



# Advancing Women in Leadership

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*Full Length Research Paper*

## **The Benefits and Challenges of Inhabiting the Dual Role of Mother/Leader**

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**What does it mean to be a good mother? What does it mean to be an effective school leader? These questions elicit a myriad of answers, illustrating the complex roles of mother and leader. The complexities are magnified for those who inhabit both roles. The purpose of this study was to understand the intersectionality of motherhood and educational leadership through the experiences of women who are mothers and leaders in a public school district in North Carolina. In this qualitative study using a phenomenological approach, a focus group was formed to explore participants' experiences and perceptions of the benefits and conflicts inherent in maintaining the roles of mother and school leader as well as their perceptions of the non-dichotomous relationship of the two roles. Feminist standpoint theory and work/family border theory were utilized as frameworks to inform study design, data collection, and data analysis. Ideas around gendered roles as well as work/family balance were central in our efforts to understand the lived experiences of each participant. Through analysis of each focus group session, followed by an analysis across group sessions, three themes emerged: 1) emotional challenges 2) mother's ways of leading, and 3) work-life balance.**

**Keywords:** Mother/Leader, Women in School Leadership, Feminist Standpoint Theory, Intersection of Motherhood and Leadership

Caring and collaboration are descriptors of both nurturing mothers and influential leaders. Although mothers bring beneficial qualities to leadership roles, those who inhabit both roles also experience challenges. Gender bias, specifically related to workplace advancement, can be a barrier as women negotiate their identities as both mothers and educational leaders. A pluralistic feminist lens, as proposed by bell hooks (2000b), is of value for understanding the interconnected systems of oppression that working mothers experience. While using feminist standpoint theory and work/family border theory as lenses, the intersectionality and multi-dimensionality of motherhood and educational leadership were explored in this study. We sought to understand the conflicts as well as the benefits that are experienced by those maintaining these dual roles.

This study was informed by the work/family border theory, proposed by Clark (2000). Work/family border theory suggests that mothers manage and negotiate boundaries between work and family domains to maintain balance and reduce conflict between these roles. Borders can be physical, temporal, or psychological, and the permeability of borders varies based on personal preferences, job demands, and family dynamics. Successful border management requires flexibility and strength in creating borders, as well as support from institutions in

respecting borders. When borders are managed effectively, mothers experience greater well-being. However, poorly managed borders can lead to role conflict and stress, diminishing satisfaction in both work and family life. In general, working fathers have experienced less complications and stress than working mothers in establishing work/family borders (Torres et al, 2024).

In addition to greater stress around work/family borders, women also experience challenges related to gendered norms in the workplace. Historically, successful leaders have been characterized by more masculine leadership traits of competitiveness, aggression, and ambition. Women are more often associated with leadership traits such as helpfulness, kindness, and empathy. These traits are closely linked with the role of motherhood and the intersectionality of motherhood and leadership (Ahmed, 2000; Arendell, 1999). The two roles, while challenging to navigate, can complement one another. Those who inhabit these dual roles can benefit from self-advocacy and self-care, as well as careful and consistent boundary setting. School districts can support those inhabiting the dual roles of mother and leader by providing mentorship and flexibility. Both school districts and individuals gain from understanding that leaders who are also mothers tend to enact their roles differently than those who do not inhabit both roles (Torres et al, 2024).

As both mothering and leading are rooted in gendered norms, feminist standpoint theory provided a useful lens for exploring these roles. Feminist standpoint theory is focused on marginalized groups, particularly women, who have unique perspectives shaped by their experiences of oppression. According to Harding (2009) and Hartsock (1998), women possess a more critical understanding of social structures, as their lived experiences provide insights often overlooked by dominant groups. Feminist standpoint theory emphasizes the importance of amplifying women's voices against historical norms, asserting that such standpoints are not merely subjective opinions but constitute valuable, situated knowledge that can reveal systemic power dynamics (Harding, 2009; Harstock, 1998; Smith, 1987).

### **Identifying as Mother and Leader**

Becoming a mother often initiates an epistemological change encompassing new ways of knowing and moving through the world, such as listening, nurturing, and mediating (Levesque et al, 2020). Additionally, becoming a mother is often accompanied by a shift in priorities and work-life balance. Becoming a leader is also accompanied by a transition in one's sense of identity. Role identity research indicates that changing from one role to another does not happen in a discrete step; instead, it is a process that requires bridging the disengagement of one role with the engagement of another. It requires shedding one persona and donning a new one (Ashforth, 2001).

