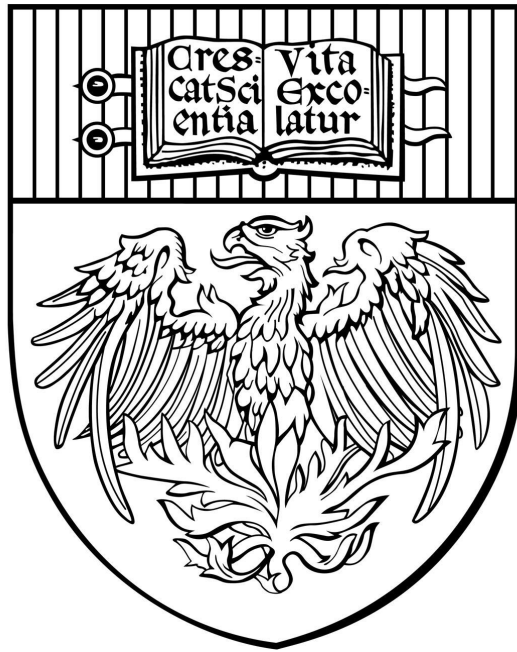


**OVERWORKED AND UNDERVALUED: EXAMINING TEACHER  
LEADERSHIP THROUGH A GENDERED LENS**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The Illinois State Board of Education recognizes the expansion of formal teacher leadership roles as a potential solution to low recruitment and high turnover in the teacher workforce. In a traditionally flat profession, teacher leadership roles create differentiated career pathways through which educators can experience professional growth and engage with leadership responsibilities, often while remaining in the classroom. Despite resounding research demonstrating differences in how teachers of different genders experience their careers and glaring gender inequities in the teacher workforce, the implications of teacher leadership for teachers of different genders are not yet understood. My research seeks to fill this gap in the literature, using qualitative interviews with teachers in an Illinois high school district to examine teacher leadership through a gendered lens. I find that unlike administrative leadership, teacher leadership successfully appeals to women teachers. Because teacher leadership is not valued as highly as administrative leadership, however, teacher leadership roles lead to the overwork of women teachers and reinforce the unequal valuation of “womens work” in schools.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Teachers in the United States are in high demand. Across the nation, public school districts are plagued by shortages as schools struggle to recruit and retain staff. These shortages stem in no small part from the low status of the profession; although Americans believe that teaching is important work, most report that they would not encourage their children to pursue it as a career, citing overwork and underappreciation (Phi Delta Kappa 2018). These public perceptions of teaching closely reflect actual educator experiences, as teachers largely leave the profession because of burnout, underappreciation, and insufficient compensation (Phi Delta Kappa 2018). Although it goes largely unacknowledged in education scholarship and policy, gender plays a clear role in these phenomena. Teaching is a highly feminized profession, with women representing 75% of teachers in the United States. Female dominated professions like this one consistently face challenges of low social status and pay (Levanon et al 2009).

With a motivation to entice educators to enter and remain in the profession, researchers and policymakers recommend the growth of teacher leadership roles in schools (e.g. Illinois State Board of Education 2018; Martin, Partelow & Brown 2015; Mehta et al 2015; Teach Plus “The Decade-Plus Teaching Career”). Moving beyond a historically limited set of formal leadership opportunities in school administration such as assistant principal, principal, and superintendent, conceptions of teacher leadership now include roles like teacher mentor, instructional coach, or multi-classroom leader (Bae et al 2016; Public Impact 2015). Part of a broader movement that aims to “professionalize” teaching, these teacher leadership roles offer room for growth within a historically “flat” profession.

Professionalization and female-domination in an occupation are historically at odds with one another (Gitlin & Labaree 1996). Despite the relevance of gender to the status of the

teaching profession, contemporary policy research in education frequently fails to analyze how teachers of different genders navigate workplace policies. Researchers in the United Kingdom have demonstrated the salience of gendered studies of teacher careers (e.g. Acker 1989; Moreau 2019), however these approaches have yet to be replicated and applied to policy initiatives in the United States or to teacher leadership at all.

This paper explores the consequences of teacher leadership roles for gender equity among educators. Traditional leadership roles in schools are highly segregating on the axis of gender; although the teacher workforce is predominantly female, school administration is disproportionately occupied by men (Thornton & Bricheno 2009). Women are subsequently put at an economic disadvantage and excluded from conversations and decisions around school policies and procedures. In my analysis, I critically explore how teacher leadership policies interact with these stark and pervasive gender inequities.

A single Illinois suburban high school district, called Suburban HSD in this paper, acts as the setting for this study. Through interviews with teachers and administrators in the district, I investigate whether or not teacher leadership is a feminist policy and if or how teacher leadership might be used to improve gender equity in the district and in Illinois school districts more broadly. Grounding my research approach in feminist policy analysis, I seek to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent do teachers of different genders need expanded professional growth opportunities?
2. How do teachers of different genders engage with teacher leadership?
3. To what extent does teacher leadership reduce or reproduce gendered inequities among educators?

The first research question aims to fill a crucial gap in policy research on teacher leadership which fails to disaggregate policy assumptions by gender. Among teachers in Suburban HSD, I find that men and women teachers are equally focused on career growth, but that women experience barriers to professional growth opportunities due their disproportionate family and caregiving responsibilities. Subsequently, research question two addresses whether teacher leadership meets this demonstrated need by presenting an accessible professional option for women. At Suburban HSD and across Illinois, I find that women readily engage in teacher leadership, in no small part due to communal understandings of teacher leaders.

Despite the appeal of teacher leadership to women teachers, my analysis demonstrates how teacher leadership can actually be harmful to female educators. Alarmingly, women who participate in teacher leadership frequently wind up feeling overworked or exploited. Furthermore, when addressing how teacher leadership fits into the bigger picture of gendered inequities, I find that implementations of teacher leadership in Suburban HSD do not take steps to equalize power or pay across teachers of different genders. In response, I identify recommendations for districts looking to develop teacher leadership policies that promote gender equity in the workplace. Building from some policies implemented in Suburban HSD, I propose districts take steps to protect female teachers' time and increase their valuation of women's labor.

## **BACKGROUND**

### *Teacher Leadership*

Formalized teacher leadership, a framework through which teachers experience differentiated leadership responsibilities while remaining in the classroom, is an initiative that has gained increasing momentum over the last decade (e.g. Martin, Partelow & Brown 2015;

Mehta et al 2015; Teach Plus “The Decade-Plus Teaching Career”; Illinois State Board of Education 2018; Civic Committee of The Commercial Club of Chicago 2004). Teacher leadership roles provide opportunities for growth within what is generally considered a flat profession, addressing a recommendation commonly raised by policy researchers investigating teacher retention and shortages. Some scholars also posit teacher leadership as a mode through which schools can expand the impact of effective teachers, however I follow Moreau’s lead in examining teachers independently of their impact on students and choose to focus on teacher leadership specifically as a tool to increase teacher retention (e.g. Public Impact 2015).

Notable innovations in the field of teacher leadership include the Kentucky Leadership framework, which outlines various leadership roles suited to varying “dispositions” of veteran teachers, and Opportunity Culture schools, a project by Public Impact that uses a “multi-classroom teacher” role to extend the reach of effective teachers while keeping them in the classroom (Kentucky Teacher Leadership Work Team 2009; Public Impact 2015). The latter model, used by districts throughout the nation, was first implemented in select schools in Chicago Public Schools in 2019 and has since expanded to additional schools in the district (Chicago Public Schools “Lead With CPS: Opportunities”).

In this paper, I make the distinction between formal and informal teacher leadership, following cues from previous literature (Danielson 2007). I define informal teacher leadership as when teachers are seen as or see themselves as leaders. Teachers can be leaders in the classroom, leaders among peers, or leaders in the school community more broadly without engaging in formal leadership roles. Formal teacher leadership, on the other hand, consists of structured roles that may be compensated or uncompensated like instructional coach or mentor teacher.



A number of Illinois stakeholders have advocated for increased attention to formal and informal teacher leadership, including the Illinois Network of Charter Schools, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), and other Illinois-focused policy and advocacy organizations (ISBE 2018). In 2018, ISBE authored the Teach Illinois Initiative, which included teacher leadership pathways among seven policy recommendations designed to combat teacher shortages (ISBE 2018). In the report, ISBE committed to funding and reporting on innovative teacher leadership initiatives and funding teacher leader endorsements from institutions of higher education (ISBE 2018). Subsequently, the agency piloted the Teacher Leadership Problems of Practice grant, a \$250,000 grant designed to “support districts in addressing local challenges to developing and retaining teacher leaders” with priority granted to applicants who center diversity and culturally responsive practices in their projects (ISBE “Problems of Practice Grantees”). Districts across the state have been recognized on a few platforms beyond ISBE’s Problems of Practice grant for work expanding teacher leadership pathways and opportunities, including in reports by Advance Illinois and the Aspen Institute (Advance Illinois 2011; Aspen Institute 2014). However, an exhaustive report surveying teacher leadership across all 862 districts in Illinois remains unwritten.

Districts in Illinois are embracing teacher leadership and are doing so in a wide variety of ways. Although ISBE has laid out some best practices for using teacher leadership to improve teacher retention, teacher leadership remains a fairly broad concept (Danielson 2007; ISBE 2018). When searching for partner districts for this study, I encountered a wide variety of implementations of teacher leadership. While some schools build structures to engage teachers in department-wide collaboration, others offer formal roles that require specific leadership responsibilities. Others still seek to build a culture of leadership, in which all teachers are

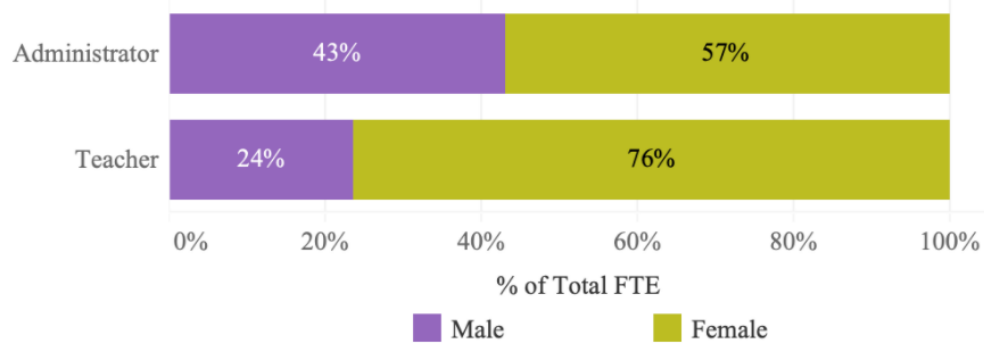
encouraged to lead projects within or outside of formal roles. Although the district included in this study employs many of the tenets of teacher leadership outlined in policy research, the particular teacher leadership structures discussed in this paper do not encompass the vast array of implementations of formal and informal teacher leadership that are possible, and in many places in Illinois, a reality.

### *Gendered Inequities in the Teacher Workforce*

The maternal, White, cis-gendered woman is central to how Americans understand teachers and has been since the rise of women in the teaching profession in the American public school system in the mid 19th century (Clifford 2014). This numerical influx of women and shifting norms about how adults were to approach raising children are both examples of what is often referred to as the “feminization” of the teaching profession (Moreau 2019).

Despite the centrality of femininity to discourse on teaching, vast inequities in pay, position, and power exist across teachers of different genders which harm female teachers. Inequities stem in large part from men’s disproportionate representation in administrative positions (Sanchez & Thornton 2010). This phenomenon is called “vertical segregation;” as one moves up the career “ladder” into increasingly prestigious, influential, and highly-paid roles, representation of women quickly decreases (Sanchez & Thornton 2010). At the highest level of educational administration, the superintendency, gender representation is bleak. Although women represent 75% of teacher positions in the United States, only one in four superintendents are women (Sanchez & Thornton 2010). These gendered inequities are especially clear and present in Illinois. Figure 1 shows that among Illinois teachers and administrators, men make up less than a quarter of teachers but represent 43% of administrators.

