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Through the looking glass: An autoethnography

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Through the Looking Glass: An autoethnography

by

Jennifer Pryor Halter

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This proposal titled Through the Looking Glass: An autoethnography

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DEDICATION

To my husband Jon and our daughters Alyssa and Emily.

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This journey was challenging, exciting, and eye-opening. Many people I would like to acknowledge helped me along the way. First, to my husband Jon, your support and understanding throughout this process helped me succeed. Thank you for being my partner, guide, and biggest cheerleader. There were many sacrifices of time and resources to make this happen, and your unwavering support was noticed and appreciated! Thank you for supporting my dreams and working alongside me to make them happen!

To my daughters, Alyssa and Emily, thank you for your love. I hope that each of you knows you can accomplish great things. I look forward to watching you both grow and become strong women leaders in whatever you decide to do. Always take care of others, be kind, and work hard. I will always be there to cheer you on!

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an autoethnography studying my experiences as a female high school principal in the south. Autoethnography is qualitative research that analyzes personal experiences to understand a particular culture (Ellis et al., 2011). I share my lived experiences in fictionalized composite examples to protect myself and others possibly implicated in the research (Law & Fine, 2004). Through analysis, I use feminist theories and metaphors to understand the school and community and the presence of southern culture in this school's context. Through research, I found glass metaphors describing women in leadership roles and their obstacles (Simpson & Kurma, 2015). I found many feminist leadership theories that use glass metaphors that applied to my lived experiences: glass ceiling, glass escalator, glass cliff, glass walls, and glass slipper. Other theories applied to my research are theories around professional dress for women, role incongruity theory in gendered organizations such as education, and theories describing southern culture centered around the importance of loyalty and storytelling.

I also found it important to share lessons learned on this journey parallel to my leadership experiences. I learned leading an underperforming high school and writing a dissertation were more difficult than anticipated. I realized I was not alone in writing this dissertation or leading a high school. I learned the importance of the right fit in choosing a committee and doctoral chair and what the right fit means in leadership. I learned that both processes in writing an autoethnography and leadership are forever evolving. Also, writing about my experiences and applying theories to those experiences helped me make sense of the world and myself as a leader. Furthermore, as an autoethnography shares stories of lived experiences to make sense of

the world and add to current research, I found storytelling is part of the southern culture that manifests in the school I lead.

Autoethnography is a qualitative form of research that is messy, personal, analytical, and emotional. Writing this type of qualitative research for a dissertation requires reflection, vulnerability, and applying theories to understand experiences. In adding this autoethnography to current research, I hope more leaders will learn from my shared experiences.

Ladies, make sure to wear shoes
 there's glass
 everywhere.
 —Kamala Harris

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I pull on the ends of my blazer and glance across the large room. Rectangular tables are in long lines forming rows that seem endless. Small piles of paper are stacked neatly in front of each empty plastic chair tucked under the tables. I am the only one here. Pacing the room's length, I run my hand along the bookshelves that cover the walls. My fingertips brush the spines of books tightly packed in a row on the shelf. Usually, being among books in a quiet room is calming, but my heart is racing. The day is about to begin—my first day as the new principal of this high school. The media center door swings open, and two teachers come in, backpacks slung over their shoulders and travel coffee mugs in their hands. I take a deep breath and start to walk back to the front of the room to greet them. I do not know what they will think about me. I do know I am not what the staff expected.

I am an experienced principal promoted to a high school principal position. However, I am not the typical principal for this rural high school in this small southern town. As a female secondary school principal, I represent only a fourth of the population of high school principals in the nation (Wallace Foundation, 2012). All principals before me came from the faculty ranks, and I did not. I remember being anxious on my first day greeting the staff.

I grab the presentation remote to check that it will click through correctly. I straighten my materials on the table at the front of the room. More teachers start to come in, and they begin to hug each other and share about their summer break. I listen and watch. I wonder what they will think of me. I wave hello to more teachers as they arrive. I am anxious and excited about

what this year will bring. I remind myself to smile. I remind myself that this is where I want to lead. I remind myself, I know how to do this.

I was a principal of a middle school for many years. My former school has an excellent reputation for dedicated staff and faculty that put many systems in place for raising academic success. However, after a few years, I found I was getting bored. As the school ran smoothly, I lacked the drive to stay motivated because I did not find it challenging anymore. Realizing that about myself, I sought a new challenge. I wondered what it would be like to lead a high school. I always wondered what the high school principal role required and how it seemed different from my middle school position.

You Asked for This.

When I have had a perfect day at work, I can close my eyes, and it takes me right back to where I decided to become an educator. I can see the chipped kitchen counter. I can smell the unwashed dishes. I am full of excitement. Leaning against the sink, I stare out the grimy window. I punch in my Dad's phone number and stare through the windowpanes to find the line where the grass in the lawn meets the road before it—my breath hitches as I hear my Dad's voice. I can not wait to share my news!

I shout with excitement that I am going to be a teacher! I anticipate my Dad's excitement to match mine, but it does not. He lets out a big sigh and tells me not to do it. There was a long pause. I am confused. My Dad was a teacher. I grew up playing pretend teacher in my Dad's classroom. I had watched him teach students science exploration partnered with songs he had written about lab safety. He would get excited talking about cool lesson plan ideas, and his passion for teaching helped foster my love of school. What do you mean do not do it?! I stood still. I stare out the dirty window. I searched for the line in the grass, the boundary where the

green grass and concrete met, as if it would anchor me. I half-listened to him drone on about the challenges, and lackluster salary that being a teacher would entail. I grip the counter in frustration. I do not keep listening. Two years later, I became an English teacher to eighth-grade students.

I still think about that decision and how much I enjoyed teaching. However, my focus soon turned to seeing big system problems and brainstorming ways to fix them. I quickly found myself in administrative positions and became a principal. I fumbled through my role as principal for the first few years. Examples of fumbles would be when I tried to create school-wide initiatives without staff buy-in or struggling to have critical conversations with teachers about their instructional practice. But soon, I was leading effectively, and the school was high-performing. Being more comfortable in my role, I started to coach and mentor other principals at the district level and became involved at the state level with leadership associations. The school continued to excel in student achievement, having grown every year in the percentage of an A-rating on the state accountability assessments, earned awards in climate and culture ratings, and boasted many accolades on teacher performance. However, I started to get bored in the role, so I pursued the high school principal position, and very quickly, new challenges began.

Not only were there staffing and discipline challenges, but I also wrestled with the fear of change in this new role. I also found that being a principal, mother, wife, friend, and student seemed easy to balance at a successful school in the last few years, but not so much as this struggling one. I had no idea the demands of this new position would cause this much personal imbalance. I sometimes questioned why I sought this new role as I struggled to keep up with all the obligations. As I lamented to my mentors, they reminded me I asked for this challenge. With

a deep breath and tired eyes, I prepared to walk into a principals' meeting and again reminded myself. Yes, I asked for this.

The Hot Seat.

Sitting in a principal's meeting, the superintendent reminds the room full of administrators about the role of leadership and "the hot seat" all principals sit in to answer for the school grade. In the era of accountability, district leaders seem not to know how to lead principals without adding a level of fear to their messaging. I cringe and start listing the many mandates rattled off by the leadership team. With a reminder that the person answering for any shortfalls is me, I shift in my seat and look across the table at the other high school-level principals. All of them carry a look of concern mixed with annoyance. I used to wonder what about that look, and now I am starting to mirror it. Do my facial expressions show the pressure I feel?

I know the pressures and challenges around accountability, student safety, and staffing shortages. Not only are principals required to handle the managerial challenges of a school building, staffing, and students, but also the achievement levels of each student and the school grade as a whole. As I led for many years at a high-performing school, the principal seat was no longer hot. However, in this new role, I quickly realized that not all principal positions are equal. The job description of a high school principal by one school district describes the essential performance responsibilities to fall under three categories: instructional leadership, organizational leadership, and professional and ethical leadership (Wallace Foundation, 2012). Krasnoff (2013) shared that effective principals must have a vision of academic success for all students, create a climate for learning, grow leadership in others, improve instruction, and

manage people, data, and processes to foster school improvement. I feel I mastered those skills at my previous school.

However, this new seat is scorching. I sometimes shift and chafe against the challenges as the pressures to perform are great. The main challenge is to raise the current school's student achievement from a C-rating to an A-rating in a few short years. I noticed the school's pride grows from athletic accomplishments, but academic achievements seem an afterthought. With many alum teaching at the school and community ties, there is a strong sense of pride and a feeling of trying to keep things as they have always been.

But I like it hot. I want to take on challenges and new goals, and I have performed under pressure and seem to lose motivation when the pressure is off, or the goal is complete. So here I am, appointed to this position and a challenge to the staff. I did not fit the mold of the traditionally expected appointment of the principal at this high school. On the first day in the new "hot seat," I was reminded I was an outsider.

You are Not from Around Here.

My heels click on the tile floor as I walk into the front office. My assistant principal and a few male coaches meet me wearing tennis shoes and gym shorts. After the warm welcome, we stand in front of the framed photos of the previous principals, and I receive a quick history lesson from the Vice Principal of those who led before me. All who had served on the faculty were assistant principals at this school first. I was not.