Role transitions have been studied widely in other disciplines, such as business and medicine. However, role transitions have not been a focus in education. Curry (2000) explained, "Considerations of leadership have been lacking in two ways. They have not focused on the phenomenological aspect, including such developmental experiences as the intrapsychic aspects of the individual's ascendancy to a leader position through the construction of a leader persona, and they have not substantively included the experiences of women" (p.18). Although context cannot be ignored, there are some challenges common to many women undergoing this transformation. Those who become both mothers and leaders experience multiple shifts and likely find themselves leading and mothering differently than those who do not perform both roles (Crosslin & Bailey, 2021; Weber & Cissna-Heath, 2015).

### **Mothering Ideology**

Mothering ideology refers to the set of socially constructed beliefs and expectations surrounding the roles, responsibilities, and nature of motherhood, often idealizing mothers as selfless nurturers primarily responsible for the care and emotional development of children (Williamson et al, 2022). With roots in traditional gender norms, mothering ideology looks upon caregiving as a moral obligation for women, emphasizing sacrifice, patience, and unconditional love, while positioning motherhood as central to a woman's identity (Zhou, 2017). The prevalence of this ideology often results in conflicting pressures and feelings of inadequacy and guilt for mothers working

outside the home (Williamson et al, 2022). This ideology has continued to impact societal notions of what it means to be a good mother.

### **Mother**

Considering the deep roots of mothering ideology, motherhood can be viewed through socially constructed norms, grounded in history and culture. Historical and modern studies of motherhood have deemed it a study of a private experience, but the definition of a good mother is largely socially constructed. However, the construct does vary in terms of cultural resources and constraints. Hattery (2001) writes, "Mothering is constructed through men's and women's actions within specific historical circumstances. Thus, agency is central to the understanding of motherhood as a social, rather than a biological, construct" (p.25). The construct of motherhood has evolved over time based on the intersectionality of societal norms with factors such as gender, class, and ethnicity. These factors help define motherhood and shape what is defined as the ideal. Values regarding a mother's role in child-rearing, the home, and the workplace are all shaped by the socially constructed ideology of motherhood. While the "ideal" in motherhood has changed throughout history, the value of the mother as the primary caretaker is still present today. Intensive mothering, according to Hays (1996), is a child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, financially expensive ideology in which mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture and development of the sacred child and in which children's needs take precedence over the individual needs of the others (p. 510). With the gendered imbalance of this great responsibility, mothers (particularly those with demanding professional roles) can feel overwhelmed.

### **Leader**

While women have a long history in the role of mother, their tenure as school leader is relatively short. Men outnumbered women in school leadership in 2000, but by 2023, about 55 percent of principals identified as women and about 45 percent identified as men (Phillips, 2023). Feminist researchers view gender as a lens through which school leaders make meaning of their work and lives (Collard & Reynolds, 2004; Elias 2022). Young and Skrla (2003) explain, "Researchers of gender and educational leadership have centered women in their work and have explored the characteristics of women leaders and the institutional and professional cultures within which they work" (p.1). Researchers use a feminist lens to correct both the invisibility and the historical distortion in male researchers' interpretations of the female experience (Elias, 2022; Harding, 2009; Harstock, 1998; Shakeshaft, 1989). The increasing number of women gaining entry into school leadership warrants an examination of the work lives of these women, as female school leaders often face different challenges than their male counterparts (Collard & Reynolds, 2004). A lack of networking, scarcity of role models, and inadequate mentoring are challenges

for many female leaders, but not necessarily for male leaders. Sacrifices of personal relationships and even health are obstacles female school leaders continue to face (Phillips, 2023).

## Dual Roles

Adding the role of mother to school leader brings even more complexity to this gendered identity. In the climate of the late 1960s and 1970s, feminists asserted that motherhood topped the list of social constructions which have hampered women's power and autonomy (Elias, 2022; Vandenberg-Daves, 2002). Despite the constraints, school districts benefit from recruiting women leaders and finding ways to support them in leadership roles (Bergmann et al, 2022). Darling-Hammond (2007) suggests that factors associated with behaviors of female school leaders, such as providing support to staff, establishing a supportive culture, and establishing a participatory decision-making structure, are strong predictors of organizational learning which also impact teacher motivation and empowerment. In addition, female leaders often bring several years of teaching experience and knowledge of effective instructional practices to their schools. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) propose that the prominence of instruction and learning at the center of women's leadership drives instructional change that improves student learning. Thus, with the need for strong instructional leaders brought about by efforts to improve academic outcomes for all students, it is essential to recruit and retain female school leaders.