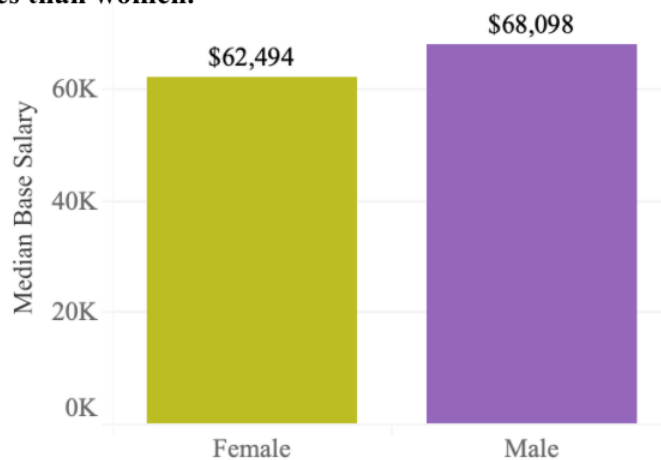
**Figure 1. Men are overrepresented in administrative positions in Illinois.**



Source: Illinois State Board of Education Educator Information System, 2020.  
Non-administrative and non-teacher positions are excluded from analysis.

Inequities in power are accompanied by a significant gender wage gap among educators. Across the United States, male teachers receive higher pay on average than their colleagues, with pay differences stemming not only from the overrepresentation of men in leadership but also the higher value placed on teaching in the grade levels and subjects into which men segregate (Verdugo & Schneider 1994). Male educators in Illinois have a median salary around \$5,600 higher than that of female educators, representing a 9% gender gap in base salaries (Figure 2). This significant gender pay gap is a glaring equity issue that future educator workforce policies must seek to diminish, not exacerbate.

**Figure 2. Among Illinois educators, men have higher median salaries than women.**



Source: Illinois State Board of Education Educator Information System, 2020.

### *Gender and Professionalization*

Attempts to professionalize teaching in response to teacher shortages across the country work in conflict with gender equity in the workforce. To begin, professionalization works to “elevate” the status of the teaching profession. Empirically, it has been shown that a high proportion of women in a profession lowers its status (Levanon et al 2009). Jobs that employ a larger number of women pay significantly less, and as more women enter a profession, its pay declines (Levanon et al 2009). In light of the relationship between feminization and status, it is critical to consider whether “elevating” the status of the profession inherently requires the exodus of women from the field.

Historically, it has in fact been the case that professionalization of teaching requires the removal of women teachers. Take as an example a critical moment in the history of teaching in the United States. In the mid-19th century, the rise of the American public school produced a profusion of new teaching jobs, leaving schools in every town and city eager to fill their

available seats (Anderson 1988). Simultaneously, with industrialization opening up new jobs, many men were moving into new industries, leaving vacant both new and previously existing teaching positions (Gitlin & Labaree 1996). A concern with developing and retaining competent teachers soon entered public discourse (Anderson 1988). The notion that teaching must be “professionalized,” meaning the occupation should become selective, elite, and characterized by high levels of subject expertise, authority, and discretion, quickly followed, leading to the advent of teacher preparation programs (Anderson 1988; Thorpe 2014). With a desire to incorporate selectivity into the profession and elevate the status of teaching, schools began to draw from graduates of universities and offer these candidates higher pay, despite the fact that the bulk of teacher candidates were excluded from these spaces on account of their gender (Gitlin & Labaree 1996). Male candidates, who had access to education, were siphoned into secondary schools, the ultimate location of professionalization, pushing women into elementary spaces. Efforts to appeal to desirable, meaning educated male, candidates while also staffing schools in the context of teacher shortages, led to a sharp increase in the segregation of men and women across elementary and secondary spaces which remains to this day (Gitlin & Labaree 1996).

This tenuous relationship between professionalization and gender, playing out against the backdrop of teacher shortages, provides the impetus for my research. In recent years, professionalization has again been posed as a remedy to teacher shortages, but little has been said about how these policies ameliorate, reproduce, or intensify gender inequities and segregation in the workplace. With the teaching profession featuring high levels of shortages and a numerical domination by women just as it did in the mid-19th century, will attempts to “professionalize” the sector replicate, or worse, exacerbate, gendered inequities?

## **PREVIOUS RESEARCH**

A significant body of literature addresses the mechanisms that lead to gendered inequities in the workplace. This body of knowledge has yet to be applied to the context of teacher leadership, however. While scholars have substantially investigated the impact of teacher leadership on classroom practices and student outcomes, little is understood about the implications of teacher leadership for equity among staff.

### *Gendered Barriers to Vertical Movement*

Even in professions numerically dominated by women, men are at an advantage (Cognard-Black 2004; Williams 1992). Formal and informal structures disproportionately advance the careers of men in numerically female-dominated professions, ushering them along what Williams terms the “glass escalator,” (Williams 1992). Some scholars debate the notion that men receive exceptional structural support in numerically female-dominated occupations as compared to gender-balanced and male-dominated occupations. However, Cognard-Black’s assessment of gender imbalances in teaching clarifies that male advantage is even more prominent in elementary schools, heavily-female dominated spaces, as compared to secondary schools, which are relatively more gender-balanced (Budig 2014; Cognard-Black 2004).

Institutional mechanisms that constitute these inequities across workplaces are described in detail by Ellemers, who analyzes structural reinforcement of gendered inequities in leadership structures, organizational culture, and advancement structures (Ellemers 2014). Ellemers posits that “under guidelines that promote meritocracy, men are generally more likely than women to receive rewards,” suggesting that policymakers must take an affirmative stance on women’s inclusion when it comes to designing teacher career pathways (Ellemers 2014). Starnski and Son Hing similarly contribute to an understanding of the mechanisms that reproduce and

intensify gender inequality in the workplace through analysis of discrimination in human resources policies and procedures across a variety of sectors (Stamarski & Son Hing 2015).

Within schools, there exists considerable research into institutional barriers to vertical movement, meaning the acquisition of administrative leadership roles. Bias in promotional structures is a key factor. In an analysis of survey data from the National Center for Education Statistics, Joy shows that men are more likely to be promoted to leadership than women (Joy, 1995). Martinez, Lopez, and de Cabo find similar results in their more contemporary global analysis of teacher survey data (Martinez, Lopez, & de Cabo 2020).

In addition to institutional factors, social structures that contribute to gender imbalances in leadership positions have also been thoroughly studied. Martinez, Lopez, and de Cabo find that women tend to have lower self-efficacy, meaning they are less likely to believe they are fit for a leadership role (Martinez, Lopez, & de Cabo 2020). In a meta-analysis of research around leadership, Koenig et. al find significant evidence that cultural understandings of leaders are heavily masculinized (Koenig et. al 2011). This study demonstrates salience across three theories of gendered perceptions of leadership. First, when people imagine leaders they are most likely to imagine particular men. Second, leadership is associated with culturally masculine traits rather than culturally feminine traits. Third, leadership is associated with agentic traits and actions rather than communal traits and actions. Agentic traits, which emphasize the individual and individual success are closely tied to cultural understandings of masculinity, while communal traits, which emphasize relationships to others and work that benefits a broader group, are closely tied to feminine stereotypes (Sczesny et al 2019). Blackmore's essay on the historical development of school administration demonstrates that these masculinist perceptions of

leadership persist in the education sector having stemmed in large part from professionalization efforts in the mid-nineteenth century (Blackmore 1993).

Also situated in the school environment, Acker and Moreau research extensively the ways in which teachers of different genders conceptualize and experience their careers and how that impacts their engagement with administration (Acker 1989; Moreau 2019). Particularly relevant is Acker's suggestion that career advancement is not as central to the thinking of women teachers, who are much more likely than their peers to be satisfied with a job well done (Acker 1989). This finding exists in tension with contemporary claims that teachers require additional professional growth opportunities. To address the conflict, in section one of my analysis, I investigate whether and how teachers of different genders conceptualize career growth.

A robust set of literature demonstrates how and why traditional administrative leadership roles exclude women teachers. Although the mechanisms that lead to a disproportionate occupation of leadership roles by men are largely understood, policy researchers have failed to apply this research to teacher leadership roles. My research seeks to fill this gap by understanding how and why teachers of different genders occupy teacher leadership positions.

### *Gendered Divisions of Labor*

Barriers to vertical movement outlined in the literature are inextricably linked to gendered divisions of labor; when women do not typically occupy certain positions, other women then choose not enter these positions (Pan 2015). Further, this segregation can strengthen existing mechanisms of inequity in the workforce. As men and women segregate, associations between perceptions of male dominated work and masculinity as well as between female dominated work and femininity are strengthened (Blackmore 1993). Additionally, as I discuss in



the background section, when women concentrate in certain occupational spaces, their work is valued less (Levanon et al 2009).

Within and across sectors, people of different genders participate in different kinds of work, with women typically engaging disproportionately in communal and client-facing work (Blau & Khan 2017; Pan 2015). Teaching is no exception to these problematic patterns of gendered labor distribution. Vertical segregation between administration and classroom teaching is a large part of the story; where men are more likely to hold leadership positions where they work on policy and decision-making, women are likely to remain in the classroom where they care directly for children and participate in peer support (Blackmore 1993).

Two particular aspects of the gendered division of labor have meaningful consequences for teachers' career trajectories and retention: emotional labor and care work. Hochschild defines emotional labor as work that involves emotional regulation within individual interactions (Hochschild 1979). For teachers, this involves navigating interactions with emotional students as well as with peers and colleagues while maintaining composure and providing the desired emotional response, be it comfort, sympathy, joy, or anger (Meier et al 2006). Women are expected to, and do, perform significantly more emotional labor in many sectors (Hochschild 1979; Webb 2001). This trend is particularly problematic for teachers, for whom emotional labor is statistically linked to burnout and attrition (Noor 2011; Cheung et al 2011).

Alongside emotional labor, women also participate in significantly more care work within and outside of the workplace than men. A large-scale study from the Center for American Progress shows that even among men and women parents who work the same amount at a paid professional job, women on average perform significantly more care work and domestic work (Glynn 2018). Further, women are much more likely to participate in caregiving work for

children as well as family members. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the backdrop of this study, the quantity of domestic labor taken on by women has only increased (Madgavkar et al 2020). These changes have subsequently caused women to lose their jobs or leave the labor force at much higher rates than men (Madgavkar et al 2020).

Women's disproportionate involvement in emotional labor and care work drives them out of the labor force. If teacher leadership is to be used to address issues of teacher retention and teacher shortages in Illinois, the relationship between these gendered workplace pressures and experiences with teacher leadership must be understood.

### *Race, Gender, and Teacher Leadership*

Teacher leadership has been studied from numerous angles for several decades (York-Barre & Duke 2004). Qualitative research honing in on human capital shows the positive impacts of teacher leadership on instructional practices (Gonzales & Lambert 2014).

Additionally, Shen et al's meta-analysis of literature on the impact of teacher leadership and student outcomes reveals that teacher leadership has a small but significant effect on student achievement (Shen et al 2020). Further, numerous qualitative reports identify teacher leadership as a key recommendation to combat teacher attrition (e.g. Martin, Partelow & Brown 2015; Mehta et al 2015; Teach Plus "The Decade-Plus Teaching Career"; ISBE 2018).

Despite attention from scholars toward teacher leadership, a key missing piece remains. Research on teacher leadership pays little to no attention to how teacher leadership interacts with social forces like race and gender. Qualitative research typically incorporates the voices of teachers of different genders, however, researchers consistently fail to disaggregate their data by race or gender (e.g. Martin, Partelow & Brown 2015; Mehta et al. 2015; Teach Plus "The Decade-Plus Teaching Career"). By ignoring this important analytical approach, reports fail to

illuminate anything about the relationship between teacher identities and teacher leadership. Further, how teacher leadership may impact systemic gendered or racialized inequities in the teacher workforce remains unclear

One notable exception to this trend is a qualitative report from Teach Plus, which identifies reasons for attrition among teachers of color (Dixon & Griffin 2019). Also addressing race and gender, Rathbone's dissertation "Teacher Leadership, Power, and the Gendered Space of Teaching: Intersections and Discourses" provides a critical qualitative analysis of how teacher identities inform teacher leadership (Rathbone 2015). These studies importantly hone in on the particular needs of teachers of color and female teachers, with Rathbone's thesis specifically delving into the mechanisms of gendered and raced experiences. Following the lead of these researchers, I aim to contribute to this small but important body of research looking to understand the career experiences of marginalized teachers as they relate to teacher leadership. Crucially, my study adds an attention to broader social structures, in particular systemic gendered inequities among educators, to the study of gender and teacher leadership.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS**

This paper follows social constructivist thought to conceptualize gender (Fausto-Sterling 1985). Drawing on the work of West and Zimmerman, gender is defined in this research as a social process, constantly performed, negotiated, and at times resisted by individuals in their everyday lives (West & Zimmerman 1987). The social construct of gender is understood as an organizing concept of society predicated on oppression, suggesting that the essentialization of gender differences would be a dangerous byproduct of this work (Fausto-Sterling 1985; Lorber 1991). Still, gender is central to how a person experiences every aspect of their life and thus presents a critical analytical tool (West & Zimmerman 1987). I approach this research with the

intent to highlight important differences in the needs and experiences of people of different genders without essentializing those differences. Without reifying them, I examine and challenge power structures that prop up and are propped up by the concept of gender (Lorber, 1991).