I walk into the principal's office and run my hand along the top of the principal's desk. The giant oak desk took up one side of the office. I remember sitting at that desk as the principal interviewed me for an Assistant Principal position and told me the only way to be hired was for me first to work there as a teacher. I felt this remark meant that my resume could not show

enough qualifications for the position unless one of those qualifications were being a teacher at that school. I remember my anger and frustration. It was as if I was not good enough for that school or that position.

I feel myself blushing as I reminisce about this moment, and I turn to notice that the coaches have followed me into the office to show me around. They glow with pride as they discuss the last two male principals who had served at the school. They smile and laugh as they share stories and point out memorabilia in the office. I quietly scan the room. I listen and nod. As one finishes telling a story about the last principal, another coach turns to me and reminds me, "you're not from around here."

Steeped in traditions, this high school principal was predominately male, having only one female serving a short three-year term fifty years ago. One treasured tradition is to become a principal at this school by first rising through the teaching ranks, serving as the athletic director, becoming an assistant principal, and being promoted to principal. To achieve this, one must hold the title of coach and be male. Even being well known in this small town as a great principal, becoming the principal of this high school broke the tradition of inheritance to this role. As the school was steadily declining in academic achievement and enrollment was starting to wane due to successful programs at other local high schools, it was time for some change.

As I run my hand across that cold oak desk, I think about being told of the status quo and those traditional requirements to belong here. I am ready to make a change. I shift to place my hands on the top of my new "hot seat" and plan what to move first. I think they are correct. I am not from around here.

But I Got Here as Fast as I Could.

I am not a stranger to this community. I know the city council members and have served on several community boards. Having led at another school in the same town, the community knows my name and reputation well. I have won state and national awards in the previous school, been a patron at the local businesses, and sat on boards for the city council. Along with my former school achieving academically every year on the state assessments, my reputation for having high expectations and honesty is evident. There are staff members at this current school who had worked for me at the previous school and understood my approach to an academic focus and my unwavering commitment to hold the staff accountable for student success. However, this school presented a new challenge of steadily declining academic achievement for the last seven years, rooted in treasured traditions born fifty years ago.

That is How it is Done Here.

Dust cakes the many trophies that stand four rows deep on bookshelves that line the main hallway. Class pictures that date back to the 1990s cover most of the walls, some hanging so high on the wall that the small squares of faces are hard to distinguish in the fluorescent lights. Every trophy, class picture, and memorabilia covers this main hallway's walls. It is cluttered and overwhelming.

I ask questions about why this hallway houses all the trophies and pictures. The other halls are bare. The answer is, "that's how it's done here." I begin to discuss a vision to streamline the hallway and spread the accolades throughout the school in various hallways. As I gather a few excited teacher leaders to help me dust off and organize trophies to move to another location, I receive an email from the former principal telling me to put everything back. He

informs me everything in that hallway has a specific place, and I am not to move it. It is tradition. I ignore the email and keep moving trophies.

Before I delve into the story of my journey, let me explain what I mean by here. I create the descriptions of this high school from the compression of experiences and details. To find this specific high school as described would not be possible as it is a fictional place made up of composite examples. I share these composite experiences to shed light on obstacles and challenges that I have encountered as a female high school principal. Cunliffe et al. (2011) described this as a method used in a qualitative ethnography of fictionalizing the research data by making a composite of multiple traits that arise during the research process. Fictionalizing the data allows these composite examples to provide anonymity (Piper & Sikes, 2010). The examples I share mirror my experiences during my first year as a principal. Rhodes and Brown (2005) pointed out that although these are fictionalized narratives, it does not mean that it is untrue. This creation of composite examples protects me and others in the research process. Recognizing I am in a position of power and interact with many people, I want to protect others (Lac & Fine, 2004). Using descriptions to help the reader understand the type of high school and my experiences help me not to implicate others in my work. I can protect the privacy and safety of others by altering identifying characteristics while still sharing my experience, as Bochner and Ellis (2002) reminded me that the meaningfulness of the incidents is more critical than recounting every detail. However, the details I use are essential as they work to bring the reader into experiencing the emotions, thoughts, and struggles.

The research context occurs in a high school in a small rural town. The school serves approximately two thousand students. The student and staff demographics mirror each other as both are comprised of majority white ethnicity with a low minority rate of less than ten percent.

The community demographics also match the student and staff demographics. Generations of families have attended the same school, and most staff live in the community that surrounds the school. There is fierce pride in this high school among the community. The same fields and buildings display the names of former students who are now professional athletes, politicians, or who serve in leadership roles in the district. The community takes pride in the high school's long-standing athletic accolades. Traditions are honored by the community, including the expectation of the person who should lead this high school—one tradition that breaks upon my arrival.

I am aware I represent a small percentage of high school principals. While ninety percent of teachers are female, it does not mirror that in school leadership roles (Wong, 2019). Nationally, men represent more than two-thirds of high school principal positions. In a southern, conservative state, that percentage of a third being female high school principals is sometimes even less than that. I was named this high school's new principal and, on the same day, reminded I was the second female ever to lead this school, following two males previously with their combined tenure equaling almost thirty years of leadership.

There is a low turnover rate among teachers and staff as the number of years they have served at this school is like a badge of honor. No one willingly leaves unless it's for a promotion or retirement. More than half of the staff are alums. There is value in their fierce pride and honored traditions. I notice alums are almost reverent in retelling their glory days at this school and are protective in keeping these perceived rules. While I see the value, I also view it as stagnation. It seems almost an unwillingness to move forward into different practices. This reluctance to change reflects in the use of outdated furniture, the overcrowding of trophies in the

hallways, and instructional practice. It feels almost like it is an invisible barrier. One I will have to overcome.

Seeking to Understand.

This dissertation is written as an autoethnography, a first-person narrative, as I study my experiences. Throughout the dissertation, I use italics to help the reader experience and pull them into my inner thoughts. Stepping back from those experiences, I analyze those experiences when the text is not in italics. The following chapters explain the layout of the dissertation. To understand autoethnography, chapter two deeply explains this qualitative research method. Chapters three through six shares lived experiences and the theories that arise through analyzing the data. To conclude, chapter seven explains lessons learned in leadership through this transition year and in writing an autoethnography.

Glass Everywhere

Analyzing my experiences, I found feminist leadership theories that use glass metaphors. Many glass metaphors are used in research to describe women in leadership roles and the obstacles they face (Simpson & Kurma, 2015). These glass metaphors describe various barriers. Some of these barriers shattered for me. Some I press against or use as a tool, and others I smash. The following glass metaphors help analyze my journey. Chapter three discusses three theories: glass ceiling, glass escalator, and glass cliff. The Wall Street Journal first coined a glass ceiling in 1986, where women try to advance to management positions that men only hold. The glass escalator describes how men rise to leadership positions in gendered organizations quicker than women (Williams, 1992). The glass cliff is a phenomenon where women leaders serve in leadership roles requiring a change in an underperforming organization (Ryan & Haslam, 2004). Chapter four explains the theory of glass walls. Glass walls portray barriers women leaders

experience in gendered organizations to impede success (Miller, 1999). Chapter five explores the theory of the glass slipper, termed through the famous fairy tale Cinderella, representing the perceived right fit for a leadership position (Ashcraft, 2013). Chapter six shares my sense of belonging as if I have stepped back *Through the Looking Glass* (Carroll, 1891).

Lessons Learned

Finally, in chapter seven, I share lessons I learned while on this journey. Through this process, I found parallel and converging lessons in leadership and in writing an autoethnography. I discovered that assimilating to southern culture and writing an autoethnography was more difficult than I anticipated. I learned that I was not alone in either journey and of the importance of the right fit in research and leadership. Throughout this writing process, I learned autoethnography is a form of research that is constantly evolving, almost like a live text. Leadership is also continually changing like a live text. I discovered my growth as a researcher and a leader through writing a reflective method using theoretical frameworks and metaphors to help myself and others understand and make sense of the world. Finally, I learned the power of storytelling by exploring how southern culture manifests in a particular school and sharing my story.

CHAPTER 2: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

I stand in the front office of my school and stare at the eight framed headshots of the previous principals hanging on the wall. Two women provide end caps to the six white males lined up evenly in the middle of the row. My professional headshot stares back at me. I remember standing outside the state school board meeting and getting my picture taken in a blue suit while sweat pours down my back in the July heat. It looks like I am blushing in the photo, but I know the heat causes my cheeks to be pink. I also notice I am the youngest leader staring back at me on this wall by at least ten years. I comment aloud, "Wow, that's a lot of old white men!" The secretary replies, "Well, that is how things were done around here."

I am a new principal in a traditional school, trying to navigate tradition. I want to share my experiences and the tensions others can relate to in a similar position. There is little research that conveys a high school principal's lived experience. In seeking research to help me understand these experiences, I found autoethnography. This method pulls from interiority and personal experience to shed light on a broader world. One that allows me to examine my journey in navigating tensions and analyze myself and the world around me (Chang, 2008).

