support career re-

entry and aligning them with equity-focused leadership practices would improve opportunities for women in education leadership (Essiomle et al., 2024).

Additionally, organizational cultures in schools often reflect deeply embedded patriarchal norms that resist change. Hiring and promotion processes continue to favour men due to implicit biases regarding commitment and availability, particularly for women with young children (Halim & Biswas, 2024). While diversity and inclusion initiatives have been implemented in some districts, their effectiveness remains limited without systemic changes to hiring practices and leadership development programs (ATA Research 2020 Women in Educational Leadership Needs Assessment Survey, 2022).

Despite these barriers, some studies highlight promising strategies for enhancing gender equity in educational leadership. Equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) training for hiring committees, mentorship programs for aspiring women leaders, and flexible work arrangements have shown potential in addressing gendered organizational barriers (Essiomle et al., 2024). However, without fundamental changes to how leadership is structured and valued in education, women in Alberta's K-12 system will continue to face challenges in accessing and excelling in leadership roles.

Policy and Systemic Structures Shaping Accessibility

Policy and systemic structures are crucial in shaping women's accessibility to K-12 educational leadership worldwide, in Canada and in Alberta. Depending on their design and implementation, these policies can either facilitate or hinder women's advancement in leadership roles (OECD, 2020). Research highlights several key barriers embedded within policy frameworks that affect the accessibility of women's leadership.

Harris et al. (2024) highlight the absence of affirmative action policies explicitly promoting gender equity in leadership positions. In many jurisdictions, policies are structured to appear gender-neutral but fail to account for the historical and structural disadvantages that women face. This lack of targeted interventions leads to the continued underrepresentation of women, particularly in senior leadership roles within K-12 education (Davis, 2022). Even where gender equity policies exist, they often do not extend to intersectional factors such as race and socio-economic status, further marginalizing women of colour and Indigenous women in leadership pipelines (Chin et al., 2007).

Another policy-related barrier is the impact of maternity and parental leave on career progression. While Canada has relatively progressive parental leave policies, there are no robust mechanisms in place to mitigate the career setbacks that result from extended leaves. Women who take maternity leave often face slowed promotions, reduced networking opportunities, and biases against their commitment to leadership roles. The expectation of continuous, uninterrupted career progression remains the norm, disadvantaging women who must balance childbearing and caregiving responsibilities (Torres et al., 2021). Additionally, policies often lack structural supports, such as job-sharing, flexible work hours, or leadership models that accommodate diverse family needs, making it challenging for women to balance leadership roles with caregiving responsibilities (Akinola & Naidoo, 2024).

Intersectionality is another critical concern in policy discussions on leadership accessibility. Existing leadership development models and policies tend to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach that does not account for the unique challenges faced by racialized women and Indigenous women (Chin et al., 2007). Studies have shown that racial and cultural biases influence the way leadership potential is perceived, with leadership traits often defined through a

Eurocentric, masculinized lens. For instance, Black women leaders may be viewed as "too assertive." In contrast, Indigenous and Asian women may be seen as lacking the assertiveness required for leadership, reflecting racialized leadership stereotypes rather than actual leadership competencies (Agosto & Roland, 2018, p. 258). This systemic bias affects hiring, promotions, and leadership evaluations, creating additional hurdles for women of diverse backgrounds.

Moreover, the failure to integrate intersectional policies into work-life balance initiatives further restricts accessibility to leadership roles. Policies that address only gender without considering race and socio-economic status do not provide comprehensive support for all women. Research suggests that policies need to recognize and accommodate multiple and intersecting identities, as women from different backgrounds may require different forms of support to navigate leadership roles effectively (Itai, 2025). Without such intersectional approaches, existing policies continue to reinforce the exclusion of diverse women from leadership pathways.