While gender is the central axis of identity used to analyze teacher leadership in this research, I recognize that gender cannot be understood independently from other axes of identity, including but not limited to race, class, dis/ability, sexual orientation, carceral status, and migration status (Crenshaw 1989). Within this research I work to incorporate an intersectional approach to analysis of gendered experiences whenever possible (Crenshaw 1989).

The remaining theoretical frameworks in this paper rely on an understanding of gender as an organizing element of society. In a seminal piece of literature from 1990, Acker theorizes the gendering of organizational roles (Acker 1990). Analyzing the role of job descriptions and evaluations, Acker demonstrates how conceptions of a role centers the body of a particular person with a particular gender. Acker's work critically critiques understandings of organizational roles as gender-neutral and lays the groundwork for an analysis of constructions of organizational roles in this study. However, there are stark limitations to Acker's theory in the context of this paper. In particular, Acker focuses heavily on bodies, while understandings of gender have transitioned greatly to understanding gender as incorporating largely social, as well as embodied, traits (West & Zimmerman 1987; Lorber 1991). Further, Acker focuses specifically on the male body, claiming, "Abstract jobs and hierarchies, common concepts in organizational thinking, assume a disembodied and universal worker. This worker is actually a man; men's bodies, sexuality, and relationships to procreation and paid work are subsumed in the image of the worker," (Acker 1990). While this theory may apply to other organizational contexts, such an

understanding of roles ignores the role of women's bodies, including focuses on femininity and maternity, in contemporary social understandings of teachers (Clifford 2014).

In order to understand how masculinity and femininity are imbued in professional roles in schools, I involve Sczesny et al's agency-communion framework (Sczesny et al 2019). The framework categorizes individual traits as well as activities agentic or communal. As the researchers explain, "Agentic content refers to goal- achievement and task functioning (competence, assertiveness, decisiveness), whereas communal content refers to the maintenance of relationships and social functioning (benevolence, trustworthiness, morality)," (Sczesny et al 2019). The categories of agency and communion reflect closely modes of work that men and women perform, including care work and emotional labor (communal) and traditional enactments of management or leadership (agentic). Sczesny et al also identify agency and communion as closely linked to masculinity and femininity; people of different genders are socialized into these particular roles, resulting in gendered divisions on agentic-communal lines.

Just as masculinity and femininity can be subverted, however, so too can gendered participation in these categories. Women can, and often do, engage in agentic behavior and male teachers in particular frequently participate in communal behavior. Other teacher identities such as race and sexuality may continue to complicate gendered relationships to these categories. Masculinity and femininity, therefore, do not cleanly map onto agency and communion.

The agency-communion framework is not without additional limitations. I choose this framework over a masculine-feminine paradigm because of the highly contextual nature of masculinity and femininity. Still, the agency-communion framework as a mode of understanding gendered work centers the particular cultural and demographic context of the researchers who brought it to being. Additionally, while I often imagine the agency-communion dichotomy as a

spectrum rather than a binary, Sczesny et al provide little language or precedent for a spectral approach to the framework. Thus, nuanced categorization of certain behaviors, traits, and activities may sometimes be lost as they are bucketed into these two modes.

Just as organizational structures and roles shape and are shaped by gender, public policy more broadly is tied up in the social process of gender. In the popular book *Invisible Women*, Perez reviews the consequences of largely male-centric public policies around the world (Perez 2019). Often, these consequences include excess deaths, injuries, and violence against women. Perez argues that the lack of gendered data disaggregation is a key driver of these policy failures.

While data disaggregation is important, it is not the only element necessary in a review of the relationship between gender and a given policy or program. Several more robust feminist policy analysis frameworks have emerged in the last two decades, providing a model through which to interrupt harmful gender-neutral policy analysis. In 2003, McPhail proposed such a framework. Without the incorporation of a gender lens, McPhail argues, gendered regulation, essentialization, and oppression is obscured (McPhail 2003). Their framework seeks to make women visible in policy, foregrounding how gender frames and is framed by public policy (McPhail 2003). Kanenberg, Leal, and Erich critically revise McPhail's framework, redefining and incorporating the concept of oppression and increasing the framework's emphasis on intersectionality (Kanenberg, Leal, and Erich 2019). Notably, notions of dis/ability and gender-nonconformity appear for the first time in the revised framework (Kanenberg, Leal, & Erich 2019). As McPhail outlines, the questions outlined in these frameworks present a starting point for analysing policy through a gendered lens (Kanenberg, Leal, & Erich 2019; McPhail 2003). Indeed, I pulled out a number of questions from Kanenberg et al's framework as a starting point for my analysis (Appendix A).

Building on the methods outlined by Perez, Mcphail, and Kanenberg et al, I construct three research questions, which organize the analysis in this paper. First, following Perez' crucial suggestion that it is critical to disaggregate data by gender and Kanenberg et al's question, "Is the white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied male experience used as a standard? Are results extrapolated from male experience and then applied to women?" I interrogate the underlying assumptions in the design of teacher leadership as a mode to increase teacher retention. Specifically, I hone in on the assumption that teachers demand career growth, asking: to what extent do teachers of different genders need expanded professional growth opportunities?

Next, I continue to disaggregate teacher leadership data by gender, aiming to understand the experiences of teachers and administrators within the context of teacher leadership, asking: how do teachers of different genders engage with teacher leadership? Finally, in the final section I draw on Kanenberg et al's focus on power relations to situate teacher leadership within the broader power structures in a school, asking: to what extent does teacher leadership reduce or reproduce gendered inequities in schools?

## **DATA AND METHODS**

To address the research questions highlighted above, I draw from qualitative interviews with educators in an Illinois public school district. Although it limits the scope of generalizability, qualitative data is well suited to the study of gender and teacher leadership. For example, I understand gender as a social process and just one component of an intersectional identity, meaning that the binary gender typology used in the quantitative data does not encompass the full depth of how gender informs a person's everyday life (West & Zimmerman 1987). Additionally, because teacher leadership roles are often informal, most are not visible in state-level educator workforce data. Even many formal leadership appointments within

committees, extracurriculars, or professional learning teams are not captured in the publicly available data. In-depth qualitative research is necessary, therefore, to capture the full breadth of teacher leadership roles and experiences.

Numerous studies have successfully employed interview-based research to fuel an understanding of how teachers of different genders approach their careers and navigate workplace structures (Dixon & Griffin 2019; Acker 1989; Moreau 2019; Breshears 2004). In this study I reproduce these methods in the new state and policy context with the additional use of gender as a unit of analysis.

Several themes discussed in the results section, including gendered perceptions of teacher leaders, could be investigated through textual analysis of policy documents issued by the Illinois State Board of Education and other education policy organizations. However, these policy documents do not reflect how personnel in the field conceive of teacher leadership. This perspective is key to understanding the implementation, not just the design, of teacher leadership policies.

### *Case Study Selection*

Each district, and in many cases each school, addresses teacher leadership in different ways. Because district policy is so central to how teacher leadership is implemented, I organized my qualitative research around a single district. Illinois is home to 863 school districts; to narrow my selection, I limited candidates for the study to districts who had demonstrated a commitment to teacher leadership, either by applying to ISBE's Educator Effectiveness grant or appearing in literature, including policy briefs and journalism, on teacher leadership. I inferred from the districts' demonstrated commitment to teacher leadership that personnel at these districts would be familiar with concepts of teacher leadership in interviews and that these districts were likely



to be innovating around how they develop and utilize teacher leaders. I reached out to several of these districts and performed interviews with a small number of staff in two before forming a strong relationship with administration at a suburban high school district, referred to in this paper as Suburban HSD, and deciding to concentrate my data collection there.

Suburban HSD is a large suburban district with three high schools. The teaching population is over 90% White while the student population is just over half White, nearly a quarter Latinx, and around 15% Asian. The suburbs from which Suburban HSD pull students are relatively affluent and the teachers are paid well above the state average salary (Illinois District Report Card 2020). Suburban HSD's teachers also have a higher retention rate than the state average. As is true in most high school districts, the gender breakdown of educators at Suburban HSD is close to parity, with slightly more women teachers. Because I compare experiences across genders, access to male public school teachers was critical to the study and working in an environment where they are plentiful was advantageous.

### *Qualitative Data*

Qualitative data for this study are drawn from a series of 30 minute semi-structured interviews with teachers, counselors, psychologists, and school or district administrators from Suburban HSD. Interviews were conducted over Zoom and were audio recorded with the interviewee's consent. Because my research focuses on teacher leadership, I restricted the administrator population included in the study to former educators. I did find that school counselors and psychologists engaged in similar ways as classroom teachers with formal and informal leadership throughout the district, and so I chose to include them in my study.

I completed 38 interviews with educators in Suburban HSD, including 23 women and 15 men. Interviewees spanned a number of positions, with 21 teachers, including 3 instructional

coaches, 3 counselors or psychologists, and 14 administrators, including 10 department chairs. The majority of interviewees were White, with 4 identifying as Hispanic or Latinx and 1 identifying as another race. Teachers and administrators came from a variety of subjects and departments and were pulled from all three high schools that make up the district.

Before diving into teacher and administrator case studies, I held an informational interview with a district-level administrator to obtain a baseline understanding of teacher leadership roles in the district. With the help of this district administrator, I contacted a random sample of teachers and administrators in the district via email.

Teachers and administrators were asked how they think about their career path and what structures in their school environment contributed to how they approached their career. I also asked teachers to describe a time or a way in which when their identity informed their career paths. While I made it clear to interviewees that my study was about gender, I intentionally left this question open to allow interviewees to talk about aspects of their identity that were important to them. Teachers and administrators were also asked about whether they consider themselves leaders in their school. Finally, interviewees were asked what they look for in school leaders and how they would describe their current school leadership. The interview protocol is included in the appendix (Appendix B).

Interviews were deductively coded for (a) gendered experiences and (b) gendered patterns in experience. For the former, I identified and coded moments when gender identity informed teacher experiences. For the latter, I pre-established areas of interest based on my research questions and coded for responses which would then later be disaggregated by gender. Codes were then combined and organized into themes that formulated my responses to each research question.

### *Quantitative Data*

Some quantitative data is used throughout my analysis to contextualize claims or explore patterns at the state level. Supporting descriptive analyses are conducted using data from ISBE's Employment Information System (EIS). Specifically, I draw from a single publicly available dataset from the 2019-2020 school year which includes demographic, employer, salary, and position data for Illinois public school personnel.

As discussed, teacher leadership is poorly represented in the EIS data. The most prevalent leadership position that is included is instructional coach; roles like mentor teacher, PLT leader, or club coordinator are not available in the public-facing data. Some positions like technology coordinator that are present in the EIS data may fall into the category of teacher leadership in some districts, however for simplicity and consistency, I focus on the instructional coaching position when analyzing data on teacher leaders across Illinois.

### *Study Limitations and Researcher Positionality*

A primary limitation of this work is the overrepresentation of privileged experiences. Suburban HSD is a predominantly White district in an affluent region. While many of the teachers who work there are from low-income backgrounds or were first-generation college students, most exist in a relatively high level of economic and social privilege. Further, experiences that were shared with me largely centered heterosexual relationships and gender conforming identities. I myself am a cis-gendered White woman and that perspective influences my work. I study the experiences of marginalized women and gender minorities, but my entrance into this field stemmed from knowledge of the experiences of largely privileged White women in my life. While I attempt to acknowledge how the White and privileged perspectives of myself

and my interviewees frame both the results and analysis in relevant moments throughout the paper, in reality this perspective is imbued in every moment of the work.