### Purpose and Rationale

The purpose of this study was to examine the intersectionality of the roles of mother and educational leader. For this study, the term mother/leader is used for women who inhabit these dual roles. Intersectionality refers to the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies as well as the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power (Davis, 2008). In this study, intersectionality is specific to the intersection of motherhood and school leadership. Maintaining the dual roles of mother/leader can create role conflict, but mutual benefits also exist between the two roles. We sought to explore the challenges and benefits from the perspectives of mothers/leaders.

bell hooks' (2000) emphasis on the multi-dimensions of power relations is especially useful to this study as it illuminates a pluralistic feminist lens which informs the understanding of the interconnected systems of oppression that many working mothers experience. Using a feminist lens facilitated the examination of the roles of motherhood and leadership from both a historical and current perspective. Mothers/leaders must navigate assumptions related to leadership, particularly regarding the expectations of and the value given to the person in the leadership position based on gender. Feminine ways of leading have been historically viewed as less valuable than more masculine leader behaviors. Blackmore (1989) stated:

Leaders display attributes and behaviours [sic], possess moral virtues and principles, which are generally associated with 'masculinity.' It is a view which has effectively displaced women in educational thought, and therefore rendered women invisible in administrative practice (p. 64).

The historic patriarchy that exists in the education system has placed value on masculine leadership attributes, such as assertiveness, competitiveness, and a more hierarchical approach to decision-making. Therefore, while the pipeline into educational leadership is predominately female, males have historically occupied a disproportionate number of leadership roles.

Educational leaders make daily decisions regarding the care, safety, health, and well-being of children. Given that educational leaders have this unique position of professionally leading both children and adults, the intersectional relationships between this role and motherhood are unique when compared to women in other leadership arenas, such as politics or business. For school leaders, a mothering ideology may translate into professional roles and manifest itself in ways that can be beneficial in communication, building relationships, and shared decision making (Bergmann, 2022). Women leaders are associated with leadership traits such as helpfulness, kindness, sympathy, and sensitivity. These traits are also closely linked with the role of motherhood. The roles of mother and leader may complement one another if mothers/leaders can successfully navigate these dual roles. Therefore, it is important to understand how these two roles intersect.

### Methods

In this study, we endeavored to describe and explore selected women's perspectives on their roles as mothers/leaders. The notion of describing and exploring rather than identifying cause and effect indicates a qualitative approach to inquiry (Janesick, 2004; Merriam, 1998). Qualitative techniques are utilized when we need a complex, detailed understanding of an issue that is best established by talking directly with people. Qualitative research, in general, is also used to empower individuals to share their stories, stories which show individual differences in a way that quantitative measures cannot. In addition to individual differences, qualitative research brings sensitivity to issues of race, gender, and economic status. Qualitative research explores behavior within the context of the social structures in which that behavior takes place (Austin & Sutton, 2014).

This qualitative study focused on the experiences of five mothers/leaders in North Carolina. The study sought a deep understanding of how these five mothers/leaders understand, experience, and balance the socially constructed ideologies of being both a "good mother" as described by mothering ideology (Williamson et al, 2022) and an effective leader. We used a phenomenological approach, which is aimed at understanding the essence of lived experiences related to a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, the common

phenomenon experienced by participants was navigating the dual roles of mother and leader. Our goal was to illuminate the meaning of experiences from the perspective of participants. Phenomenological studies typically involve small, purposive samples of people who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Participants**

Purposeful selection was used to identify participants who could provide insight into the dual roles of mother and educational leader (Creswell and Poth, 2018). We also sought participants who were willing and able to share their experiences openly in a group setting. We believed the dynamic of a focus group would promote discussion and reflection. Participants could react to each other's comments, clarify their thoughts, and co-construct meanings around the phenomenon being studied. Five women were selected, all mothers/leaders in one rural school district, which enabled us to make specific recommendations to the district. Participants for the study were purposefully selected with varying personal and professional experiences related to motherhood and educational leadership. Participants were mothers/leaders in all grade spans in K-12 education (elementary, middle, and high school). Participants also differed in years of experience in a leadership role as well as ages of the children they mother. Varying the personal and professional experiences of the participants helped us explore commonalities and differences and inspired rich conversations in the focus group sessions.