Theoretical Framework

The persistent underrepresentation of women in educational leadership roles within Alberta's K-12 system underscores deep-rooted systemic inequities. Using leadership theory as an analytical tool, this study examines the barriers inherent in leadership that hinder women's advancement in leadership roles in K-12 education in Alberta. Historically, leadership theories have been predominantly male-centric, often marginalizing women's contributions and leadership potential. However, contemporary frameworks, particularly transformational leadership, emphasize relational, participatory, and ethical leadership characteristics that align with women's leadership styles. Therefore, this paper critically analyzes leadership theories about gendered

leadership experiences, assessing their implications for women's career progression in Alberta's educational leadership landscape.

Historical Exclusion of Women in Leadership Theories

To begin with, early leadership theories, such as the Great Man Theory, which dominated discourse in the 18th and 19th centuries, primarily associated leadership with innate traits believed to be inherently male (Jogulu & Wood, 2006). This framework systematically excluded women by equating leadership with hereditary privilege and biological determinism. Similarly, Trait Theory emphasizes attributes such as assertiveness and dominance, reinforcing the perception that leadership is a masculine domain (Bass, 1991). Furthermore, Schein's "think manager—think male" phenomenon, which was later confirmed as a global phenomenon (Schein et al., 1996), further entrenched gendered leadership biases. In a cross-cultural study of managerial perceptions in Japan, China, the United States, Great Britain, and Germany, Schein et al. (1996) found that male and female management students in multiple countries associated successful leadership traits with characteristics traditionally ascribed to men. This pervasive managerial sex-typing continues to limit women's access to leadership roles by reinforcing gendered stereotypes about who is perceived as capable of leadership.

Subsequently, the 20th century introduced behavioural and situational leadership theories, shifting the focus from inherent traits to learned leadership behaviours and contextual adaptability. Khan et al. (2016) discussed various leadership theories and styles in their literature review and identified that behavioural theories categorized leadership styles into democratic, autocratic, and laissez-faire approaches. Research later suggested that women predominantly employ democratic leadership styles emphasizing inclusivity and participation (Eagly & Johnson, 1990). However, findings from a large-scale meta-analysis of the literature on

evaluations of female and male leaders showed that women were devalued compared to men when they led in a manner perceived as masculine, when they occupied a typically masculine leadership role, and when the evaluators were men (Eagly et al., 1992).

Situational leadership theories, such as Fiedler's Contingency Model, further advanced leadership studies by emphasizing that effective leadership depends not solely on inherent traits but also contextual factors, including the leader's style and situational favorability (Fiedler, 1967). This marked a shift from earlier trait-based theories by recognizing that leadership effectiveness varies depending on the interaction between a leader's characteristics and situational demands. However, despite this theoretical progress, implicit biases in leadership selection and evaluation processes have continued to favour male leaders, particularly in high-stakes decision-making roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Eagly and Karau (2002) suggest that leadership prototypes continue to be gendered. Men are often perceived as more competent in authoritative and strategic positions, while women are frequently associated with supportive or communal leadership styles. These biases create systemic barriers that hinder women's advancement in leadership, as decision-makers may unconsciously favour candidates who align with traditional masculine leadership traits, such as assertiveness, risk-taking, and decisiveness (Jogulu & Wood, 2006). Additionally, organizational structures and cultures often reinforce these gendered perceptions by disproportionately rewarding leadership styles that conform to dominant male norms, making it more challenging for women to access top leadership positions (Northouse, 2021).

Notwithstanding the increasing presence of women in leadership roles, these systemic biases continue to shape leadership expectations and opportunities, limiting the extent to which women can fully benefit from situational leadership frameworks. While theories such as Fiedler's

Contingency Model highlight the importance of adaptability in leadership effectiveness, they do not inherently challenge the deep-rooted gender biases that persist in leadership selection and evaluation processes. Addressing these biases requires a more comprehensive approach that considers situational variables and actively works to dismantle the structural and cultural barriers that disadvantage women in leadership.

<div align="center">**Transformational Leadership as a Counter-Framework for Systemic Barriers**</div>

In contrast, transformational leadership presents a compelling alternative to traditional leadership models that have historically marginalized women in K-12 educational leadership. By emphasizing collaboration, mentorship, and systemic change, transformational leadership aligns with feminist models that challenge entrenched gender biases and structural barriers. Consequently, this section explores how transformational leadership serves as a theoretical framework to address key obstacles to women's access to educational leadership in Alberta's K-12 system, including implicit gender bias, gendered organizational structures, limited mentorship opportunities, intersectionality, and policy constraints.