Secondarily, this research is limited in its generalizability. The interview data represents a selection of voices in a single district with a particular set of norms and policies around teacher leadership and is not representative of the experiences of teachers or diversity of approaches to teacher leadership in the state of Illinois overall. The work is not meant to prove causes, trends, or effects that apply across all teacher leadership structures, but rather to generate meaningful insights that promote equitable gender-responsive teacher workforce policy implementation. This research can be used by Suburban HSD and other districts as a starting point for analyzing and unpacking how teacher career policies interact with gendered inequities in the workplace.

Finally, gender differences in perspectives, behavior, and experiences identified in my analysis should not be interpreted as natural or inevitable. Rather than reifying gender categories, these results are meant to highlight how teachers who are products of a gendered society are later punished for their compliance, or non-compliance, with gender. Gender is inherently violent and oppressive, but within the scope of this research I seek to do what I can to mitigate a small portion of its harm which has significant consequences for the careers and lives of teachers.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Section 1: Demand and Access to Professional Growth Opportunities for Teachers of Different Genders**

Policymakers in Illinois seek to use teacher leadership roles to expand growth opportunities for teachers in order to incentivize them to remain in the profession. To interrogate the relevance of this goal for women, I explored how teachers of different genders perceived

professional growth. In an analysis of interview data from 38 educators in Suburban HSD, I found that although female interviewees were just as likely as their male counterparts to value substantial professional growth opportunities, gendered barriers often hindered women's access to these opportunities. There existed, therefore, an opportunity for teacher leadership to improve access to professional growth opportunities for women in Suburban HSD.

#### *Demand for Professional Growth Opportunities among Teachers of Different Genders*

In order to understand how educators think about career growth, I asked interviewees to describe their career paths in addition to their future career goals. My data revealed little evidence that gender played a role in perceptions of the importance of career growth. For 12 out of 13 administrators, choices to advance into administration were predicated at least in part on the realization that they needed to grow or seek a new challenge. Many administrators entered their roles knowing that they would eventually grow into leadership roles, while others discovered mid-way through their career that they wanted new challenges that could be found in an administrative role.

Similarly, among teachers, psychologists, and counselors, 20 of 23 interviewees mentioned the importance of growth opportunities, specifically ongoing challenges, when describing how they thought about their future career. For some, the classroom environment provided sufficient opportunities for growth (N = 7). These educators, evenly split across men and women in the sample, often discussed broader paradigm shifts in education, including the introduction of new evaluation frameworks, in addition to the complex needs of their students, when justifying their decisions to stay in the classroom. The ever-changing education landscape and the complexity of teaching presented ongoing challenges and demanded constant growth and improvement, satisfying these teachers' need for professional growth.

Interestingly, insecurity was common among female interviewees who found satisfaction remaining in the classroom for the remainder of their careers and largely absent among men in this category. When asked about their future career goals, two women prefaced their decision to stay in the classroom with “It’s weird, but…” and “It’s strange, but…” Similarly, when discussing her vision for her career, Sophia, a White female teacher, pointed out:

In my current department I have some really good role models for people who are really good classroom teachers who are very content with being classroom teachers and don't want to be department heads, so it's nice to feel like that is an okay trajectory for my current career path. I don't have to try and push up to a higher power level.

As I discuss further in section three, gendered forces from inside and outside of schools put pressure on female teachers to advance in their careers even when they were content in one place. Sophia’s experience demonstrates, however, how organizational culture and practices can affect these experiences. In her case, seeing respect for veteran teachers who have not advanced into formal leadership positions helped her feel more secure about her career choices.

Not all interviewees had an environment or ethos that fostered satisfaction with remaining in the classroom throughout the duration of their careers. Those who ultimately looked outside the classroom for professional growth found it in four ways: through vertical movement, meaning advancement into administrative roles, horizontal movement, meaning changes in school or position without advancement into higher paid leadership or administrative roles, professional learning, and teacher leadership. Gendered barriers to vertical movement have already been closely documented in the literature (e.g. Koenig et. al 2011; Martinez, Lopez, and de Cabo 2020). In the next section, I demonstrate that women interviewees also faced gendered barriers when accessing other modes of professional growth, specifically horizontal movement

and professional learning. Gendered access to and engagement with the fourth mode of professional growth, teacher leadership, is discussed in depth in section two.

*Access to Professional Growth Opportunities among Teachers of Different Genders*

In order to satisfy desires for professional growth, some teachers moved horizontally, between subjects, schools, or districts. For example, mid way through his career, Mark, a White male teacher, chose to challenge himself professionally by transferring to another school in the district with a very different population of students than his original place of work. Similarly, Shelby, a White female psychologist, transferred from one district to another after and changed grade levels after feeling like she was ready for a new challenge in her career. Although the move granted Shelby the new challenge she was looking for in her student population, she had to sacrifice the relational capital she had built up at her old school. She describes the transition:

I just had this career shift, and I was at a point where I was sort of like very much a leader in my own building...with like this you know students and staff and I worked really closely with administrators, and I felt like I like needed a new challenge which is why I was kind of ready for a shift. I've had a tough time this year in my transition, like learning to have to bite my tongue because I'm not a leader like I was in my old district. I haven't established that role yet.

Horizontal movement is not without cost. For Shelby and for other teachers who experienced changes in their district or school, a horizontal transition resulted in lost status as a leader. Even movement across departments within the same district or school has a cost: Grace, a White female teacher who was made to change departments in response to a subject area shortage, found her status as a leader was completely lost after this transition.

Caregiving responsibilities, disproportionately held by women, make horizontal movement particularly costly for female educators. One White female instructional coach, Rachel, doesn't even see such a transition as an option in her career:

I had already been teaching in this district for, I don't know, 15 years or something like that and there were no options for moving. If I wanted to do a different job, if I wanted to teach somewhere else, I couldn't. I had a friend who left her position after 15 years, and basically had to start over as an elementary teacher instead of a high school teacher and with a much lower pay scale because they wouldn't give her credit for her years. So I realized that like in the future if I wanted to make any changes or have more stability. I needed to do an administrative degree to give me more options, so I wouldn't necessarily have to take a pay cut. I'm probably the primary supporter of my family I have the insurance for my family and stuff so I knew I needed to have some solid plans.

Among my interviewees, women were far more likely than men to mention that their status as primary financial supporter of a family was a driver of career decisions. For this reason, the risk of taking a pay cut in a transition made horizontal movement less accessible for female teachers. Because of their disproportionate care-giving responsibilities, women interviewees were also more likely to bring up mobility issues as a barrier to horizontal movement. For example, although Meg, a White female teacher, stated that she would be interested in returning to a previous district, feeling ready to tackle the challenges of those particular schools, she brushed it off as an impossibility, stating, "I would love to go back but, you know, you build a life." Horizontal movement, much like vertical movement, is hampered by gendered barriers and often seems like a distant possibility, or a costly undertaking, for women who support a family.

Educators at Suburban HSD also sought growth through professional learning opportunities like additional schooling, certifications, and professional development. Caregiving responsibilities pressed on women's time and presented barriers to engaging in these opportunities, which often took place outside of the school day. When asked about her future career goals, White female teacher and single mother Helen responded:

I just want to be a good teacher like and explore things that are interesting and valuable to me so I thought I could do like national boards, and then I realized there isn't time for that because my kids... for like three months straight they didn't go to [their father's] house, any of them. Usually they're with me the majority of



time but they didn't go to him at all. I was like, there's no way I can try to do national boards like now, you know.

The time demands of single parenthood made out of school professional learning challenging, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to note that despite these constraints, many female teachers whom I interviewed engaged in professional learning outside of work, especially through higher education. In the third section of this paper, I engage more in-depth with this phenomenon, exploring how gendered workplace pressures caused female teachers to overwork themselves by engaging with extra professional growth opportunities despite time constraints from family responsibilities.

To provide opportunities for professional growth while limiting work performed outside of the school day, Suburban HSD built in time for professional learning throughout the school day. Teachers were typically offered at least one release period per day for leadership or professional learning opportunities, and some teachers were offered more time depending on their leadership responsibilities. As Mark, Helen, and Shelby's stories demonstrate, the professional development or leadership opportunities that happened during this release time were not always enough to meet a teacher's professional needs, however. Teachers in the district still sought extra growth opportunities through professional learning outside of the school day or vertical or horizontal movement. Helen's story specifically illustrates that despite the benefits of release time for professional development for parents, the policy did not eliminate the barriers to professional learning that caregivers faced. In the policy recommendation section, I revisit this policy and describe how expanding it may continue to improve equity in Suburban HSD.

In light of gendered barriers to other modes of professional growth, I see an opportunity for teacher leadership to improve gender equity by providing growth opportunities that meet the

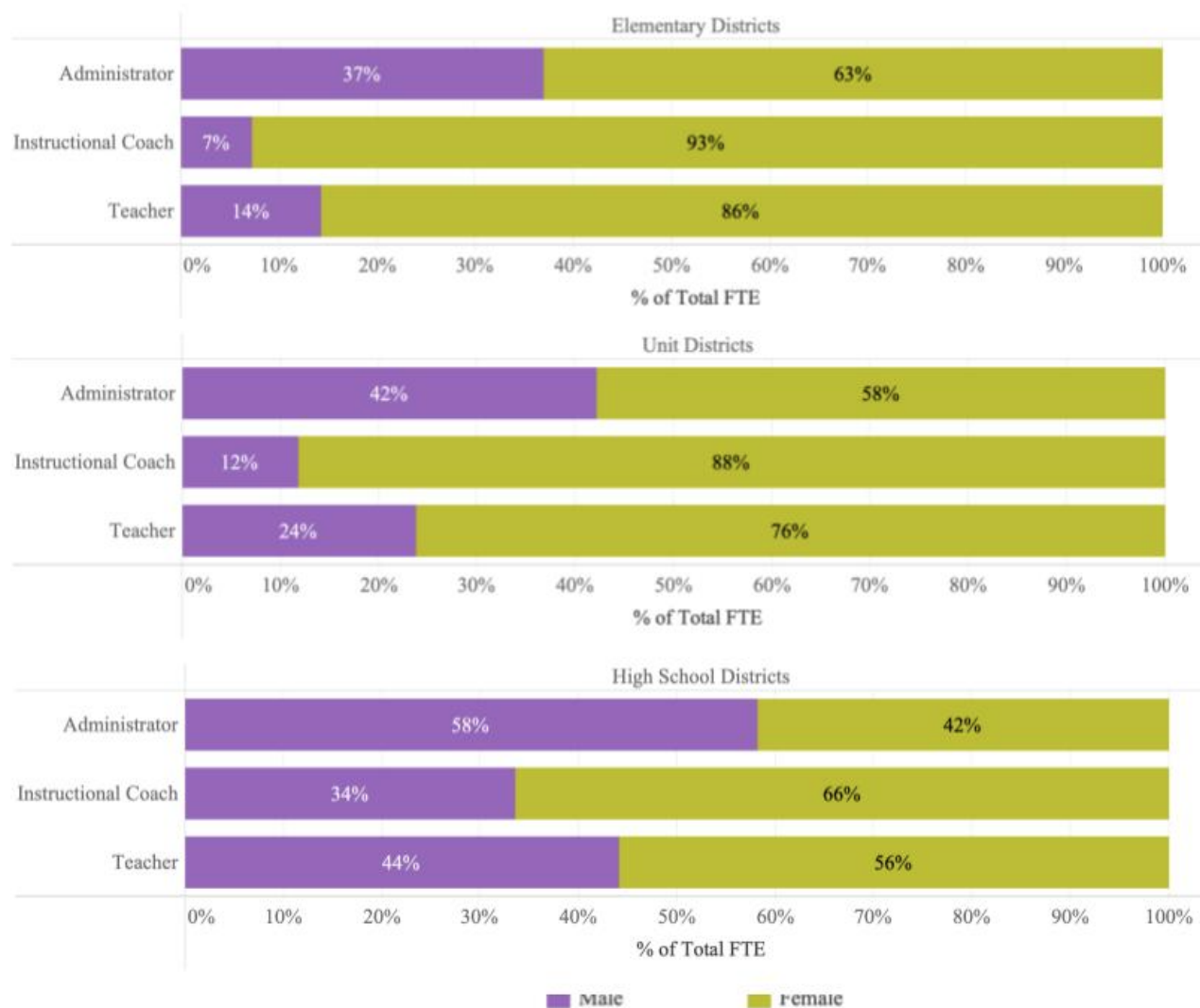
needs of women teachers, specifically those who are caregivers. In the next section, I investigate whether and how teacher leadership rises to the challenge.