### **Data Collection**

Each woman participated in four focus group sessions, lasting approximately one hour each. Utilizing a focus group allowed us to capture discussion between participants in addition to exchanges between participants and researchers. Focus groups are a useful data collection method for underrepresented or historically marginalized groups, as they generate feelings of mutual support among participants (Kitzinger, 1995). At times, focus groups have been criticized as antithetical to understanding uncontaminated individual accounts of experiences in a phenomenological approach to qualitative research. However, focus groups can stimulate discussion that opens new perspectives and facilitates meaning making around a common phenomenon (Bradbury-Jones et al, 2009). In this study, a phenomenological approach and focus group sessions were complimentary and supported our efforts to illuminate the lived experiences of mothers/leaders.

Using a semi-structured format, the focus group offered open lines of communication and dynamic interaction among the participants. Questions for the first focus group session were created from the theoretical framework and literature review. Probing and follow-up questions were inserted as needed. Questions for the following focus group sessions were created from analysis of responses from previous sessions. Open-ended questions allowed the participants to share personal experiences related to being a mother/leader. Follow-up questions were asked

to gather more details about the challenges and benefits of inhabiting these dual roles. The interviews were audio-recorded and field notes were taken. To protect participants' anonymity, pseudonyms were used and specific professional titles were not disclosed.

### **Data Analysis**

We engaged in data analysis as an ongoing, iterative process, informed by the work of Saldana (2015). After each focus group session, we examined transcripts and field notes. Initially, we broke the data into manageable pieces and assigned codes to these segments. Initial codes were numerous and included varying aspects of motherhood and leadership, including children's health issues and school emergencies. Next, we consolidated these initial codes into broader categories or themes that encapsulated the core meanings of the data, such as emotional labor and nurturing behaviors. During this phase, we also engaged in memo writing to document reflections, insights, and connections related to the codes and themes.

We followed this process deductively, starting with our predefined frameworks of feminist standpoint theory and work/family border theory. We highlighted barriers related to gendered norms and boundaries between work and family life. We also analyzed the data inductively, allowing themes to arise organically from the data without predetermined categories. Throughout the data analysis process, we used member checking and invited participants to review the emerging findings and interpretations. Member checking increased credibility and helped confirm that our findings aligned with participants' realities.

### **Summary of Major Findings**

Through focus group sessions, it was evident that these mothers/leaders were in constant internal conflict over how to simultaneously be both good mothers and effective leaders. This is congruent with work/family border theory, which suggests that working mothers continuously negotiate the borders of work and family spheres in an effort to attain balance (Clark, 2000). At the same time, they chose to lead with care and sensitivity, and they saw how their nurturing leadership positively impacted their schools. This is congruent with feminist standpoint theory, as women tend to create alternatives to traditional, hierarchical school cultures (Young & Skrla, 2003). Through our analysis of participants' conversations, three themes emerged: 1) emotional challenges 2) mother's ways of leading, and 3) work-life balance. In addition, we explored the challenges of inhabiting these dual roles as well as the benefits. We were particularly interested in data that revealed these were not discrete categories as participants often described benefits hidden in challenges and vice versa.

### **Emotional Challenges**

Participants expressed a range of emotions from joy to distress. The emotion that most often permeated focus group discussion was guilt, particularly the concept of "mom guilt". Participants

frequently referenced an internal conflict when striving to balance both roles. They discussed the struggle to separate the two roles and establish boundaries to protect their time at home with their families. Self-advocacy was necessary for prioritizing the obligations of motherhood. However, participants shared that mothering ideology is not necessarily aligned with self-advocacy and discussed the perceptions that may arise when mothers/leaders advocate for themselves.

Guilt and worry manifested in different ways for participants. One participant reported feeling guilty and being afraid to tell people in her professional circle that she was pregnant. This guilt was magnified with her second child. She stated:

I remember thinking that when I tell people I am pregnant, they are going to think that I am not going to be able to do my job or be as good of a leader because I am adding to my family or because I have small children at home. I was happy to tell everyone else, but I can remember feeling afraid to tell my employers that I was pregnant. I felt like they would think that I could not be good at both roles. I don't know where that comes from. It is completely internal.