Specifically, developed by Burns and later expanded upon by Bass, transformational leadership focuses on inspiring and empowering followers through a clear vision, motivation, and individualized support (Northouse, 2021). This leadership style contrasts with transactional leadership, prioritizing rigid structures and hierarchical power dynamics that often disadvantage women. Additionally, transformational leadership aligns with feminist models by emphasizing relational power, collaborative decision-making, and social justice (Eagly & Carli, 2003). As a result, integrating transformational leadership principles into educational institutions can foster inclusive leadership pathways for women.

Furthermore, implicit gender biases continue to shape leadership perceptions, often associating effective leadership with traditionally masculine traits such as assertiveness and dominance (Jogulu & Wood, 2006). Transformational leadership challenges these biases by valuing relational leadership qualities, such as empathy, mentorship, and team-building traits, which are frequently exhibited by women (Eagly et al., 2003). Therefore, educational institutions must actively incorporate transformational leadership principles into hiring and promotion processes to counteract these biases and recognize and reward diverse leadership styles.

Moreover, the hierarchical structure of educational leadership reinforces gendered power dynamics, with men disproportionately occupying senior administrative positions. Transformational leadership disrupts these structures by fostering inclusive development programs that encourage collaboration and shared decision-making (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Implementing equity-focused leadership training within Alberta's education system could create pathways for women to advance into leadership roles and contribute to institutional change. Equally important, mentorship and sponsorship play a crucial role in career advancement, yet women in educational leadership frequently face barriers to accessing influential professional networks (Cimene, Reilly, & Elçi, 2024). Transformational leadership promotes mentorship as a core practice, ensuring women receive guidance, support, and advocacy in their professional trajectories (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016). By institutionalizing mentorship programs within Alberta's K-12 education system, stakeholders can facilitate the progression of women's leadership by providing them with the necessary resources and networks.

Moreover, intersectionality further complicates women's accessibility to leadership roles, particularly for racialized and Indigenous women in Alberta's education system. Traditional leadership models often fail to address the complex interplay of race, class, and gender in

shaping leadership opportunities. Women of colour, Indigenous women, and women from marginalized socio-economic backgrounds encounter additional barriers due to intersecting forms of discrimination (Eagly & Carli, 2003). Consequently, transformational leadership, emphasizing inclusivity and empowerment, provides a valuable framework for addressing these intersectional challenges (Bano & Fatima, 2016). Thus, schools must adopt culturally responsive leadership training that acknowledges diverse experiences and promotes equitable representation in leadership roles.

Finally, systemic barriers persist in policy implementation and enforcement despite equity policies. Transformational leadership advocates for proactive policy development and institutional reforms prioritizing gender equity in leadership appointments (Kark, 2004). Therefore, embedding transformational leadership principles within policy frameworks can help Alberta's education system move beyond symbolic representation and create substantive opportunities for women leaders. By fostering an inclusive leadership culture, educational institutions can cultivate a diverse and representative leadership pipeline that advances gender equity in educational leadership.

Findings and Discussion

This review of the literature reveals a complex interplay of systemic barriers that limit women's access to leadership roles, and has implications for Alberta's K-12 education system. A consistent theme across the literature is the pervasive influence of implicit gender bias and entrenched stereotypes. These biases not only devalue leadership styles typically associated with women, such as collaboration, empathy, and mentorship but also perpetuate the expectation that effective leadership is inherently masculine. Such expectations are further compounded by

societal norms regarding family and caregiving responsibilities, which disproportionately constrain women's career trajectories in educational settings.

The literature themes also highlight the critical role of intersectionality in understanding women's leadership experiences. Women from racialized, Indigenous, and immigrant backgrounds encounter compounded challenges where gender intersects with race, class, and cultural expectations. While some studies underscore the universality of these barriers, others reveal context-specific variations that suggest institutional cultures and regional policies in Alberta may exacerbate or mitigate these intersecting forms of discrimination.