## **Section 2: Access to Teacher Leadership for Teachers of Different Genders**

In stark contrast to administrative leadership, with which women are disproportionately less likely to engage, women were very likely to participate in teacher leadership in Suburban HSD and across the state of Illinois. A few factors explain the accessibility of teacher leadership for women, including the perceived family-friendliness of teacher leadership and educators' perceptions of teacher leaders and teacher leadership work as communal.

### *Engagement with Teacher Leadership for Teachers of Different Genders*

Across Illinois, I found that women teachers were very likely to engage in formal teacher leadership roles. When analyzing state-level data, I honed in on the role of the instructional coach, as it was the most consistently reported teacher leadership role across districts in available educator workforce data. Figure 3 shows that in 2020, female educators in Illinois were disproportionately represented among instructional coaches.

**Figure 3. Gender Breakdown of Teachers, Instructional Coaches and Administrators in Illinois**

Source: ISBE EIS data, 2020. Roles that are not classified under administration, instructional coaching, or teaching are not included.

Among teachers, instructional coaches, and administrators in Illinois in 2020, women were two and a half times more likely to be instructional coaches than men. Figure 3 demonstrates that the pattern persisted across different kinds of districts, suggesting that the gender gap could be explained away by a concentration of instructional coaching positions in more female-dominated spaces like elementary districts. As discussed in the background section

and demonstrated again in Figure 3, this overrepresentation of women in instructional coaching contrasted with their underrepresentation in administrative leadership positions.

Instructional coaching is just one form of teacher leadership. To gather data on involvement in different kinds of formal and informal teacher leadership at Suburban HSD, I asked interviewees who were teachers, psychologists, social workers, or counselors whether they had ever participated in any formal or informal leadership roles in schools. Figure 4 shows the number of interviewees who reported participation in each of a number of leadership activities. The categories were derived from interviewees' own identification of leadership activities, as they were based on responses to the question "Do you or have you participated in any formal or informal leadership roles or activities?" Importantly, however, responses in the table came from any mention of the activities listed below in an entire interview. For example, some teachers described involvement on school committees as leadership. An individual interviewee may not have identified committee participation as an example of leadership work, but if they mentioned participation on a committee elsewhere in the interview, it was included in Figure 4.

**Figure 4. Participation in Leadership Activities As Reported by Teachers, Counselors, and Psychologists**

	Female (N = 12)	Male (N = 9)	Total
coaching or extracurriculars	6	7	13
answer teacher questions	3	2	5
committees	2	2	4
lead PLT	1	3	4
lead project among group of teachers or build program	4	2	6
lead with technology	2	2	4
leadership outside of the school but within the profession	1	2	3
mentorship	2	1	3
no leadership activities mentioned	2	1	3
running professional development	2	1	3
performing work of an administrative position without admin title	3	0	3
write curriculum that's shared across district	1	2	3
contribute to district policy-making	1	1	2
individual conversations in confidence (emotional support)	2	0	2
lead in PLT (not official leader)	2	0	2
present to district	0	2	2
administrative position	1	0	1

Across the board, most kinds of leadership work were practiced equally or nearly equally by male and female teachers, counselors, psychologists, and social workers. In fact, most interviewees were involved in some kind of leadership activity, with only three of 23 individuals reporting no engagement with leadership and mentioning no participation in any of the activities

listed in Figure 4. Although two of the three individuals who reported no engagement were female, I still observed a significant level of engagement in teacher leadership by female interviewees across the board, rivaling that of male interviewees.

The kinds of activities engaged in by men and women did differ in some key ways. For example, male interviewees were slightly more likely to participate in district level work. Men were also more likely to have official roles in their Professional Learning Teams (PLTs) with one third of male interviewees were assigned to PLT leadership roles compared to one out of twelve female interviewees.

In contrast, women in the interview sample were more likely to participate in activities involving individual relationships and emotional labor, including mentorship, emotional support, and answering questions from individual teachers. 20% of responses from female interviewees fell into one of these categories as compared to only 10% of responses from male interviewees.

Women interviewees were not just engaged in work involving individual relationships and emotional labor, but often positioned it as central to their conceptions of teacher leadership. When asked if she identified as a leader, Natalie, a White female teacher and instructional coach, responded:

Oh, yeah, for sure. I feel like when people are betrayed or pissed about something they will come to me. So, they want to know what the hell is going on right so they know that I have an ear. From to both sides, right. So, in that regard. I can lead in ways that bridge the gap between administration and teachers.

Natalie's formal teacher leadership title as an instructional coach was not what caused her to identify as a leader. Rather, it was her engagement with individual relationships and emotional labor. Such experiences with leadership contrast with those of men, who even when they participated in these kinds of work were hesitant to identify it as leadership. In his own response to the question "Do you identify as a leader in your school or district?" Patrick, a White male

instructional coach, was reluctant to ascribe the label of leadership to his engagement in emotional labor:

No, I mean...no. I guess it just depends on your definition of leader, like if you're talking about a guy that people go to when they want to ask a question or, you know, somebody that kids come to when they're looking to take their skillset to the next level that's that's that's what I'm about but never in my life, do I want to evaluate someone or, you know, have an administrative position or anything of that nature.

Patrick recognized that others might view his individual relationship building and support of other teachers as relationship, however authority is central to how he experiences leadership. In particular, Patrick's refusal to participate in administrative positions which evaluate other teachers prevented him from seeing himself as a leader. These differences in perspectives may be one reason why women interviewees so enthusiastically identified as leaders. Even Grace, who as discussed in section one changed departments and lost the relational capital she needed to feel she was truly considered a leader, automatically responded to the question "Do you consider yourself a leader?" with "yes" before discussing details of her transition and lost leader status.

Women, therefore, were extremely engaged with teacher leadership in Suburban HSD. Not only did they participate in teacher leadership activities, but they also readily identified as teacher leaders. This substantive female engagement with teacher leadership on top of patterns of disproportionate female participation in instructional coaching at the state level sharply contrasted with women's more limited participation in administrative leadership. What accounted for women's overwhelming participation in this different kind of leadership? In the following sections, I examine the ways in which teacher leadership was not only accessible to women in Suburban HSD but was largely built around what is traditionally women's work.

*Perceptions of Teacher Leadership Roles as Family Friendly*

One reason that women at Suburban HSD were so engaged in teacher leadership is that they often perceived it as family friendly. Perceptions of administrative roles as not family friendly were often a huge deterrent of participation for interviewees, particularly female teachers. Molly, a White female teacher and mother pointed out, “I think it's very hard to find balance with a job like that.” After being asked by a friend whether she would ever pursue administration, Helen similarly responded that even if she were interested in administrative work, her parenting responsibilities make it an impossibility. Even among administrators, many women in 10-month administrative roles positions, meaning roles that still offer a summer break, were hesitant to move into 12-month positions because they were needed at home in the summer when their children were out of school.

Teacher leadership roles, in contrast, were often perceived by teachers as more family friendly. Many interviewees who saw administration as inaccessible, including Helen, were interested in or had previously applied to the instructional coach role. Informal teacher leadership opportunities were similarly seen as accessible because they allowed flexibility in teachers’ levels of involvement, which was especially beneficial for parents and other caregivers. Molly explains her experience with teacher leadership:

I always try and volunteer where I can when I can. Since I had children...it's you know a lot more difficult for me....so things that required like more of a commitment I don't do any longer, but I am involved in a, like a program that is going to be starting up next week. There's just like small things that I can do that fit into my day better and still allow me to be involved.

Because teacher leadership comes in all shapes and sizes, Molly got the chance to perform leadership activities even after her time became more restricted because of caregiving responsibilities. In fact, Molly was even on a part time schedule following the birth of her children and still successfully incorporated some leadership responsibilities.



Despite the fact that women with caregiving responsibilities could and did engage with teacher leadership, I push back on the perception that teacher leadership at Suburban HSD was truly family friendly. In section three of this paper, I delve into how engagement with teacher leadership often caused teachers with caregiving responsibilities to become overworked. Overall, however, the *perception* that different kinds of teacher leadership could be negotiated with family responsibilities did successfully invite women into these leadership positions and activities in Suburban HSD.

### *Gendered Perceptions of Teacher Leaders and Teacher Leadership*

Women's significant involvement in teacher leadership positions is also accounted for by educators' gendered perceptions of teacher leadership. I found that when locating interviewees' proposed attributes of effective teacher leaders on Szechny et al's agency-communion dichotomy that teacher leaders were constructed in communal ways. Broadly, communal work was also central to how interviewees understood teacher leadership at Suburban HSD, indicating that teacher leadership is designed and conceptualized around the image of a woman.

To understand how administrators and teacher leaders were perceived, I asked interviewees what they considered important attributes for teacher leaders and administrative leaders respectively. Figure 5 shows some of the most common responses, with larger words being used more frequently.

**Figure 5. Codes generated from interviewee responses to “What makes an effective teacher leader?”**



Broadly, successful teacher leaders were seen as not focused agentially on exhibiting their own individual success. Chris honed in on this point in describing how he imagined teacher leaders, stating, “Well when I don't think of someone who's just parroting what the administration says and is clearly just trying to climb the ladder to the next thing.” As Figure 5 shows, educators at Suburban HSD instead understood effective teacher leaders in relationship to others. “She believes strongly in her colleagues, and is a person who knows how to help them amplify their strengths,” (Will, White male teacher). Teacher leadership work, therefore, was understood through communion rather than agency.

The attributes listed in Figure 5 indicate that teacher leaders were understood as embodying primarily communal traits. Specifically, interviewees named empathy, kindness, selflessness, approachability, listening skills, non-judgmentalness, and humility as traits of

effective teacher leaders (Figure 5). Because they involve relationships to others, these attributes are communal rather than agentic. Further, these traits were understood to help teachers effectively perform the communal work of building relationships and supporting other teachers which interviewees saw as central to teacher leadership (Figure 5). Laura, a White female teacher explains:

You quickly figure out the teachers that you will run into problems with or like say something happened in my classroom, how can I figure it out? I know who I don't want to talk to because they'll be very judgy. So I would look for somebody who's just trusting and approachable.

Teachers who were perceived as judgemental rather than helpful didn't garner the trust necessary to become a "go-to person," a prerequisite for leading in a department. Instead, teacher leaders needed to be approachable and not intimidating. Many other interviewees echoed this perspective, naming humility as an important teacher leader trait.