My heels click on the tile as I slowly journey back to my office, pondering the contrasts of the pictures of previous leaders. I am thinking of the other female principal who led for a three-year term. Her picture is different than the others. She wears a blouse and pants perched on the top of a desk. I wonder why she is sitting and has chosen a complete body picture. Her hairstyle is a pixie cut, and her picture is muted. The other headshots of the male leaders are all the same, in suit jackets and ties; the images are copped at the top of the shoulders, only revealing their heads. When I think about my picture with these, mine is the most vivid color. I'm wearing a

bright blue suit with a blurred background of trees. It shows the upper half of my body, slightly turned to the side.

Defining Autoethnography

As I ponder the differences between my image and others, I think about how I break with tradition, what that means, and how I will navigate it. Autoethnography is an approach to research that analyzes (graphy) personal experience (auto) to understand cultural experiences (ethno) (Ellis et al., 2011; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Jones, 2005). I use it as a self-narrative that critiques the situation of myself and others in a social context (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Spry, 2001). I am glad this method exists as it has only been around for about fifty years (Hughes et al., 2012). Autoethnography emphasizes the cultural analysis and interpretation of the researcher's behaviors, thoughts, and emotions concerning others in society (Chang, 2008).

I use autoethnography to create experiences for readers by placing them within the context of the incident in a cultural frame. Anderson (2001) explained five essential features a researcher uses: it must be analytic, contain reflexivity, be written as a narrative, engages in dialogue with informants beyond the self, and seeks to understand the social phenomenon. If I write correctly, the experiences I share should evoke emotions in the reader. Ellis & Bochner (2016) required that the researcher's personal experience, emotions, and interactions be the center of the narrative. It is a type of writing that makes emotions come alive. However, the feelings evoked in readers can be unpleasant (Ellis & Bochner, 1996). I seek to pull readers into experience this year with me and feel all of the emotions and tensions I have in this role. I have found that there is little research on real stories of lived experiences of what principals go through in a new setting. I am sharing my experiences to give an authentic account of the tensions, struggles, and decisions while navigating a new school culture. Research and reports on

leadership tend to share successes and the pleasant parts of the job, such as tips to raise student achievement and lessons learned on effective leadership strategies. I seek to strip away the cushioning of sharing only the success and niceties of the position and instead shed light on the actual lived experiences. I want readers to feel the weight of what it is like to stand in my heels. I want them to notice the strained smile, experience the headache forming between the eyes, and share the joy of developing relationships. I want readers to join in the wonder, share in the confusion, and feel the awe of trying to understand why those traditions are honored. I believe sharing my experience is valuable for myself and others.

As Bochner and Ellis (1992) shared, autoethnography is "self-consciously value-centered rather than pretending to be value-free" (p. 270). It is a form of writing that requires researchers to tell their form of truth; it allows me to seek to be known and understood (Mendez, 2013). Ali-Khan (2015) shared that autoethnography is "creative and analytical, rational and emotional, scholarly and personal, scientific and poetic" (p. 4). Sharing my story creates meanings that help me make sense of myself and provide ways for others to connect (Adams & Jones, 2008; Bochner, 2000). For example, as I look at my portrait, I think about the meaning of power, female leaders, and belonging. I can participate in a valuable form of inquiry that creates new models of reality (Mendez, 2013). Neumann (1996) pointed out that autoethnography demonstrates utilizing particular experiences in individuals in tension with dominant expressions of power. I am looking to explore these tensions of power in my year in this new school. I am looking to see my role in this culture and notice how different I am from the expected traditional leader for this particular school. I share below one example of the contrasts between myself and my predecessors.

I notice how I am different from the line of leaders that served before me. The pictures in the front office are where parents and visitors sit as they wait to meet their students, teacher, or administration. It is clear from the images that they have faded with time and which portrait is the current principal that serves here. I wear bright colors and have pink cheeks and brown hair, as I contrast with the graying heads of the white men and the muted colors of the other female leader. I notice the grays, browns, dark blues, and blacks color those portraits, which causes my headshot to stand out even more. I wonder, is standing out a good thing?

Pondering Self-Reflection

I wonder if I should change my portrait. I find myself deeply engaged in self-reflection and self-examination. Chang (2008) shared that “self-reflection and self-examination are the keys to self-understanding” (p. 214). As I write this narrative, I invite readers to journey with me. Using autoethnography, I seek to examine my experiences and position in this new culture and reflect on who I am as a leader. I am not trying to solve something; I seek more to understand. Rorty (1982) shared that the goal of autoethnography is not to expose issues to resolve or fix problems like quantitative research but rather to explore and understand nuances and complexities. This type of qualitative research allows me to explore the truth as I discover it through the process. Mendez (2013) shared that autoethnography will enable me to draw on my experiences and be critical of them to understand a particular phenomenon or culture (Reed-Danahay, 1997). As I participate in deep self-reflection, I am anxious about what it reveals in helping me understand the forces that shape who I am and how I know others (Chang, 2008).

Autoethnography draws from the power of the narrative, allowing both the writer and those who read it to grow. Ali-Khan (2015) explained, “reading autoethnographic texts encourages empathy in ways that more objective traditional research texts are not designed to

do” (p. 5). The underlying assumptions of qualitative research are that reality and truth are constructed and shaped through the interaction between people and the environment in which we live (Mendez, 2013). Autoethnography allows a deep dive into power dynamics (Tierney, 1998). The freedom of this qualitative approach provides both myself as the researcher and readers the ability to validate their own lives through connecting to emotions and experiences shared (Ellis, 2004). As Pausé (2013) explained, autoethnography allows my own experiences to reflect upon the theory and knowledge created by others.

Driving to work each day, I seek out appropriate school songs I can play in the morning before the announcements. Morning announcements did not occur previous to my leadership at this school. After shadowing fellow high school principals, I observed that they announced in the morning and set the tone for the day with encouraging words and reminders for the school day ahead. I also added playing music as students entered the building. This daily activity is also something new. I like to listen to alternative rock, but I quickly notice that half of the students at this school love country music. As I drive the dark country roads to work, I listen to unfamiliar country songs trying to find school-appropriate lyrics, and this song reminds me of our school environment. I listen to the lyrics of this song...

They call us a two-lane just passing by slow downtown.

Yea, they say what's there to do when you ain't got nothin' around.

Just a few street lights, speed limit signs that all say twenty-five.

But those folks ain't lived in our lives.

They ain't seen the blood, sweat, and tears it took to live their dreams.

When nothing's on the line, with just another field, just another
farm, no, it's the ground we grew up on.

They think it's middle of nowhere place where we take it slow.

Aw, but they don't know.

All they see are tractors, barbwire, and tall green grass.

But they don't see the years spent working, busting their ass.

How they pray for rain.

They don't know a thing about what it takes livin' this way."

— "They Don't Know" by Jason Aldean

I inch down the two-lane road, following pickup trucks, passing farms and small houses with large yards on my way to school. The song lyrics resonate with the current culture, and the pride described in the song represents the feel of this community and school. Growing up, I think about my own house, a log cabin built at the end of a long dirt road. And yet I do not feel like I connect to this country lifestyle. My mother was a grocery store manager, and my father was a teacher at the only high school in town. Even though I lived in a country setting, we did not live a country lifestyle of farming, pickup trucks, or even country-style cooking. I think about how to relate to my students, and I continue to find more country songs appropriate to play over the intercom.

Writing My Song

Just like searching for country songs, writing an autoethnography can be challenging. As Bochner and Ellis (2002) wrote, "It's amazingly difficult. It's certainly not something that most people can do well" (p. 738). I was intimidated by this process and form when I wrote an autoethnography. Other doctoral students in my field scoffed at it not being a traditional form of

study. They told me it was too easy or not actual research as they thought it would just be my journal entries about leading a high school. However, this type of writing is different than a memoir or journal because it makes a cultural connection between oneself and others in society (Chang, 2008). Autoethnography comes in various forms, as it is as much art as science. Deitering (2017) reminded me that this type of writing evokes strong emotions about the culture.

As I write my autoethnography, I move in "a back-and-forth movement between the experience and self," one that "requires observing and revealing a broader context of that experience" (Mendez, 2013, p. 283). In keeping with autoethnographic methods, I write this in the first person, describe dialogue, share emotions, and explain the cultural context (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). I share my personal experiences embedded in the cultural context of the high school I lead to analyze the experience. To share the truth of the experience, I write an evocative reflective autoethnography. Ellis (2004) reminded me to focus on my physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions and write them as a narrative. I will share experiences in the form of a story.

This research method involves deep and careful self-reflection (Adams et al., 2015). As this is not an easy method for me as a writer, this approach will push me to reflect on my experiences and how I think and react in this culture. This process can sometimes be uncomfortable and reveal things I may not have known about myself. I use various data collection and analysis. Data sources for autoethnography can include observations, interviews, documents, other artifacts, audio or video recordings, surveys, tests, structured interviews, and demographic information (Duran et al., 2006). These help me explain the cultural happenings (Geertz, 1973). I use journaling and recall the previous year's events and work to make composite examples to share. Chang (2008) used storytelling for self-narration and sharing one's experience immersed in the culture. I am sharing experiences grounded in self and analyzing

through a back-and-forth movement that allows me to understand myself and others and a broader lens on the world and how we perceive people, influence, power, and cultural dynamics (Adams et al., 2015; Wood et al., 2012).