Mentorship and sponsorship emerge as pivotal factors in facilitating women's advancement; however, the literature consistently points to a significant deficit in these supportive networks within K-12 educational leadership. The phenomenon of "mini-me bias," where senior leaders predominantly mentor individuals who mirror their characteristics, perpetuates a cycle of male-dominated leadership. This dynamic is further reinforced by organizational structures that valorize hierarchical, assertive leadership models, thereby sidelining the relational competencies often inherent in women leaders.

Policy and systemic structures also play a decisive role in shaping leadership trajectories. Despite progressive measures, such as parental leave policies, the existing frameworks often fail to adequately address the long-term career impacts of these policies on women. The literature suggests that without comprehensive, flexible, and inclusive policy reforms, efforts to diversify leadership will remain superficial, leaving deep-seated inequities unchallenged.

Overall, the integration of these themes —implicit bias, intersectionality, mentorship deficits, and policy shortcomings —presents a multifaceted picture of the barriers faced by women in Alberta's K-12 educational leadership. Rather than operating in isolation, these factors

interact dynamically, creating a cumulative disadvantage that hinders women's progression into senior roles. This discussion situates the key findings within the broader K-12 context, underscoring the need for targeted interventions that address overt and subtle mechanisms perpetuating gender inequities in educational leaders

Implications for Practice

The findings indicate an urgent need for targeted interventions to address the systemic inequities hindering women's advancement in Alberta's K-12 leadership. Alberta school boards should implement comprehensive bias training and professional development programs that broaden the conventional understanding of leadership. These initiatives must emphasize collaborative, relational, and empathetic leadership qualities while integrating intersectional perspectives to ensure that the unique challenges women from diverse backgrounds face are adequately addressed. Redesigned mentorship and sponsorship programs should actively include female leaders, fostering networks that can support and propel women into senior roles.

Policymakers and school boards must drive systemic reform through revised policies and structural changes. This includes instituting flexible work arrangements, enhancing parental leave provisions, and establishing clear accountability measures for gender equity in recruitment and promotion processes. By aligning policy reforms with ongoing training initiatives and cultural shifts within institutions, stakeholders can create an environment that mitigates the current barriers and actively nurtures a diverse and dynamic leadership pipeline within Alberta's K-12 education system.

Limitations and Areas of Further Research

This capstone paper recognizes the limitations of its reliance on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed literature and policy documents. Such sources may be subject to

methodological constraints inherent in literature synthesis, such as potential publication bias and a limited representation of intersectional complexities, which could impact the generalizability of the findings beyond the specific context studied.

To enhance future research, it is crucial to conduct empirical investigations that engage directly with women leaders in K-12 education in Alberta through qualitative methods, such as interviews and case studies. This approach would help validate and deepen the themes identified in this study. Furthermore, research that explores the intersections of race, class, and gender would provide valuable insights into how various forms of discrimination intersect and shape leadership experiences.

My Reflection

As I contemplate my capping project for the Master of Education in Studies in Educational Leadership, I am struck by the significant impact this research has had on my understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with achieving gender equity in educational environments. Through this work, I have uncovered valuable insights into how conventional leadership models can be reimagined to foster more collaborative and inclusive practices. This journey has strengthened my dedication to combating systemic inequities and reaffirmed my belief in the transformative potential of targeted interventions in reshaping educational leadership. I am inspired by the possibility of creating equitable pathways that empower all individuals within the educational sphere.

In conclusion, this study has revealed that systemic and cultural barriers such as implicit gender bias, structural inequities, and insufficient mentorship opportunities continue to impede women's advancement into leadership roles within Alberta's K-12 education system. The synthesis of the literature has underscored the compounded effects of intersectionality, where

race, class, and gender interact to create persistent obstacles that limit the career trajectories of women in educational leadership. These findings highlight the urgent need for transformative strategies, including inclusive policy reforms, targeted leadership development programs, and enhanced mentorship networks, to foster equitable opportunities for all aspiring leaders.

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