Frustration and lack of efficacy accompanied guilt. As the discussion continued, participants began to discuss certain human resource processes that women must navigate when they are pregnant. Women must request maternity leave in writing to the Board of Education and the Board must approve the leave. The group discussed how this process seems cumbersome and unclear. Each participant agreed and discussed that the process made them feel like they had no flexibility in the dates or the length of their maternity leave and they were expected to come back within a limited time frame rather than take the time they needed with their newborn children. They compared this process in education to other professional fields in which there is paid maternity leave, longer allowed terms for leave, as well as paid paternity leave.

According to participants, mom guilt begins before birth and extends far beyond infancy. One participant shared:

If my kid is sick, I feel like I have to gauge how sick they are and weigh these factors as to whether I take a day away from work to stay home with them or send them to their grandparents. I feel guilty about missing work for things such as doctor's appointments or other obligations for my children. When there are work pressures, I feel guilty about spending time with my children.

The discussion around mom guilt highlighted gendered expectations in parenting and leadership. The group commented that men are generally better at delegation and can get by with doing less. They attributed these feelings to the mothering ideology of trying to take care of everything on your own and not asking for help. The group discussed how they do not think fathers/leaders experience the same guilt as they experience when trying to maintain both roles. One participant stated:

I feel like we are judged sometimes as having too much on our plates and feel guilty about having to miss a meeting or other professional obligation and men, in the same situation, are praised for prioritizing their families.

Setting boundaries that separate the roles of leader and mother may have alleviated some guilt. However, participants found boundaries difficult. The group agreed that it is easier to sacrifice time with their families than to miss something at work as they feel there is no one else to take on their tasks and work demands. One participant shared:

I feel like I take my principal mindset home with me. My husband will tell me to stop being a principal. I get two and a half hours a day with my family on average, and I am so in tune with running a school that I come home and run it like my school. I do not know how to sit down and relax.

The inability to set boundaries also bleeds into self-care for mother/leaders. Educational leaders work long hours, and as mothers, go home to a second shift job, taking care of their families. This schedule forces mothers to either put self-care on the back burner or squeeze it into their schedule at the sacrifice of another need, such as sleep. One participant commented:

I work out at 5 am so I am back at home to get my daughters up, get them fed, and get them to school on time. After a long day at work and an evening spent running to my children's events, I am exhausted by the end of the day.

The need for mothers/leaders to set boundaries was reported to be important for their own well-being and the well-being of those they lead. The inability to set them sends the message that work should always take priority. The group agreed that a more defined line between the two roles would help alleviate stress, but it seems impossible in their current roles.

### **Mothers' Ways of Leading**

In discussions around how the role of mother impacts leadership, participants often described relational leadership. They talked about being able to see similarities in how they relate with their families and how they relate to those they lead at work. One participant shared:

I am not the same type of leader that I was when I was leading a classroom. It is very different, and I do believe it has something to do with being a mother now. My leadership is focused on relationships. I focus on getting to know students and staff on a deeper level and ensuring they feel supported.

Participants agreed that prior to becoming mothers, they may have focused more on managerial tasks, schedules, and efficiency. They were more apt to focus on procedures and rules. However, motherhood influenced them to lean into relationships

more. This was particularly evident in handling student discipline. One participant said:

Families and I may disagree on something, but we both have common ground, we are both parents. It has changed the way I deliver consequences and communication. I think about how I would want my child treated. I try to deliver these things the way I would want my child's teacher to deliver them to me as a parent.

As mother/leaders, participants reported using shared decision-making practices and seeking input from others. When making decisions or launching new initiatives, they think about the needs and well-being of those they lead. One participant revealed:

I cannot help but worry about the staff's well-being when launching big initiatives or changes within the school. Sometimes, I have to make the big and heavy decisions that need to be made, but I let the staff have input into the details of the execution. I want to protect my staff's personal time, if possible.

That empathy extended to students and families as well. Participants revealed feeling greater empathy since becoming mothers, particularly toward other mothers and parents. One participant described this in the context of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting:

As a mother, I have gained more empathy for parents as far as wanting to make sure that I am not just checking the box as the leader in their school, but that I am truly helping them understand why things are the way they are in education.

These leaders see themselves as advocates and protectors, much like they view their roles as mothers. They exercise patience as they give voice and choice, even when it is more cumbersome for them.