Returning to the school's front office, I stare at the pictures of the principals on the wall; I see how I am different from the previous leaders. The photo contrasts with those that led before me in colors and body position. While I wondered if I should conform more to the earlier pictures, I decided against it. I like that I stand out. It is a noticeable difference. I have disrupted a white, middle-aged male dominance culture in this role. Even the other female leader's picture is passivity in her body language, seated on the top of a table. In the portrait, I am standing, my shoulders slightly turned, but I stare directly ahead. Flushed pink and vibrant. I look young and confident. I straighten my back and decide I'm okay being a disrupter. In a school culture used by male leaders, I could see how some male coaches may struggle to take direction from me. I do not mind the struggle. I lean in.

Choosing My Voice

As I explore writing an autoethnography, I have discovered many types. Within the structure of autoethnographies, there is a continuum of what researchers focus more on, research process (graphy), culture (ethno), or self (auto) (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). On the one side of the continuum, "Ellis, Bochner, Richardson, St. Pierre, Holman Jones, and their cohort want to change the world by writing from their hearts." On the other side of the continuum, "the writers in the Third Chicago School [the one that Anderson supports] want none of this" (Ngunjiri, 2010, p. 4). On the other side of the continuum, analytical autoethnographies analyze the position of the self in the culture. Anderson believed others should be part of the data collection to validate and support the research's truths (Ngunjiri, 2010, p. 5). Autoethnography can be more evocative

and seek emotional connection, or analytical and analyze the position of self in the culture. Reflexive evocative ethnographies focus on culture and how the self-other interact. This method looks more profoundly using the back-and-forth method to understand the researcher as they are in a culture. I found a method that speaks to me, and I will write a reflexive evocative autoethnography. Reflexive ethnographers use their senses, feelings, and bodies to explore the self and learn about others (Cohen, 1992). This autoethnography is more along the self and culture side of the continuum. Autoethnography can be personal narratives where researchers take on dual identities of academic and personal selves to tell their stories of their experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). While researching this field, I found every autoethnography focuses on the researcher seeking understanding and relationship to self and the world.

The autoethnography I write is more evocative on the side of the continuum as it explores the emotions in this transition year and my transformation as a leader. I examine my experiences. I want other school leaders to be able to connect to my experiences, and I hope that it impacts their future work by helping them to understand their own experiences more. This approach requires being vulnerable to share these experiences, and it puts me in a vulnerable position as it shares the experiences of others around me.

Reaching Out and Reaching In

Unlike other research methods, autoethnography requires the researcher to confront things about themselves that are less than flattering (Bochner, 2002). As Allison (1996) emphasized, the goal of writing an autoethnography is to take the reader by the throat, break her heart, and heal it again. I feel like it can be an emotional task. I am curious yet apprehensive about this journey as it could expose things about myself that do not show me in the best light. This method requires me to be vulnerable, and it could share things that I wish I could take back.

As an aspiring superintendent, I know this shows who I am to the public. However, this method also will allow me to understand myself in more profound ways, and aligned with the insights of Bochner (2002), I will begin to understand others better. I must revisit the past and know that the memories that surface will be some version of the truth. I always remember the past by interpreting my current reality (Richardson, 2000).

Through the writing process, I move in and out of these events in which feelings are intense. As part of the process, I continue to revisit the experience. It puts me in a vulnerable place because it exposes who I truly am and how I feel, think, and react to the world around me. To make those I interact with less vulnerable, I construct fictionalized composite examples, drawing from my experiences or changing identifying information aligned with methods (Bochner & Ellis, 2002). I use the model developed by Bochner & Ellis (2002), where I collapse events, sharing an example of the types of experiences without explaining the exact experience to protect those involved. This composite event method engages the reader and mirrors the truth without identifying others. For example, I describe a typical person, day, or incident and use qualifying descriptors such as most, some, frequent, and few (Bochner & Ellis, 2002). This method is a way to expose the culture without exposing the individuals interacting with me. This method of research requires me to be vulnerable about who I am. I am not sure I will like what I find out.

Entering this high school, I come as an award-winning principal, which makes me carry confidence that I am not sure I should always have. I am leading in a position where I have to expose my vulnerability to get answers to why I make certain decisions at this level and what the school, district, and state levels require. However, I feel like they relish my naiveté when I have to ask for advice on school-based decisions and have laughed at me when I ask some questions

that seem like all high school principals should know. One scoff from a supervisor was when responding to a question about what chaperoning a prom would entail. The last prom I attended was my own during my senior year of high school, twenty years prior. I question my confidence as a leader even though I know how to move student academic achievement. This experience is different. Maybe I am an amusing choice for my supervisors to watch flounder?

As I shed light on the tensions and experiences a principal has in the new school culture, I am very aware of the implications this work can have, and it may not shed flattering light on me as a leader in some situations. Aspiring to lead in higher leadership positions in my career, I try to protect others from implications while exposing the most vulnerable parts of myself to the world. I seek to understand myself as a leader in this new role so that others can connect to my experiences and apply them for understanding. If learning and growing through this process helps me and others, I feel this research is a valid and powerful practice in educational leadership.

It is Complicated

I wonder how others will believe that these are actual events. While writing an autoethnography is a narrative, validity and reliability lie in telling the truth about how the researcher experienced the interaction with others and the environment. Mendez (2013) explained writing an autoethnography requires the researcher to be honest about the events described. Ellis (2007) called this truth-telling the dimensions of ethics in autoethnography. This relational ethics is sharing personal experiences that are intimate with others involved. As the researcher, sharing my experiences also requires me to be honest about my emotions, inner feelings, and thoughts. I seek to share fictionalized composite events that are replicas of the truth. Mendez (2013) pointed out this self-disclosure may be difficult but a necessary part of the

process. To measure validity, I must describe the experience as lifelike and believable as possible. I do this by being as descriptive as possible to immerse the readers in the experience.

Holt (2003) believed investigator responsiveness would help construct validity instead of evaluative checks to establish trustworthiness, as other qualitative research requires. Plummer (2012) said the story must be coherent, and readers must connect to the researcher's experience. Richardson (2000) provided five factors when analyzing an autoethnography for validity. The criteria are substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, impactfulness, and expression of reality. Readers must see how autoethnography can contribute to understanding the culture. I write to help the readers feel impacted by the experience of reading it and for it to be believable. These guidelines provided by Richardson (2000) are a framework for directing investigators and reviews of autoethnography for validity and reliability.

As I write this, I find one of the unique capabilities of autoethnography is that it allows for a therapeutic voice to emerge so that the act of writing becomes transformative in ways unique to this method. Sell-Smith and Lax (2013) discussed "the process of constantly bouncing my reactions off of the reactions of others and the literature benefitted me in myriad therapeutic ways" (p. 14). Like Sell-Smith (2013) utilized, looking back at the past to understand themselves and others, I will be in a back-and-forth motion of examining composite experiences. This process requires vulnerability to dive back into the past, and sometimes it is painful to re-experience some of those events and seek understanding and growth through the back-and-forth model. In writing this, I can be vulnerable as I analyze moments, and I am hesitant and excited to understand how I navigate the new culture I am leading.

This method is free of the constraints of other forms of research in that it allows the writer to take many forms: poetry, plays, co-constructed, memoirs, or essays. Kidd (2021)

provided an example of poetry in an autoethnography when describing he and his brother lived through traumatic brain injuries. He also discusses the types of music that helped him cope with the emotions surrounding his brother's injury. Danzak et al. (2021) wrote a co-constructed performance autoethnography, *Someone Else's Child: A Co-Constructed, Performance Autoethnography of Adoption from Three Perspectives*, using interviews, journals, photographs, and poetry to make a drama through the process they experienced in adoption. They allowed the writer to relive their experiences and express them in an art form that helps the reader experience them. I utilize the freedom in this method to be creative in how I connect to various experiences throughout this year. For example, I use song lyrics to share how it depicts my school community's pride in their way of life. I use the song lyrics because these popular cultural lyrics helped me connect to the community I serve. This research method gives me the freedom that a traditional qualitative method does not allow.

Ali-Khan (2015) emphasized how “autoethnography encourages readers, authors, and academicians to understand how our lives are connected to the lives of others” (p. 5). This method can allow me to connect readers to my experiences, question their own experiences and positionality in the world, or help them cope with their pain. This method lets the readers enter a conversation and invites them in (Bochner & Ellis, 2002). "By inviting the reader into the story, they can use it for themselves by becoming co-performers, examining themselves through the evocative power of the narrative text (Bochner & Ellis, 2002, p.748). Ellis (2002) shared working with a doctoral student who has discovered how autoethnography can create connections. After reading other works about breast cancer survivors, the student shared much in common with the other researchers and contrasted how she felt compared to the other researchers' lived experiences. This method draws the reader into the experiences and connects

them to better understand the researchers' stories and themselves. I am excited to provide a way for other school leaders to connect to my own experiences.