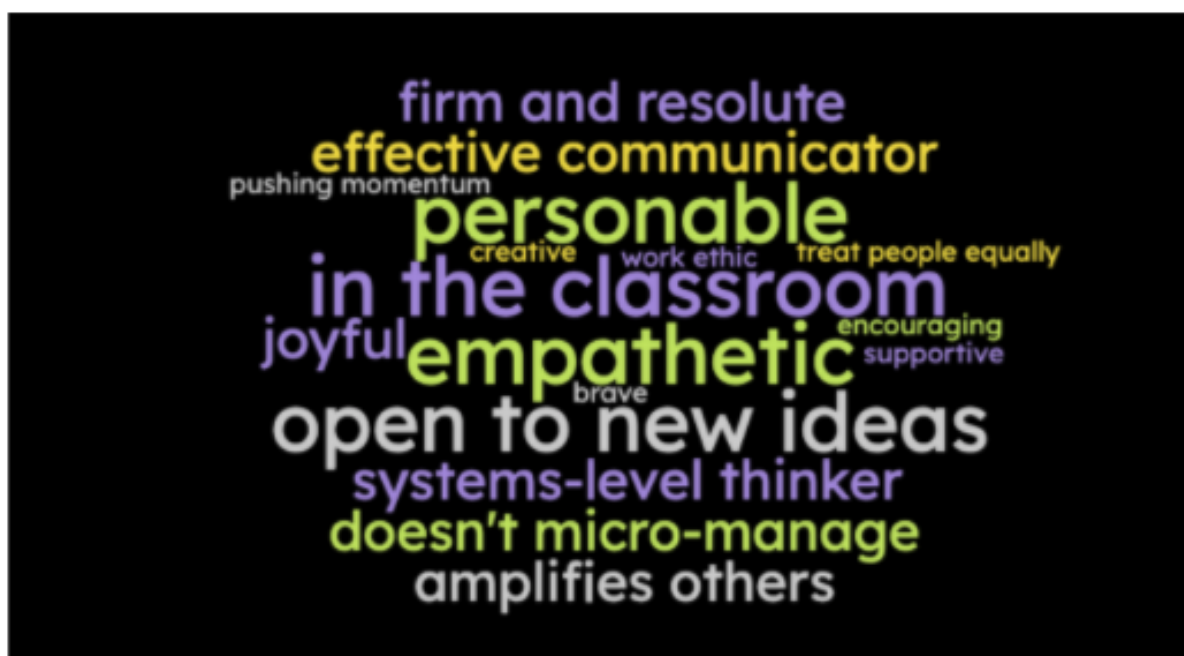
Communal traits like empathy, kindness, selflessness, and listening skills were also important because they allowed teacher leaders to perform emotional labor, a critical aspect of teacher leadership. When asked to discuss differences between teacher leaders and administrators, interviewees very frequently discussed a "firewall" between teachers and administrators. Because administrators were responsible for evaluation, teachers were much more closed off around them. Even when they had strong relationships with their department chairs, for example, teachers found themselves reaching out to fellow teachers or instructional coaches when they wanted to speak freely. Fred, a White male teacher, explained:

You're definitely gonna be way more comfortable and open [when talking to a teacher leader] than if you're talking to an administrator, just because you know administration...you're afraid if you say the wrong thing it could negatively affect your evaluation or even your job. So you're definitely more guarded.

Because of the evaluation “firewall,” emotional labor, including listening to teachers complain, providing advice, or comforting co-workers fell on teacher leaders. Previous literature suggests that this work very frequently falls on the shoulders of women and because of its ties to communion is closely associated with femininity according to Szechny et al.

Finally, it should be noted one of the most frequently discussed traits of teacher leaders among interviewees was excellence in teaching (Figure 5). I categorize this trait as neither agentic nor communal because while it focuses on individual success, one might argue that communal work like relationship building and emotional work are vital to successful teaching. Importantly, however, this trait dovetails with the teacher leader’s imperative of communion. As Margaret stated, a teacher leader “has to be somebody who is excellent at their craft, where people want their assistance and their advice and their ideas.” Therefore successful teaching was considered important insofar as it allowed teachers to effectively support others.

**Figure 6. Codes generated from interviewee responses to “What makes an effective administrative leader?”**



In contrast to descriptions of successful teacher leaders, descriptions of successful administrative leaders often relied on agentic traits (Figure 6). Specifically, interviewees attributed administrative effectiveness to the development of and devotion to a clear vision.

Natalie describes:

I think communication at an administrative level. If you can clearly communicate your goals and your vision that goes a long way. I don't feel like that's as necessary for a teacher leader. But that's absolutely necessary to be laser focused, as, as an administrator. If you're not laser focused and able to clearly communicate, where you're headed. People feel all over the place.

Where teacher leaders were conceived almost exclusively as helping other people improve their work, administrators were understood as bringing their own vision to the table. At times, it was important they embody agentic traits like firmness to defend and execute their goals.

Based on previous literature, I expected administrators to be understood in primarily agentic ways (e.g. Blackmore 1993; Koenig et al 2011). In descriptions of successful administrators from educators at Suburban HSD, however, agentic traits were matched, if not exceeded, in importance by communal traits. Figure 6 shows that much like teacher leaders, administrative leaders were associated with empathy and the ability to support others. Given that interviews took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, a time when staff were under incredible amounts of stress and when needs from the personal realm, including caregiving needs, came increasingly into conflict with professional responsibilities, these traits may have been of heightened importance. In a time of uncertainty, school staff looked to their leaders to offer empathy and support more than ever.

To summarize, although interviewees from Suburban HSD perceived administrators as engaging in both agency and communion, teacher leaders were primarily understood as embodying communal traits in order to enact the communal work of teacher leadership. Because

communion is so closely associated with femininity, these perceptions of teacher leadership were distinctly gendered. Educators could and did imagine women in the space of teacher leadership, which explains at least in part why women were so engaged in this work.

*Remaining Barriers to Access for Women and Teachers of Color*

As shown thus far, in Suburban HSD, teacher leadership was accessible to women teachers in ways that administrative leadership often was not. However, entry into teacher leadership was not free from gendered and racialized barriers. For example, a discussion of teacher leaders as “innovators” among interviewees illuminated one discriminatory barrier to entry. Particularly for administrators in my sample, innovation was fundamental to their understanding of effective teacher leaders. As David, White male assistant principal states:

So I think for teacher leaders like that’s, you know, the idea of being a risk taker and being innovative and a thinker. Other qualities of a teacher leader? I think they can come in all different shapes and sizes, but that one’s the one that keeps coming back to me. That’s like the constant.

In order to lead among their peers, teacher leaders needed to not just be established in their craft but to be constantly pushing the envelope. Risk-taking and innovation were not just applied to instructional practices. Interviewees also saw teacher leaders as people who were:

Constantly kind of questioning what’s going on around them. And every sense of that statement, whether it’s like, from a, like relational, between colleagues, like curriculum, or out in the out in the real world. They’re the ones who are always pushing the boundaries (Julie, White female department chair)

Structurally, these perceptions benefited White male voices, who were more likely to be permitted to partake in activities that push boundaries. As David illuminated with his own experience as a teacher leader: “there was never any sort of, you know, questioning of ‘why are you thinking of that?’ or ‘do you really think you could?’ or ‘is this the right role for you?’”

Among women and Latinx interviewees, standards changed. Meg, for example, described herself

as a leader when she conformed with district policy, and not a leader when she broke out of the status quo and took risks. Unlike David, Meg faced scrutiny from colleagues and administration when making innovative or unconventional choices. Similarly, while Mateo, a Latino teacher, identified his ability to speak out against injustices around him as a quality that made him feel like a leader, he noted several ways in which his questioning of school norms, particularly those which deficit students and teachers of color and students from low-income backgrounds, were sharply resisted by other teachers and administrators. A double standard in perceptions about teacher leaders emerged: while administrators viewed innovation as important, it was often only palatable when coming from a White male body.

Although access to teacher leadership was still impeded by some inequitable barriers, the implementation of teacher leadership at Suburban HSD did successfully appeal to and engage women teachers. This outcome was not a given, considering traditional formal leadership, meaning administrative leadership, historically and contemporarily excludes women. In the next section, I delve into the consequences of women's engagement with teacher leadership and investigate whether the implementation of teacher leadership at Suburban HSD actually has a meaningful impact on gender equity among staff.

### **Section 3: Implications of Suburban HSD's Implementation of Teacher Leadership for Gender Equity Among Staff**

Unlike administrative roles, teacher leadership opportunities are largely accessible to women. But is that necessarily a good thing? In this section, I consider broader implications of women's engagement in teacher leadership for gender equity in schools. First, I consider teacher leadership as an accessible professional growth opportunity, as discussed in section one. I find that at Suburban HSD and other districts, teacher leadership often led to the overwork of women

teachers who sought to push themselves professionally. Subsequently, I examine teacher leadership in the context of existing gender inequities and find teacher leadership does little to improve gender gaps in pay and policy-making power in schools. In fact, teacher leadership reinforces existing gendered divisions of labor, and results in a reproduction of gender inequities.

### *Overworked Women Teachers*

In the experiences of my interviewees, certain implementations of teacher leadership, specifically cultures in which teacher leaders are asked to say yes to everything they are asked to do ultimately overworked teachers. Female interviewees specifically shared testimonies with me describing times when they were overworked or exploited by their employers. Importantly, these stories came almost exclusively from experiences in districts other than Suburban HSD. These experiences of overwork and exploitation stemmed from specific pressures felt by women teachers, especially women of color and mothers, to prove themselves professionally.

When asked to reflect on identity and career experiences, female interviewees often described how doubts from others about their ability to do their job well drove them to work even harder at their jobs. For Teagan, a White female school counselor, experiences with sexism in her childhood motivated some of her career success:

My dad was very male chauvinistic very much like ‘women can't do the same things as men,’ and I think I grew up very much with the attitude ‘I'm gonna do exactly what you don't think I can do’ ...so my brothers are very successful...but I have gone beyond them. And there probably is some sense of like ‘I'll show you’ a little bit in me

Teagan attributed her significant educational attainment, which outpaced that of her family, to experiences with her father’s doubts about her professional capacity. On top of her responsibilities as a counselor and self-described leader among her peers, Teagan was also a leader in her profession more broadly, engaging heavily in state and national organizations



composed of school counselors. This significant engagement in leadership may have been similarly driven by the pressure she felt to disprove doubts about her capabilities.

Within the workplace, a lack of respect for female teachers similarly drove female interviewees to push themselves professionally. Mothers in particular were the target of doubt from colleagues and subsequently felt immense pressure to prove themselves as educators. Meg described this harmful phenomenon:

There is a certain mentality within schools, and especially within certain districts. that if you are a mother if you make that choice to become a mother, then you need to prove that you're so dedicated to teaching our true profession. And part of that proving is by putting yourself through personal sacrifice and suffering.

For other teachers in the school, Meg's status as a mother cast doubt on her ability to do her job well. In response, Meg felt she must exert herself even more at work. Importantly, this did not just mean that she tried a little bit harder at her job; rather, she used the phrase "personal sacrifice and suffering" to describe the extent of her exertion.

Like Meg, other mothers whom I interviewed were pushed to the brink of exhaustion as they worked to overcompensate for the doubts of other educators. These women's additional roles as caregivers only compounded the issue as they struggled to strike a balance between work and family life. As Molly put bluntly, "there is no balance." In addition to extra hours of work from caregiving responsibilities, interviewees who were mothers often also experienced physical and mental exhaustion during and after pregnancy. With little support from schools, including limited maternity leave, release time and part-time flexibility, women found themselves incredibly traumatized and overworked during this period.

Like female interviewees, Latinx educators felt unique pressures to prove themselves in the workplace. Latinx teachers were not automatically granted the respect that their White

counterparts experienced in schools and subsequently had to work harder to demonstrate their value and competence to their colleagues. As Latino teacher Simon stated, “your colleagues have to believe that you are a leader and capable of leading at any given moment.”

Further, most Latinx interviewees felt a strong duty to work hard to represent and support marginalized students in their school. For example, Paulina, a Latina counselor, described feeling pressure to lead to support Hispanic and Latinx students, despite her disinterest in formal leadership roles. The pressure grew to such an extent that it pushed Paulina to “take a step back and re-evaluate” her career at one point. Working twice as hard to prove themselves and combat racist structures in schools, teachers of color were vulnerable to overwork and burnout.

Interviewees found that in current and past districts, implementations of teacher leadership played into these workplace pressures, ultimately overworking and exploiting women teachers and teachers of color. Often, the expectation that teachers perform extra work in order to embody the role of teacher leader led to teachers taking on more work than they could handle.

Latino teacher Mateo described watching other teachers go through this very experience:

I feel like when you become good at something, and people notice your efforts...when t they need something, they will like to come to you as like, Hey, can you help me with this kid? Or can you we're doing this new initiative to check in and check out with students. You're really good coach, can you do this? Can you do more? And of course, someone always say ‘Yes. Give me more. I like influence. I like responsibility.’ ...That really harms the teachers that are really good at what they do.

Cultures of teacher leadership encouraged administrators and teachers to ask for help from other teachers and encouraged those teachers to say yes to these additional tasks. As Mateo described, teachers who were singled out as teacher leaders quickly became overworked and their classroom craft was at times impeded.

Mateo’s description of teacher leadership begins to hint at another aspect of teacher leadership particularly encouraged overwork, namely promises of professional advancement.