### **Work-Life Balance**

Participants revealed ongoing struggles with inhabiting a professional role historically dominated by men. They felt pressure to constantly demonstrate their competence and prove that motherhood does not interfere with their work. One participant shared:

I felt I had to prove myself over and over, and I got locked in this mindset. I often felt like I was in a glass house. I felt like everyone was judging my performance. I was never really great at asking someone to step in and help because it's my job.

Participants described the pressure to do it all in both roles. They feared they would be viewed as complainers if they admitted to having too many tasks to accomplish without sufficient time and support. They expressed fears around their supervisors assuming they could not handle the work and the career limitations related to those assumptions. One participant said:

At times I have felt that if I advocate for myself now, I will be overlooked for future opportunities. I also think that if we don't apply for positions because we are a mom and we want to keep our lives balanced at the time the position is available, that is frowned upon as well.

These mother/leaders acknowledged their attempts to compartmentalize their roles but found it difficult to do so. Participants described their efforts to leave work at work and to find ways to transition into family time. For example, they try not to talk about work with their spouses or think about work when trying to be fully present with their children. However, most acknowledged that work issues often invade their thoughts, particularly when they are trying to relax or sleep.

### **Challenges**

All participants described the challenges of separating their professional roles from their roles as mothers. They encountered challenges related to missing time with their families or being unable to attend events. They were not always able to stay home with sick children or go to appointments. Even when they were physically present, they were often preoccupied with work concerns. Similarly, when they had to ask for time off or assistance to accomplish tasks at work, they felt guilty for not being available or placing additional burdens on those they lead. One mother/leader described the challenges:

The importance I placed on my role as a mother often conflicted with my desire to be a highly effective leader. I often felt guilty about having to choose between a work obligation and a family obligation. I dreaded asking permission to miss a meeting or school function to attend my own child's events. I felt constant internal guilt and stress.

However, they found unexpected benefits in these challenges. Their children had an expanded circle of caregivers, a variety of role models. They also believed themselves to be modeling what it looks like to have a meaningful and fulfilling professional life, which may serve as a powerful example for their children. By prioritizing their families, they gave permission for their faculty and staff to do the same. They had great empathy for those who were also juggling personal and professional obligations. Trying to model professional boundaries eliminated the domino effect experienced by those whose leaders encroach on the personal time their employees.

### **Benefits**

The benefits of being a mother/leader included a tendency to use a relational and collaborative leadership style, which had a positive impact on their schools. These mothers/leaders also became better communicators because of their dual roles. One participant said:

I am a better communicator with my child and even my child's teacher because I am an educational leader. I feel like my ability to reason and talk things through with

my child has improved due to the continuous conversations with students each day. I also think I am more reflective of how I communicate with my child's teacher and how I approach any situation that may arise in their education due to my experiences working with teachers and leading a school.

However, they also found challenges hidden in these benefits. Being more empathetic meant they cared deeply about the struggles of those they lead as well as the students and families they served. They described feeling empathy fatigue, feeling mentally and physically exhausted by holding space and worrying about everyone's problems.

### **Discussion**

Ideologies are patterns of beliefs, ideas, opinions, and values used to create meaning (Freedman, 2003). People both produce and consume ideologies and use them to define and promote a construction of reality (Johnston & Swanson, 2006). Ideologies are both "in us" and "to us" and as a result, we are not fully aware of the degree to which we internalize ideologies (Althusser, 1984). From the conversations of the focus groups, it was evident that all participants had similarly constructed ideologies regarding what the ideal mother/leader should be. These ideologies created an internal conflict for participants as they navigated the dual role of mother/leader. Attempts to integrate career and motherhood are in themselves a source of stress, according to Johnston and Swanson (2006). Work and family balance is a process of giving and taking and often gets out of balance. Navigating borders between work and family requires flexibility and continuous negotiation (Clark, 2000). While participants described the pressure and drive as "unexplained," feminist theory explains the source of this conflict and guilt as the patriarchal foundation of the educational system and the masculine leadership traits of competition, discipline, and assertiveness that are still valued today (Zhou, 2017). Mothers/leaders feel this internal pressure to prioritize professional obligations as well as the intensive maternal drive, often making them conflicted strivers in both roles.