This method can also allow readers and me to transform our practice through connection; as Coles (1989) argued, "we use stories to figure out how to live our lives meaningfully" (p. 21). Exposing vulnerabilities and analyzing the past to understand better oneself and others can transform the researcher by changing their perspective or promoting healing. Bochner and Ellis (2002) shared, "our accounts seek to express the complexities and difficulties of coping and feeling resolved, showing how we changed over time as we struggled to make sense of our experience" (p. 748). The personal narrative allows space for the human element to shine through. This method aims to experience the story, not analyze the research, to feel the researcher's truth and become a participant in the storyline morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually (Richardson, 1994). I have already begun to experience some transformation in just the back-and-forth movement of remembering experiences while I write this chapter. This method gives voice to personal experiences for sociological understanding (Wall, 2008). The revisiting of experiences, the emotions being reborn through remembering, and the analysis of the culture around me help me question my leadership, thinking, and view of myself in the world. I also hope through this that readers connect their own experiences and experience growth as they revisit experiences for connection and transformation.

Being Vulnerable

As I use this evocative method, it requires me to be vulnerable and share lived experiences, and one of the goals is to encourage compassion and promote dialogue (Ellis, 2002). This method opens doors to entice more conversations around challenges, struggles, and truths challenged to be silent in oppressive sociocultural contexts. As I invite readers to

experience and be a part of the journey to understand and use it for themselves in constructing new meanings, I, too, learn more about myself in the process. Sharing my lived experiences and who I am as I navigate the constraints of this culture, I wonder what truth I will discover. I seek to understand the power dynamics, the cultural constraints, and the freedoms I may find through this process. As I engage in this method, I also hope that readers connect. This method encourages empathy and dialogue to seek how to manage challenges and tensions experienced by principals in new school cultures.

Recognizing Limitations

While I write an autoethnography and have explored what it can do, there are limitations to this type of research. Autoethnography, a method created only about fifty years old, is a frequently criticized form of research. Sparkes (2000) suggested that it is not widely accepted as a valid research method because it does not fit the traditional criteria used to evaluate most qualitative research. Mendez (2013) shared that the evaluation of autoethnography is not straightforward, and finding a consensus on assessing this type of research is hard to reach. This method is not a typical form of qualitative research; Sparkes (2000) pointed out that the criteria to judge autoethnography should not be the same as traditional criteria used to evaluate other qualitative research investigations. Ali-Khan (2015) explained, "autoethnography presents messy, personal and complicated texts, which in addition to their messiness often leave the work of interpretation to the reader" (p.4).

As I seek to find truth in my experiences, Deitering (2017) explained this type of research is not neutral. While most research is supposed to stay neutral and find the truth to the answers in the data, Holt (2003) suggests that the problem with autoethnography is that truth locates in evidence of empirical data, which does not exist in this type of qualitative approach. The

difference in this data approach seeks truths in the interaction between the self and the culture. Thus sometimes questioning the types of dominant viewpoints and attempting to reclaim marginalized representational spaces (Tierney, 1998). However, examining the social constructs and definitions of truth allows me to push back and seek to understand and define my reality. Something that I could not have done in traditional research.

One major criticism of autoethnography is it describes this method as narcissistic, and that approach is too self-indulgent (Coffey et al., 1999; Sparkes, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Chang (2008) warned that pitfalls to autoethnography are the excessive use of self without acknowledging others, overusing the narration without cultural explanation, relying on personal memory as the primary data source, and neglecting ethical standards regarding narration. However, autoethnography is not limited to the self because people do not experience life in a social vacuum. If I am the only data source in autoethnography, and the research does not discuss the outside forces and other interactions within the experience, it should be questioned (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Sparkes, 2000). I am aware that questions of validity occur if I do not write explaining my experiences within the cultural context and with interactions with others. Mykhalovskiy (1996) challenged that to write individual experiences is to write a social experience, which requires the interaction of the self with others and the cultural environment. In writing autoethnography in composite examples, some critics say it is fiction and, therefore, not proper research (Mink, 1970; Shotter, 1987). Atkinson (1997) stated that it was unworthy of being classified as a social science because it was a romantic description of oneself.

Autoethnography is the study of oneself and their experiences within a cultural context to better understand the truth around one. As the researcher, I am a social being who interacts with the world around me and then examines that experience. This research requires emotion and

honest reflection for the reader to experience and connect to my knowledge. Writing the autoethnography, I move back and forth through the experience to see the social, political, and cultural interactions. Using this narration and research method, I am excited to expose the truth and possibly challenge the current power structures. As Deitering (2014) shared, this approach makes the world better by seeking more understanding.

GLASS EVERYWHERE

CHAPTER 3: GLASS CEILING, GLASS ESCALATOR, AND GLASS CLIFF

I smooth my skirt as I prepare to meet with my supervisors. I am about to discuss data and report on how the status of the school. As I walk into the room, I notice it is small, with a large conference table that takes up most of the space. This newly constructed room still has bare walls, and one small window at the other end allows a slight slant of sunlight. The already crowded area seems small due to the large furniture. This arrangement seems to add to the pressure; it is as if the walls are leaning toward me.

The large conference table is long, with chairs pressing around it. While there are eight to ten chairs around this table, all are empty except for three at the far end, where three supervisors sit. I take a deep breath as one supervisor motions for me to sit at the other end of the table. I stare at all the chairs between us as I sit in a cushioned, black office chair, the chair swivels and causes me to spin slowly from right to left. I grip the side of the conference table to steady myself. My damp fingers leave marks behind on the polished wood, and I watch as the marks slowly evaporate. I shift uncomfortably in my seat as sweat starts to pool under my thighs.

I smile nervously at my supervisors as I make eye contact. I seem so far away from them. The distance between us creates a feeling of intimidation. Was this feeling intentional? I try not to second-guess myself. Is the tension of accountability and expectations causing my shoulders to tighten and burn? My boss alludes to principals often being in the "hot seat." He is referring to the kinds of stress and anxiety familiar with principals. I struggle with anxiety when I feel pressure to perform and do the right thing. I wonder if this is the "hot seat" he is describing. It must be. The pressure I face in this role causes my heart to race and my palms to sweat, not from the actual heat in the room but from the weight of the accountability principals face.

I hear the reminder again that I need to move the school academically. I glance down at my binder of data. Pages with names of teachers, names of students, highlighted lines, names circled, and notes of performance beside them. Plans and questions scar the pages of charts and schedules. Numbers. So many numbers. Numbers that tell part of each student's story, part of the impact of the teacher, and part of my journey as the principal of this high school. Part, but not all, of the story. I take a deep breath. I shift in my seat, sliding on sweat under my thighs, and yank at the hem of my skirt. I nervously think as I twist my hair in my fingers. Can I do this?

My role as principal has increasingly become more complex and demanding. Hallinger (2005) emphasized that with new demanding leadership standards, principals are held more accountable for their schools' performance. With this increased accountability, some principals are leaving the profession. According to Steinberg and Yang (2021), there are a growing number of schools struggling to replace the "graying corps of principals at a time when the pressure to raise test scores and other new demands have made an already difficult job an increasingly thankless one" (p. 3). This new pressure of accountability has deterred others from pursuing principal positions. In the last two years, a third of principals in the nation have been walking away from this profession, explicitly naming the increased pressure of accountability, job-related stress, and lack of family time as the reason (Scanga & Sedlack, 2021). Yet, I have stepped up to this challenge to lead an academically underperforming high school, and now I feel I may be standing on a cliff.

I grab hold of my binder full of data. I feel like there is a room full of supervisors, but only three people stare back at me. They have sheets in front of them of charts with numbers that share only part of the story of my journey this year. I have to answer for these numbers, yet I do not want to claim responsibility for them...at least not yet. I begin to tell the story of what I

discovered since coming to this high school. Of the hard-working and not-so-hard-working teachers, I grimace as I skip past some of the names on the pages as they are dear friends of the supervisors in this room. I am aware I am dancing a delicate dance. I was trying not to step on any toes as I start to allude to changes I need to make. Shifting in my hot seat, I wonder how much I can control and how much change I can bring to this school. I am waltzing around the hard decisions I will have to make. I am tip-toeing around feelings of pride, getting ready to pivot when change does not happen so quickly. Who will I make angry? Who will leave the school? Will I be successful? Will students be successful? I hold such a delicate position, my shoulder burning with the weight. I must perform well. I rattle off some of the challenges, slow down over some triumphs, and smile as I share how a teacher left in the third week of the school year by throwing up peace signs in my face and saying, "peace out." We all share a chuckle. But even though there is camaraderie, I feel like I am on a cliff, and my toes are curling over the side. I am wondering, can I do this?

As a high-performing school principal with many years of proven success, I move to lead an underperforming high school. I like a challenge, yet I wonder if I will fail. I wonder if I am leading this particular school because others would not have taken this challenge on. As a female high school principal, I have noticed that I follow in the footsteps of many male leaders before me. In my school, I stand to fill the shoes of the former male leaders that followed the progression of being coaches, athletic directors, and principals. Yet, I am not the norm, and this is one example of an interaction that reminds me.

At a community event, a high school principal from a neighboring district confidently walked toward me. He is a tall, white, athletically built male wearing a polo shirt and khaki pants. He greets me with a warm smile as I say hello. As he introduces himself, he asks me where

to find the principal. I stare up at him, smiling. I proudly say my name and that I am the principal. As we talk about upcoming testing schedules and the current football success, he informs me that last week he met another female high school principal from our district but cannot remember her name. He describes the school that she leads and her appearance. I remind him of her name and also add some accolades of that particular leader, explaining the strengths in leadership she adds in her role. I feel I cannot just answer with her name alone. She is more than just a name. I feel proud to share who she is among leaders, and I feel lucky to be alongside her in the ranks of leading high schools in this district.