Kara, a White female department chair, described her own experience with overwork as a teacher leader looking to advance in her career in an Illinois district other than Suburban HSD:

When I started kind of like seeing myself, and I was being seen as, this teacher leader, I feel like I was very much taken advantage of...because I was in the early stages of my career, I was kind of like: "I guess I'll do this, yes" to the point where I was taking on so much, because it meant a lot to me to further myself professionally. I was 100%, like, on the verge of burnout. And really getting no type of compensation, it was really more for me to just like, gain the experience.

Kara clearly documented elements of exploitation and overwork in her statement, describing feelings of burnout and referencing the fact that she received no compensation for her extra teacher leadership work. Like Mateo, she associated teacher leadership with a pattern of saying "yes" to task after task until her plate was overloaded. For teachers like Kara who were looking to advance into administration or teachers like Meg who were eager to overcome doubts from their colleagues about their capabilities, teacher leadership offers a tempting or even unavoidable opportunity which can quickly slip into patterns of excessive work or even exploitation.

In addition to encouraging teachers to take on significant extra work, teacher leadership offers a cover for the exploitation and overwork of eager teachers. As mentioned in section one, Sophia and Katherine shared past experiences doing the work of an administrator without actually having an administrator role. For Sophia, this occurred when an administrator wasn't pulling their weight and certain work needed to be done for the department to function. Katherine found herself being given more and more responsibilities until she was doing the work of an administrator, but, as she points out, "I wasn't given that title or the money." Instead of describing these situations as exploitation, districts and schools often framed them as instances of teacher leadership.

The relationship between workplace sexism and racism and teacher overwork complicates findings from section one, in which I claim that women seek professional growth as

readily as men, by revealing one problematic source of motivation for professional growth. In section one, I describe barriers to professional growth for Helen, whose caregiving responsibilities prevented her from seeking National Board Certification. Although Helen was in some ways disappointed by this particular outcome, she also called it “a relief,” quickly delving into the burdens of her job on her mental health. Although she was incredibly motivated to do well at her job and succeed and grow, for Helen any respite from professional pressures, including an excuse to not take on one more task, was a blessing. Helen’s story illustrates a tension between granting professional opportunities and combating the overwork and burnout of female teachers. In light of this new understanding of professional growth, increased accessibility to opportunities for professional growth may not strictly be the answer to the issues raised in section one. Indeed, while teacher leadership opportunities offer accessible professional growth opportunities for women, as Mateo and Kara’s stories demonstrate, they simultaneously feed into problematic pressures exerted upon female teachers and teachers of color and lead to the systematic overwork of these teachers.

### *Undervalued Women Teachers*

In addition to being overworked by districts, female teachers were sorely undervalued within the context of teacher leadership. Specifically, teacher leaders were not granted comparable levels of pay and policy-making power as administrative leaders. Because teacher leadership was undervalued in this way, instead of elevating the status of women’s work in schools, teacher leadership reinforced a problematic hierarchy in which disproportionately male administrative work remained superior to female-dominated teaching and teacher leadership.

Proponents of teacher leadership frequently position it as part of a broader change in educational leadership. Scholars often consider teacher leadership as part of a push to

democratize leadership, shifting power away from authoritative models to models in which teachers collaboratively arrive at decisions (York-Barr & Duke 2004). Even fairly conservative educator pipeline policies suggest some changes to overall leadership structures. For example, recommendations from ISBE advocate for differentiated pay scales for teachers in formal leadership roles (ISBE 2018). In Suburban HSD, however, the prevalence of teacher leadership, including the institution of formal teacher leadership roles through the instructional coach position, did little to alter the hierarchical leadership structure of schools.

**Figure 7. Hierarchy of Leadership at Suburban HSD.**

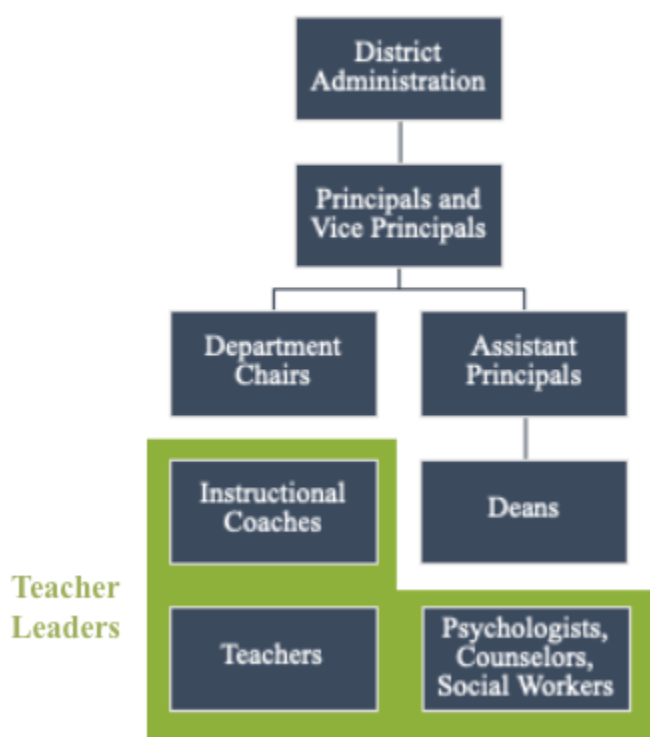


Figure 7 shows my illustration of the hierarchy of leadership within Suburban HSD. Evidence of the status of teacher leadership on this hierarchy stems in part from teacher movement through roles. Often, teacher leadership is a stepping stone on the path toward administrative leadership. John, a White male teacher, explains: “the good teacher leaders often become administrators. That’s what I see happening where I work.” In line

with this observation, among the three instructional coaches whom I interviewed, two were interested in moving upward into administration in the future.

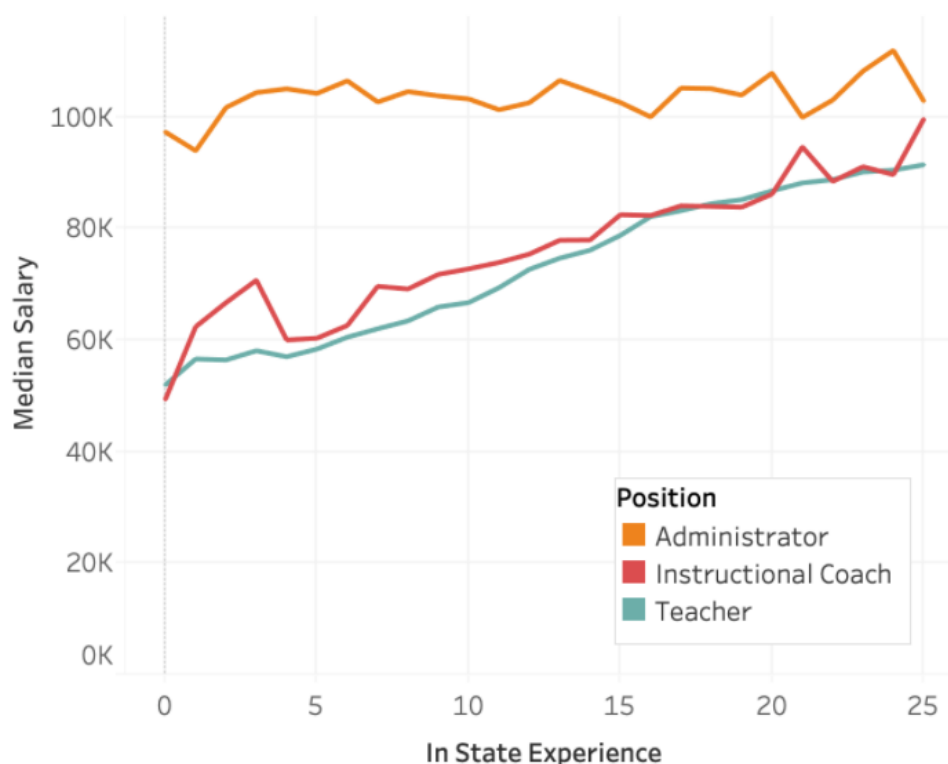
The limited policy-making power granted to instructional coaches is another reason I identify them as below administration but above teachers in the leadership hierarchy at Suburban HSD. According to Brad, a long time instructional coach at Suburban HSD, the creation of a teacher leadership role, namely the instructional coach role, has not fundamentally changed the policy-making power of teachers or administrators. “The administration sets policy,” he states, “they set instructional policies based on best practices.” Despite the subject matter expertise held by instructional coaches, they typically do not provide substantive input into district instructional policy. Even teacher leaders who do research into the effectiveness of certain instructional practices in the district are not sought out by administration when instructional policy is set. When asked whether teacher research projects, organized by the district, were used to inform district policy, Patrick looked surprised. “That’s a great question.” He responded. “I never thought of that before.” The “best practices” that build district policy are not readily fueled by teacher leaders.

That said, teacher leaders, particularly instructional coaches, often did have more influence over district policy than other teachers. As Brad stated, “The administration sets policy. But there are definitely roles or ways that teachers, especially teacher leaders, can get involved.” Rachel and Natalie, both instructional coaches, described close relationships with teachers across their schools as the source of their influence on district policy. Natalie elaborated: “I have been able to help mold some, not much, but some administrative decisions... because I’ve gotten to know the staff really well, because I coach people all over the building.”

Instructional coaches had an opportunity to really understand the experiences of teachers in their buildings. For this reason, they acted as liaisons between teachers and the district, with “an ear to administration and an ear to teachers” (Rachel). Building-wide relationships put

instructional coaches in a privileged position when it came to contributing to district policy, however other teacher leaders like Mark who stood out to the administration also got called on to give their opinion on school or district-level decisions.

**Figure 8. Median Salary of Administrators, Instructional Coaches, and Teachers with Master’s Degrees by In State Experience**



Source: Illinois State Board of Education Educator Information System, 2020. Education and in state experience are controlled for because they are typically used to determine salary schedules.

Finally, my understanding of the placement of teacher leaders on the leadership hierarchy in Suburban HSD stems in large part from the fact that teacher leaders were not paid differently than teachers. While teachers were occasionally offered stipends for extra time spent on leadership activities, the status of “teacher leader” did not have any effect on a teacher’s salary schedule. Even teachers in formal roles did not see increases in pay; in Suburban HSD, instructional coaches were paid the same amount as other teachers. A look at the state-level data demonstrates that this pattern tended to persist across the state (Figure 8). Although the median

salary of instructional coaches may have occasionally been higher than that of classroom teachers, there was a significantly larger gap in pay between administrators and instructional coaches than between instructional coaches and teachers (Figure 8). Where administrative leadership was valued much differently than classroom teaching and clinical work and therefore was associated with higher pay, teacher leadership was not. Teacher leadership recognizes work that women perform, including informal leadership and communal work, but doesn't value it.

By failing to pay teacher leaders any differently, Illinois school districts miss an opportunity to make any progress toward closing the gender wage gap among educators. To understand the extent of the missed opportunity, I performed a decomposition between two rates to quantify the extent to which segregation between classroom teaching and administration contributes to the gender wage gap among educators in Illinois (Kitagawa 1955). For this calculation, I examined gender wage differentials between all educators in the ISBE EIS data who are in either administrative and teacher positions, and filtered out data on any other positions. Analysis of this dataset revealed that 40% of the gender gap in salaries within this sample is attributable to differences in position. In other words, a very significant portion of salary differences between teachers of different genders is caused by the difference in valuation of classroom work and administration. There exists a significant opportunity for improved gender equity in schools through changes to teacher and administrator pay structures.

As discussed in section two, teachers identified a distinct “firewall” between administrators and teachers, largely due to the evaluative role of administration. This line represented a stark division of labor in school. On one side of the line were administrators, largely male, who performed agentic and communal work and received substantive salaries. On the other side were women teachers and teacher leaders, who performed largely communal work



and received a lower pay valuation. Teacher leadership did not subvert or interrogate this line: rather it reproduced this divide between gendered forms of labor and subsequent unequal valuations of men's and women's work.