Professional decisions shape and reinforce the mothering ideology (Weber & Cissna-Heath, 2015). According to Johnston and Swanson (2006), "Mothers must find cognitive ways to reconcile their employment decisions and their mothering ideology." The need for this reconciliation was described by participants when discussing their inability to establish work-home boundaries and the resulting mom guilt that came with the struggle. Participants discussed their feelings of failure as a mother as a result of work demands bleeding into their personal time and lives. Participants revealed how compartmentalization was a weakness for them, and they seldom could leave their professional duties at work and come home to focus on their families. In an effort to alleviate guilt, participants discussed making the most of the time they had at home, such as planning activities for their families, even if they could not

attend. To modify work constraints, participants discussed self-advocacy and setting professional boundaries. Both strategies were self-identified weaknesses of all participants.

Participants were asked to think deeply about their perceived challenges of being a mother/leader and were asked to think beyond the dichotomies. They were asked about the values found in the perceived challenges of being a mother/leader. Conclusions drawn from this discussion aligned with the writings of hooks (2000), outlining the need for self-advocacy in order to destabilize a patriarchal education system. Participants concluded that guilt can serve as a catalyst for women to take action to systemically support other women and transform a historically male-normed education system. Participants discussed support systems such as support groups and mentorships as necessary actions for improvement. "Often parenthood initiates an epistemological revolution," write Belenky et al. (1997, p.35). This epistemological revolution impacts how educational leaders who are also mothers lead professionally.

The dual role of mother/leader lends itself to an epistemology that is described by feminist scholars as care-based (Noddings, 1984) and love-based (hooks, 2000). Mother leaders experience a "crossover" of motherhood traits into leadership style. The same care-based and love-based approach they use with their own children manifests itself in their professional leadership as well. Relational leadership was a theme discussed by all participants as a way in which they lead their staff and interact with students and families. This was the primary leadership style that emerged when participants discussed areas of their profession such as decision-making, new initiatives, communication, and discipline. Although the participants experienced multiple and significant challenges, they believe those they lead benefit from their dual roles.

### **Limitations**

Our study was focused on women who identified as mothers/leaders in one rural school district in North Carolina, and all participants identified as white females. Although generalization was not a goal of the study, we recognize that a more diverse group would likely yield some differences in findings. We also chose to work with a small focus group over multiple sessions. A larger group may yield some differences, as the small group of participants came to know one another intimately. Utilizing member checks and multiple researchers in analysis increased validity. However, it is possible that other researchers may reach different conclusions.

### **Recommendations**

Work-life balance and organizational support are key to eliminating gendered role expectations and the impact of those expectations on women in leadership (Ahmed, 2000; Arendell, 1999; Zhou, 2017). The responsibility for finding a balance between work and family obligations falls primarily on mothers/leaders. However, school districts can do more to support and protect them. Human resource departments in school

districts could improve working conditions for expectant, new, and experienced mothers. These departments could adopt the “employ the family” mindset to create more family-friendly working conditions, flexibility, and support for working mothers. Areas such as mental health support, self-care resources, and flexible maternity leave could alleviate stress for mothers in leadership. Additionally, if superintendents and other school and district leaders had a better understanding of the challenges related to female leaders also embodying the role of mother, they may be able to consider these additional stresses and conflicts when making decisions on how to support mother/leaders.

At the conclusion of this study, participants expressed a desire to keep the focus group in tact and morph into a support group with regular meetings. They found the conversations with others who are experiencing the same challenges helpful. Prior to the study, many of these mothers/leaders described feeling alone in the struggle and believed others were handling the challenges more effectively. This also demonstrated the need for more mentoring. Experienced mothers/leaders who have successfully navigated the challenges can provide insight, strategies, and additional support to newer mothers/leaders. Providing training on self-advocacy skills and negotiating working conditions could also be helpful. However, the success of peer groups and mentoring initiatives is dependent upon districts creating the time and space for mothers/leaders to talk about their struggles as well as their successes in the dual roles.

Students, teachers, and communities benefit from the leadership of mothers/leaders. Their relational and collaborative style as well as their instructional expertise engender improved outcomes. However, these benefits can only be realized if mothers/leaders are able to sustain in leadership roles. Providing support and opportunities for growth can help mothers/leaders develop the internal resources necessary. Systemic changes are also needed, as mothers/leaders could benefit from structures that provide greater flexibility and a clear path forward. Ultimately, the success of mothers/leaders is tied to valuing their unique ways of leading and their choice to inhabit these two intersecting roles.

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