I am proud my district's ratio of male to female high school principals is equal. I find that here, locally, the glass ceiling has shattered. However, in this southern state, most high school principals are male. While women have been breaking through the glass ceiling, a phenomenon describing an invisible barrier preventing women from rising into leadership ranks, men are still more likely to be promoted to leadership positions. Schmitt (2021) pointed out that the glass ceiling is more pronounced at the high school level. As public school is a gendered organization, female teachers are the majority at 75% of the workforce, but only 36% become high school principals (Zaho, 2022). Some women still consider the high school principal role masculine. The assumption is female principals are more motherly and should lead elementary-level schools to care for younger children. As evidenced by Taie and Goldring (2020), most elementary principals are female. However, I wonder if another reason high school principal roles are mostly male could be because women pursue their careers after they raise their children. I also wonder if female principals prefer an elementary setting to be on a similar work schedule as their children, as it does not require as many extra supervision duties at night for extracurricular activities.

However, I did not wait to pursue my career in school leadership. I am caring for my children; they are growing up watching me work as a principal.

My youngest daughter bounces up and down on her toes on the sideline of the football game. It is a Friday night in the fall, and she is coming with me to watch my student-athletes play a rival team. Attending events like these is not how I envisioned her childhood. I became a teacher twenty years ago to be home after school with my children. I grew up not seeing my mom much as she was a grocery store manager and worked long hours. I wanted a different life for my kids. Or so I thought. My oldest daughter was one year old when I earned my Master's degree and started applying for an Assistant Principal position. By the time I was promoted to administrator, I had two children; my daughters were three and one year old. They have grown up attending sporting and community events and hear tales of work-life discussed over dinner with my husband. I struggled to decide to pursue a career I wanted over the dream of being more present at home, and my ambition and desire for this career won out. As one female friend and administrator told me as I was interviewing for administrator positions, "you can be a mom and a principal, too." I often think back to that conversation when I struggle to balance work and life demands and remind myself, yes, yes, I can be both.

While I am managing motherhood and being a principal, some women postpone their careers to raise children, which slows their progression to further their careers. However, women focusing more on raising children first is not the only reason men seem to dominate the high school principal role. The rise of more males into this principal position seems more in line with a phenomenon known as the "glass escalator" (Williams, 1992). The "glass escalator" is defined as a preference for a male leader over a woman leader and seems to do more with perceived gender differences in leadership abilities (Judge, 2003). Therefore, males are promoted quicker

than females for specific leadership roles for several reasons in gendered organizations or through relationships known as the good ole boy network. Whereas women breaking through the glass ceiling are celebrated, a negative view of males in female-dominated professions persists. While women pursuing careers in school leadership may have shattered the glass ceiling and possibly overcome the glass escalator, another phenomenon female principals may experience is the glass cliff.

I did not feel the pressure of breaking through a glass ceiling as I had many female principals as role models. They opened doors for me by providing advice and leadership experiences. I think fondly of their names. I can picture their smiles, stance, and offices as I visit for another word of advice or a listening ear. However, I have felt the sting of watching glass escalators. I wonder what I did not do right to get that promotion. I remember the sting of jealousy as a male colleague with less experience is promoted more quickly than me. But here I stand now. Having asked for the next step and facing a new challenge. Not realizing I may be standing on a glass cliff.

The glass cliff is a metaphor used by Ryan and Haslam (2006) to describe the precarious situations women leaders find themselves in because they are placed as the leader of an organization when an organization is underperforming. Men tend to shy away or turn down these positions that require tackling such challenges in the leadership role because other opportunities will arise for them. This phenomenon may be because male leaders are subject to more opportunities to lead in various settings due to the glass escalator. Hence, they feel they have options to say no and not receive pressure to accept the first offer (Williams, 1992). In contrast, women leaders accept challenging leadership positions because they feel that other opportunities may not come. While this was not the case for me, I felt the need to ask to lead a high school.

While I have served as a secondary principal at the middle school level for many years, I quickly became bored with the high-performing school I lead. I want a new challenge. Seeking to lead a high school, I do my research. I analyze data and plan for change to help this particular school become high performing. I present my plan to the superintendent, asking for this challenge. I did not know that I would only be the second female to lead this high school and follow in the footsteps of many male coaches turned principals. I have no idea I would be different from what the faculty sees in a leader. For this principal role at this school-- I am different. A female. Not a coach. I do not come from the faculty ranks of the school. I am not from this school. I am new. A new challenge for the staff and me I would lead.

Within a few weeks of my new role, my new administrative team confessed they were hesitant to work with me. They did not know what to expect because my reputation was unknown. I am not the first female leader to experience this tension when leading a new organization. Brown et al. (2011) found that a desire for a leader who exemplifies change and can move the organization in a new direction may go against the gender-based leadership preference. It is a move from the old leadership style to a new one that signifies change. Ryan and Haslam (2006) found that women tend to be appointed to leadership positions under different circumstances than men. Considering that the school was in a downward spiral in academic performance for seven years, it will take more than one year to create systemic change and see results. Ryan and Halsam (2006) found that more women than men are in precarious leadership positions and are at risk of being blamed for adverse events already in motion long before their appointment to the leadership position. I am eager to see academic learning gains, but I nervously watch my first year leading this school to analyze the culture. I wonder if I will receive blame if student achievement does not improve this year.

So here I am. I stare across the long conference table and hear the phrase, "you have to move the school." The term "moving the school" is often said among district staff and principals to mean increasing the school grade earned from the state on accountability measures. It is one of the main goals, pressures, and heartaches of being a principal in this world of high-stakes accountability. This school has steadily declined in academic success for the last seven years. Yet, having been in "the hot seat" for six months, I am answering whether student achievement is increasing.

I return to the room where I feel this pressure of sitting in a "hot seat," a seat scorching with accountability. I nervously swallow and grip the sides of my binder of data. The supervisors asked me about my plans and how many changes I would make in the first year. Don't go too fast—one advisor in the room shares. Don't go too slow; you can't waste time, says another. But go just right, chimes in one more. I take a deep breath, writing down their suggestions. I know they feel the same pressure; we stare at the same numbers that tell part of the academic story, and I know their seats are just as hot.

The pressure of accountability is not mine alone; it is a burden that all school and district leaders bear. The weight of this particular position at this school is heavy, and I can see the supervisors feel it too. Creating success at this school requires a change in leadership. Ryan and Halsam (2006) pointed out that while the glass cliff positions hold an element of risk, they do not necessarily lead to failure but are an opportunity. Some women, like me, strategically seek them out (p. 5).

As I sit across the conference table discussing the plans for the high school to be more successful, I wonder about support from my supervisors. I hold my sweaty palms together, fingers intertwined, in my lap, trying to look confident. I know that bringing this kind of change

requires tough decisions that may upset people who have been a part of this school culture for decades. I lean closer as I ask my superiors, will you support me when those core teachers are upset? I am hesitant as relationships run deep with the staff at this school. I am aware I am not the one with deep connections to this staff and community. How far is too far in sharing my frustration with my supervisors? I shift again in my seat. I smile nervously and move my gaze away from direct eye contact. I know my ability to make the changes needed. I force myself to make eye contact again. I assure them that I can raise this school's achievement levels. I will "move the school."

As I ponder my plans in this new role, I recognize that as a strong leader new to this school, I need to be careful about not being viewed as arrogant. Confidence can equate to arrogance in describing women. Role incongruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) suggests that men and women are perceived differently in leadership roles. In a gendered organization, the chosen leader must align with the desired qualities of the leader role with stereotypical characteristics (Eagly & Karau, 2002). For a male audience, tentative women are more influential than confident women because they are not showing agentic factors that go against the norm (Wiley & Eskilson 1985). I am not male nor tentative. Using the role incongruity theory, I am not fitting in with the norm of the leader for this school. However, I have the backing of my superiors in leading the school to increase academic success, and my approach and personality are valued. Ryan et al. (2007) suggested that even in organizations dominated by men, women lead in a crisis. Women leaders seem more hostile and less rational than successful male leaders (Heilman et al., 1995). Powerful women receive nicknames, such as Dragon Lady or Battle-Ax (Eagly & Karau, 2002). I, too, have been given a nickname. I recall a conversation with a group of female school leaders as we rode in a car together to a conference.

We share stories of the past few weeks' events and how we handled them—disgruntled parents, challenging student interactions, and evaluating teachers. I share my story of standing up for myself with a particularly tough interaction with a teacher. As I retell my experience with this particular teacher, I explain my expectations of the next steps for the teacher. I glance over and see my colleague staring at me. At the end of the story, there is a pause, and she says, "you are sweet but have a way of holding your own. You are like a kitty with claws. You only put out the claws when you need them. I wish I could do that." The nickname she gives me, "kitty with claws," is funny, but it makes me think. Why do women shy away from being direct, dominant, and aggressive if needed? If they do, do they always receive nicknames? With this nickname, I feel proud. I feel confident and almost like a model for her on how to be more dominant. I do not shy away from those agentic characteristics. However, even though I relish the nickname and another female leader noticing my candor in leading, I wondered if I would be too harsh for this new school.