By engaging women but then refusing to value their work, the implementation of teacher leadership in Suburban HSD fell short of reducing gender inequities among staff. Still, my analysis uncovers a number of opportunities for teacher leadership to work in favor of gender equity. Often, for example, inattention to the needs of caregivers results in policies which exclude or harm female educators. Building policies around the particular needs of educators with caregiving responsibilities is just one place to start in crafting effective policy and repairing inequities in the educator workforce. In the following section, I begin to outline several recommendations for Suburban HSD and other Illinois school districts as they continue to develop, reform, and refine their approaches to teacher leadership.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

When districts and schools build policies around human capital, sensitivity to the needs of teachers of different genders is paramount. Experiences with teacher leadership from the educators at Suburban HSD demonstrate that even when a policy appears to appeal to women, it may have harmful gendered consequences. The implementations of teacher leadership analyzed in this paper represent only a small portion of what is being implemented across Illinois, meaning Illinois districts must take steps to analyze their own individual culture and policies to understand their particular gendered implications.

Despite the shortcomings of teacher leadership in Suburban HSD in terms of its interaction with gendered inequities among educators, teacher leadership offers an opportunity to correct some of these systemic inequities. Through teacher leadership, Suburban HSD took the

important step of recognizing informal leadership, including communal work like emotional labor, as valid leadership. The next step? To value this work.

*Recommendation I: Districts should compensate teacher leadership and administrative leadership equally*

Teacher leadership is not valued at the same level as administrative leadership. In fact, in Suburban HSD, neither formal nor informal teacher leadership are paid more than traditional classroom appointments. In alignment with recommendations from ISBE, I urge districts to increase compensation for teacher leaders. I recommend teacher leaders be paid the same amount as administrative leaders in order to increase the valuation of communal work and reduce the gender wage gap.

Specifically, instructional coaches, mentor teachers, and other teachers in formal leadership roles should be paid more. These salary increases should be taken from the salaries of highly paid administrators, not teachers, in order for the change to actively contribute to a decrease in the gender wage gap. Because teacher leadership roles are often informal, rather than formal, districts might also consider expanding the number of formal teacher leader roles to further enact this re-distribution of pay from administrators to teachers.

Unions present a significant barrier to implementation of this recommendation. Teacher unions negotiate salary schedules, which often help eliminate pay gaps between teachers of different genders and races. Unfortunately, because they cover teachers and not administrators, union protections do not as rigorously address divisions in pay across these lines. It is in the interest of teachers as a collective to equalize salaries with administrators with the same background and educational histories. Thus, unions may take up the issue of pay gaps between teachers and administrators and cite issues of gender inequity in their arguments for pay equality.

*Recommendation 2: Districts should build in time throughout the day for leadership activities and professional growth*

Suburban HSD had a policy of incorporating time throughout the day to allow teachers to participate in professional growth activities and engage in leadership activities. In section one, I outline barriers to professional growth for women, one of which is precious time. Because women disproportionately perform caregiving work outside of schools, they have less time to engage in professional growth activities outside of school, and when they do choose to participate in these activities wind up are more likely to become overworked. By building in opportunities for professional development throughout the day, Suburban HSD breaks down this barrier. I recommend that other districts implement this policy in order to increase growth opportunities for women and improve their longevity in the teaching career.

One potential barrier to this policy is teacher buy-in. At Suburban HSD, many teachers felt satisfied with the challenges of the classroom and did not seek out external opportunities for professional growth. Teachers in other districts who share these experiences may be hesitant to replace one or more of their courses with, for example, a professional development curriculum they had no part in creating. In light of this potential challenge, districts must build in flexibility in terms of the kinds of professional growth opportunities offered during this time. For example, teachers who are eager to stay in the classroom may lead a student club, observe or assist with another teacher's class, or do specialized or small group tutoring.

*Recommendation 3: Districts should offer hybrid roles that mix different kinds of work*

Teacher leadership roles that do not incorporate administrative elements widen the gap between teachers and administrators, separating leadership around individual relationships,

coaching, and instruction from leadership focused on strategic vision and systems-level policy. As I suggest in section three, this division is dangerous as it reinforces gender segregation across different kinds of jobs. This gendered division of labor results in the reinforcement and essentialization of gender categories by demonstrating to impressionable children in schools that women and men are best suited for different kinds of roles. Further, when men and women segregate into different kinds of work, women are consistently paid less.

I recommend that districts offer roles which combine the work done by administrators and teacher leaders. This will help prevent segregation across roles, reducing the gendered division of labor. Suburban HSD already has one such role: the department chair. Department chairs are administrators, they must have an educational leadership degree, or “Type 75,” but they maintain one to two classroom appointments. As a result, department chairs often participate in one-on-one coaching with teachers much like instructional coaches.

Still, the department chair role does not fully incorporate the emotional work of a teacher leader because these educators participate in evaluation. Because of this evaluative component, teachers are not as open to department chairs as they might be to instructional coaches or peer teachers. Evaluation plays a significant role in relationships in schools and limits the ways in which districts can blend emotional labor with traditional administrative work.

*Recommendation 4: Districts and schools should protect teachers' time and energy*

In section two, I presented narratives from women teachers who felt overworked and exploited by the teacher leader position. Women are vulnerable to overwork for a variety of reasons, and cultures of teacher leadership often feed into this problem. In addition to being an issue of gender equity, overwork of teachers can lead to burnout and attrition. For Helen, managing the demands of the school day on top of single parenthood puts incredible stresses on

her mental health. To support and retain a healthy workforce, districts and schools must put measures in place to protect teachers' time and energy. I propose three specific strategies:

1. Allow teachers to apply for increased release time

Women teachers often wind up overworked even when they are not in formal roles administered by the district. These teachers are not lazy or negligent; rather, they are performing valuable work, often for women either leadership work in schools or care work at home. To compensate that valuable work and protect teachers, school districts can grant teachers release time from classroom activities. Since the elements that lead to overwork are often unofficial or happen outside the school building, teachers should be allowed to make the case for release time. To aid in the process, districts should outline example reasons for release time which demonstrate their commitment to valuing traditionally undervalued forms of labor, including care work. This step is critical for the successful implementation of this policy; without a bold demonstration of respect and valuation of women's care work from education institutions, women will continue to feel pressure to prove themselves at work and hesitate to request release time.

2. Create a culture in which teachers are empowered to say no

Teacher leadership creates a culture where continuously asking teachers to expand their responsibilities becomes acceptable. In order to prevent teachers from becoming overburdened, districts must empower employees to protect their own time. Specifically, schools must create a culture which allows teachers to say no to added responsibilities without shame or recourse. This norm can be established through whatever culture setting practices schools, departments, or districts already have in place. Administrators may also model the behavior to normalize it

among staff. Further, sustainable work habits and clear communication about time constraints may be added to values sought in the hiring and promotion processes.

Creating a culture which protects people's time is in many ways antithetical to the culture of most public service positions, in which labor decisions often center on the need to use taxpayer dollars wisely and frugally. Still, the creation of school environments that successfully retain teachers is a critical human capital investment, one which is all the more valuable under the conditions of Illinois' current teacher shortage.

### 3. Increase formal structures around emotional work and individual conversations

In order for schools and districts to better understand how teacher time is being used and allocate time fairly with respect to emotional labor, departments, schools, and districts can increase formal structures around emotional work. In Suburban HSD, instructional coaching offers some structure around emotional labor by providing each teacher a safe space to talk through anxieties, fears, struggles, and successes with a non-evaluative individual. Still, in Suburban HSD much of the emotional labor came down to teachers without formal leadership roles, too. One way to increase formal structures around emotional work is to let teachers hold office hours for short periods of time throughout the day.

The road from policy research to successful implementation is not straightforward. At Suburban HSD, the district's implementation of teacher leadership had significant unexpected consequences, including the overwork and burnout of female teachers, which opposed the policy's intent. Failure, however, is not inevitable. By rebuilding teacher leadership in a way that protects teachers from overwork and appeals to the needs of women teachers, Illinois school districts like Suburban HSD can actually use teacher leadership to increase teacher retention in a

successful and equitable way, as intended. It is only after considering the role of important but often obscured social forces like gender that such policy can successfully be constructed.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study are salient in the context of Illinois' teacher shortage crisis. While state-level policymakers position teacher leadership as a way to increase retention, I find that in opposition to this goal, teacher leadership can actually exacerbate feelings of burnout among overworked and undervalued female teacher leaders. Importantly, the increased overwork of women teachers which resulted from teacher leadership in some ways even problematizes the very premise of teacher leadership as a professional growth opportunity. Women and Latinx teachers at Suburban HSD often pursued professional growth opportunities like teacher leadership because they felt gendered and racialized pressures from colleagues and broader social pressures to prove themselves professionally. These experiences exemplify that the relationship between gendered and racial inequities and notions of professionalization in teaching cannot be ignored as Illinois works to solve the teacher shortage. In order for public policies around the educator workforce to be effective and equitable, they must take seriously the particular needs of teachers of different genders, particularly women and gender minorities.

Creating equitable and just working conditions requires identifying and meeting the needs of the most marginalized. In my research, Latinx teachers in addition to mostly White women teachers, especially those with caregiving responsibilities, are the central focal point due to the makeup of the interview sample. I call on future researchers to continue this line of gendered inquiry, which is so critical to effective and equitable educator pipeline policy, and seek out the voices of the most marginalized teacher groups, including but not limited to Black teachers, Native teachers, gender-non conforming teachers, and queer teachers.

Moving forward, I urge districts to follow the lead of feminist policy analysts and incorporate gender as an organizing unit of analysis when crafting school or district policies. As this study demonstrates, relationships between gender and public policy can be subtle but are distinctly consequential. Among teachers at Suburban HSD, gendered differences in how teachers were valued and how they approached their work had huge impacts on the lives of women teachers, who underwent “personal sacrifice and suffering” for the sake of their professional lives. Fortunately, teacher leadership norms and policies have the potential to be emancipatory, if used correctly. Teacher leadership critically positions communal work as leadership, opening a pathway for more fundamental changes to how men’s and women’s work are valued.



## APPENDIX

### *A. Selected Questions from the Intersectional Feminist Policy Analysis Framework*

- Is the goal of the policy role equity or role change?
- Does the policy impact women's economic autonomy as a step toward equality? Does it pay special attention to the differences of women along their race/ethnicity, sexual identity, gender identity/expression, class, religion, national origin, documentation status, migration status, carceral status, and ability/disability identities
- Is the white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied male experience used as a standard? Are results extrapolated from male experience and then applied to women?
- Have the programs, policies, methodologies, assumptions, and theories been examined for bias at the intersections of gender race/ethnicity, sexual identity, cis-privilege, gender identity/expression, class, religion, national origin, documentation status, migration status, carceral status, ability/disability identity?
- Does the policy work to empower women of varying race/ethnicity, sexual identity, gender identity/expression, class, religion, national origin, documentation status, migration status, carceral status, ability/disability identities?
- Who has the power to define the problem? What are competing representations of the problem?
- How does this policy affect the balance of power? Are there winners and losers? Is a win-win solution a possibility?
- How are the specifics of a variety of women's experiences centered to inform the policy (i.e. how are the intersections of a woman's identity brought to light in the policy?)?

Source: Kanenberg, Leal, & Erich (2019)

### *B. Interview Protocol*

1. Briefly describe your current role.
2. Can you describe how you got to that position?
3. Can you think of a way in which your identity--which could be your gender identity but you're welcome to talk about another aspect of your identity--shaped this path?
4. What are your career goals now? How do you plan to reach them?
5. Can you describe what leadership looks like in your school right now?
  - a. *Who do you consider to be leaders in the school?*
  - b. *What roles do they have or what tasks do they perform?*
  - c. *What do you like about this current leadership structure? What might you change?*
6. Do you consider yourself a leader (among staff) in your school? Why or why not?
  - a. *If answering no to the above question: Do you want to or expect to become a leader in your school? If so, what might that look like? If not, why not?*
  - b. *If answering yes to the above question: When did you start to feel like a leader?*

7. Does your school push you to innovate within the classroom? How do you manage that?
  - a. *Have you ever tried to innovate and had it backfire/experienced roadblocks?*
  - b. *Have you ever tried to innovate and seen a lot of success?*
8. Do you get opportunities to advance initiatives beyond the classroom? Would you want to?
9. What do you think makes an effective teacher leader?
10. What do you think makes an effective administrative leader?
11. *If not mentioned:* would you feel comfortable sharing your racial/ethnic identity and/or gender identity with me?

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