As I sit across from my supervisors now, I wonder if I am coming across as too strong. Do I care if I seem too strong? I like feeling strong. Confident. Even as I feel like I am teetering on a cliff. I can do this. I have permission to move forward with my changes. With one reminder—move the school. I slide out of my chair and grab my binder full of data, charts, and plans. I open the conference door and stride out.

I admire the women who have shattered glass ceilings here for me as I advance to this leadership role. Even though serving in a southern state and watching glass escalators continue to glide upward, I am thankful for my position. A position that I sometimes feel may be a glass cliff. A cliff that I peer over the side at times, but then I right my gaze to stare ahead at the challenge I requested.

CHAPTER 4: RUNNING INTO GLASS WALLS

The sound of grunts, plastic-covered shoulders slamming into each other, and the sucking of cleats sliding through thick mud fills the air. The boys push harder into the slick ground seeking purchase. Piercing whistles ring out, and yellow flags fly high and fall into the mud puddle. The boys stop moving. Coaches start to yell. I squint, straining to see into the stands across the football field. I scan the sea of students' faces, wondering if everything is safe. I jam my hands into my shorts, bracing myself against the wind as it starts to pick up. My ponytail is swinging in a gust. I can smell the rain coming in the sharp ting of cut grass; I hear the trees rustling as wind rakes across them. I start to pace back and forth on the sidelines, watching the end of the first quarter of the football game. I hear the parents standing next to me chatter about the play. I glance over at the line of our cheerleaders and notice they are sliding on their rain gear. The wind has started to pick up more. I spot a bright flash of lightning—the game halts.

It is a Friday night, and I am at a football game. An event where the whole community comes out to cheer on their boys on the field. I feel their eyes on me and watching my every move. Football games were not how I used to spend my Friday nights. But now, here I am. I am an outsider. I am the new high school principal in a rural school and do not know much about football. I am out of my element.

Our school is playing a rival team on their home turf. We are guests here, but even so, we feel unwelcome. I scan the buildings behind the field, thinking of where to send students needing shelter from the impending storm. I assess the stands, trying to account for my students, parents, and community in planning where they should go for safety. The student section of the stands holds about three hundred students, and I recognize many familiar faces. These students from the rival team were my former students as principal of the local middle school years ago. I smile and

wave as I get closer to them. Until I notice that they are chanting, "go home," as they fling trash at my students passing by.

I feel a barrier on how to connect without much knowledge of football and being new to the community. Especially in a rural high school, Howley and Howley (1999) explained that sporting events create a sense of community and help define school identity. High school football is one of the most significant community events in the fall—a tradition in the South where young men can display a sense of southern honor. In the 1920's college football, particularly in the South, became more than just a sport. While research points to college football, I found this also applicable to high school football. In the 1920s, the football field transformed into a place where young men could earn honor and courage by displaying athletic skill and feeling a sense of pride through winning. Southerners hail success on the football field as the virtue and strength of native sons (Borucki, 2003).

I stop pacing and stand near a group of parents and community members who are grumbling about the other school's behavior. I grimace and continue to scan the crowd. I do not know these parents. However, I recognize the parents on the other team. Parents I know well. I wonder how I will fit in here.

On the sidelines, two female grandparents started asking questions about where I grew up. Being a former principal down the street from this school, I give the title of my former position. However, that is not what they are asking me. Southerners seek to find out connections through others. Instead of your occupation, the question is about where you originate from and who your family members are (Landess, 1981). They smile politely, nod, and then ask where I grew up. Being from a small southern town not too far from this one, I share my upbringing and describe my family's land. Suzanne Keller (1995) found ten small-town community building

blocks. One of the building blocks is membership criteria to understand who belongs in the community. Landess (1981) found southerners could assess an outsider quickly through one short conversation. As I share my family name, and the location of our family property, the grandmothers look at each other for help as they work to connect my family name to family names they know in the area. Part of a southern identity is defining your sense of belonging to a place and knowing who "your people" are. The ability to tie your people to people in the community is an important way of creating a sense of belonging (Cooper & Knotts, 2017). They smile politely at me, seeming happy they can make a connection, though distant.

I smile back at them and return my attention to the field. I feel a strong breeze and notice the old ladies slowly shuffle away and open their umbrellas. I hear the chanting from the opposing team's stands. I recognize their faces. I cringe at seeing my former students harass the students now in my charge. As the sky opens up and the rain begins to fall, I consider all my students and where they are on the field, in the stands, and in the marching band, gathering their instruments. The rain falls harder. I look at the principal of the school we are playing; he stands huddled under an umbrella. I have no umbrella. I ask him where my students could take shelter. He responds with a shrug. As my band students hustle by, hunched over their instruments in the rain past the bleachers, students from the other school, students I had watched grow up, started throwing trash at them.

Now completely drenched, my flip-flops are soaked through and slippery. I kick off my shoes. Students start to throw bags of flour and chips at my students; I march barefoot across the now deserted football field towards the stands. When I get to the other side, I stare at the familiar faces of former students and parents and start correcting them for their rude behavior. Shaking my hands at the parents to get their attention, I call some students by name. The parents

sit silently and watch me. The rival school, my former students, continue to chant back at me, "go home," as the insults continue.

Frustrated and annoyed, I look around for assistance. I notice then that the new community members are watching me. With their eyes on me, I feel as if I am pressing against invisible barriers, glass walls, that I am running up against. Experiencing glass walls is a phenomenon where women in certain occupations are restricted to different aspects or roles in a job as compared to men, and therefore feel they are hitting barriers to success when put in leadership roles (Miller, 1999). As I stand on the sideline of the football game, seeking assistance to protect my new students, I feel there is now a barrier to connecting. I search for familiar faces in a place I have not led before. I scan for help from fellow administrators from the other school. I feel as if I am being watched and evaluated simultaneously. I push against these glass barriers that may be invisible to others, but I know my actions are transparent. I see parents watching me. As they look at me, I look at our students and notice their behavior. They do not retaliate as rude comments and trash hurl towards them.

At this moment, I realize I am in the place I am supposed to lead. While angry and sad to see the students I used to lead treating others so poorly, I look around at my new students, athletes, and parents and feel pride. I notice they are picking up trash thrown at them. They are walking by silently. The school grounds I currently stand on is the school I had aspired to lead next. It is an affluent, high-performing school in a newer part of town. I knew the families and students. Instead, I am the principal of the rival high school. My school is less economically sound, rural, and underperforming academically. However, my school is also friendly, respectful, and loyal. As I stand barefoot in the pouring rain, watching the contrast between the

two communities, I realize I am thankful and proud to be their principal. I feel I am where I am supposed to be.

This moment was the first time I did not feel like an outsider. Sperandio (2015) found many factors that make it hard for an outsider to lead a rural high school. The primary significant factor is not being from the community. Another glass wall that I am trying hard to knock down. Morford (2002) found the community views placing an outsider as a leader in the school is a challenging tradition.

Conversely, a promotion of an insider signals a commitment to continuity, loyalty to the belief systems in place and honors the achievements of the existing staff and community (Joseph & Roach 2014). Another southern tradition is the code of honor. This code emphasizes loyalty to the community, faith, family, and war (Gorn, 1985). A Celtic influence on southern culture is evident in the expectation that a community member will always protect one's and the community's reputation. Another building block is the spirit of the community (Keller, 1995), a sense of interdependence transcending individual interests into that community's interests. The individual begins to assume responsibility for their community (Keller, 1995). Gorn (1985) explained the code of honor demands loyalty and action to stand and help others in times of peril and consistently to maintain pride. That night, in that one act of standing up for our students, I realized my loyalty as the leader of this high school.

I did not know it then, but my parents and coaches were watching me. For weeks after, parents and coaches come up to me at football games and events and talk about their principal marching across the football field barefoot. They smile with pride and tell me that seeing me barefoot on that field, standing up for our students, is when I became one of them.

As the community watched my response during the football game, it shattered the glass wall blocking my acceptance as the leader of this school. This event was the night I became an insider in this community. As the parents still discuss this night with me, this incident reminds me, "that was when I knew you were our principal."

CHAPTER 5: SLIPPING ON A GLASS SLIPPER

Always wear high heels. Yes, they give you power.
You move differently, sit differently, and even speak differently.
— Carine Roitfeld

I remember, as a young teacher watching one of my supervisors walk to her car, carrying a slick leather bag, wearing a pressed navy pantsuit and matching navy high heels. Her hair perfectly positioned in a neat bob, and her wedding ring glinting in the sun. She looks confident. She looks powerful. I watch, wearing a floral sundress, a cardigan, and scuffed sandals, and tell myself I will look like that someday.

Years later, I stand watching students enter the school through the main doors, smiling at them as I shift from foot to foot in my high heels. I am wearing a navy suit and matching high heels. When I aspired to be a school leader, I looked to other women in those roles. I noticed how they carried themselves in rooms and how they dressed. Cues of professional dress for women are not explicit. There are unspoken rules on professional attire for women that are more complex than for men (Wolf, 1991). Women tend to be more affected than men by clothing choices as they want to appear “at their best” and not wear the wrong clothing (Coleman and Fitzgerald, 2009). Women use clothing to convince others that they are a particular kind of person (Woodward, 2007). For me, high heels are a tool I use.

The bell rings for class to begin, and I slowly walk back to the office; with every step, the pads of my feet ache. My high heel catches on the lip of a broken tile, and the cap chips off. There is the tell-tale click, and a small slide as the metal of the heel post hits the slick tile, and I hitch my step to ensure I do not fall. A step, and then a small slide; I step and slide as I hobble the last few steps to my office and close the door. I kick the heels off and add them to the growing pile of broken heels under my desk—a graveyard of tools I use to set myself apart. I wear a

uniform of my design, a suit of armor that consists of a pencil skirt, blazer, and high heels. However, the high heels have not lasted long on these tile floors. My feet are cramping from long days of standing and walking through stretches of hallways. I sit barefoot for a minute at my desk to assess my calendar. I pull the next pair of high heels from below my desk. Unbroken, yet scuffed. I notice the callus on my heel bloom red. I wince as I stand up and place the heels by the end of the desk near the door. As the next bell rings, I take a deep breath and slip my heels back on. I gingerly walk down the hallway.

I force myself to fit this model I have in my head. As advice on one website tells females aspiring for professional advancement, “wear high heels while climbing the corporate ladder” (Archambeau, 2006). Wearing heels makes me taller. I feel more in control, polished, and professional. However, it is not a notion I have created on my own. It is a painful constraint imposed by societal norms that tell women professional dress, including high heels, creates attraction and the impression they will earn respect (Kaiser et al., 2001). Like the female school leaders I admire, I take unspoken cues from the examples I observe. A societal norm of wearing make-up, a dress, and high heels shoes is the basic criteria for a woman to be recruited into management positions (Jefferys, 2004). I recognize I am trying to establish credibility. The taller and slimmer I appear, the more respect I will gain from those I lead.

From the first day walking these halls, I have worn high heels. Even my female supervisor, who served as a high school principal, commented on my shoes and advised me to find an alternative shoe choice. With the size of the school and the amount of time on my feet, it would not be suitable for me if I wore heels every day. I listen with concern. I wonder, can I find cute flats? I think back to that conversation as I gingerly walk down the hallway. She is correct, but I like the height the heels add and do not want to slip into flats.

I did not slip into this role but instead was appointed for change. I am a contrast to the previous school leaders and not one that is the norm for this high school. There is the southern cultural expectation for a school leader to be the "right fit," a white, cis-gendered male who grew up in the community he leads (Hite, 1994). As I enter this position, I am reminded that this role feels like I am trying on a glass slipper, and it does not fit. The glass slipper phenomenon coined by Ashcraft (2013) after the glass slipper in the famous fairy tale Cinderella. The prince uses the glass slipper Cinderella loses as she hurries from the ball to find her and rescue her. Only the proper fitting of the glass slipper will determine if she is the one. This phenomenon in leadership describes how a specific person is considered a fit for occupation. The fit is created through body-work association by certain genders that occupy those professional spaces and create a collective identity. Education is an example of one type of gendered organization where most teachers are female and most secondary school leaders are male. Therefore a specific societal fit is formed. While my supervisors support me, I feel I chafe against the norms of the male leaders before me. I slip on this particular glass slipper, a large men's tennis shoe. I find it does not fit, and as I step into its mold— it shatters.

It is early morning, and the bathroom light casts shadows across my bedroom carpet. I pick out matching jewelry for the day, a pair of pearl earrings, and fasten them on. I glance at the television as the weather report drones on, noting that it will be another hot day. I shrug on my black blazer, adjust the collar, and punch the label pin into the left collar, spinning the school emblem to stand straight. I grumble about how hot I will be later, thinking about how the suit jacket fabric always sticks to my skin. I step into my heels and spin to the right slowly, checking my appearance one last time in the full-length mirror before I head for the front door.

Women leaders begin forming their image and identity by simply getting dressed (Woodward, 2007). Leading in a role that all-male coaches once led, I further explored the differences in my identity. As a female wearing a blazer, skirt, and high heels, my appearance is vastly different from the norm, and I need to dress this way daily. One way that women leaders try to combat the bodywork that creates “glass slippers” in gendered organizations is to fight it by hiding their femininity through dress, voice, and self-presentation (Kumra, 2014). Women leaders are viewed as “problematic signifiers” in the workplace as they do not match the occupational identity (Brewis & Sinclair, 2000, p. 195).

Wondering why I feel that pressure, I explore Fitzgerald's (2018) theory that women think that they need to dress in a certain way that helps establish credibility. Puwar (2004) found that women feel conspicuous, awkward, and self-conscious in their leadership roles combating the glass slipper phenomenon. I do feel noticeable and uncomfortable at times. Wearing a blazer every day, I examine the contrasts in my wardrobe and the power they play in how I dress as I continue to define myself as the principal of this school. Entwistle (2000) claimed professional women simultaneously monitor their appearance to be feminine and professional. Wearing a blazer is part of my suit of armor to help me feel confident and less awkward in this role.

Sitting at my desk, I start to prepare for a meeting that I know will be contentious. I make notes on a small paper pad next to me for the meeting. I take a deep breath and roll my shoulders back, tilting my head from side to side. I feel the tension in my neck loosen slightly. My hand shakes as I jot down reminders of points I need to make in this upcoming meeting. Having taken my blazer off earlier in the day while doing office work, I grab it off the back of my office chair and wrestle back into it. Gripping the front of the jacket and pulling it close together, I pace back and forth in my office. After a few moments, I settle into an office chair around a

circular conference table at the center of my office. I feel more comfortable for this impending conversation with my blazer on. As if it gives the message that I am in charge of this meeting.

The blazer is a clothing item that women use to help them feel that they have set themselves apart, signifying they are a leader instead of part of the faculty (Niesche & Heffernan, 2020). While Brewis and Sinclair (2000) found research to say women's bodies in leadership positions signify problems, clothing such as a blazer also acts as a signifier. While Swan (2005) found women's bodies are out of place in leadership positions and not the right "fit" for the job. Women embody sexuality, nature, emotions, and hormones and, therefore, are assumed not to be able to be rational, authoritative, or in control. To combat this stereotype, women wear blazers. Studies have found that the blazer creates a signifier to assimilate into the leadership role, particularly in academia. This way of dress is a noticeable difference in leadership. I remember a time a teacher commented on my appearance.

The decorated hallways are lined with characters and pictures of victory over the football team we will play on Friday night. The walls show colorful images of our mascot, football players, and characters from beloved childhood stories playing out their version of a victory for our school in the next game. Lights, streamers, and banners line the walls, leading you down tunnels of fantasy as the music plays from motion-censored speakers as students walk by. At the end of one hallway, depictions of the administration team as various characters in a story are drawn life-size on a wall. I am holding Mickey Mouse's hand and waving at the crowd in my picture. I am wearing a blazer, a pencil skirt, and high heels. In the picture of the administrative team, I am the only one wearing a blazer. The other administrators are pictured wearing pants, polo shirts, and flat shoes. As a teacher walks by, he notices me looking at the pictures and comments how the students had to picture me in my statement blazer. Statement

blazer? I never thought of it that way. The blazer makes a statement. I thought it was just an internal meaning to help me feel I established more authority and control in this role (Green, 2001). However, now I know the staff and students also notice it.

Women in leadership roles feel noticed in every room they occupy. In gendered organizations, women in leadership roles find ways to blend in as a peer with other leaders; therefore, wearing blazers and suits helps to deflect others from potential abnormal signifiers (Niesche & Heffernan, 2020). Wearing skirts that are too short, bright colors, scarves, or large jewelry that distracts the eye may cause attention that questions the woman's ability to belong in the room (Kaiser et al., 2001). Research has found that women leaders, even if they do not wear a blazer daily, have one ready in case they need it. It is draped on the back of an office chair or resting on a hook, waiting for the moment it is needed to be put on as a type of suit of armor, a way to signify authority and professionalism (Niesche & Heffernan, 2020). Adamson (2015) found there was no way to fake the fit, and there was no invisible wand to erase this glass slipper, so I chose to smash it. I remain conspicuous in my blazer, skirt, and high heels.

CHAPTER 6: THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

Country roads take me home to the place I belong. – John Denver

A group of boys sits in the first row near the stage during graduation practice. It is a warm May morning, and they are shifting in their seats as sweat beads on their foreheads. They squint up at me standing on the stage. It is the last hour of long graduation practice. Tonight these students will walk across this stage and graduate high school. Tired of waiting, some boys sing softly, “country roads, take me home, to the place I belong.” More boys join in. I watch as they settle back in their plastic seats. Their voices are gaining volume.

As I wait for further direction from the teacher leaders to usher us out of the sun, I think back to one of my drives to school early one morning. My car bounces slowly down a long dirt road. The road stretches on as far as I can see, with forest lining each side. No sign of a house or another car. Where am I going? I wonder if I should turn around. I keep driving. I’m uncomfortable. Am I safe out here?

This drive reminds me of the dirt road where I grew up. Forest also lines both sides of the long drive to my house to a log cabin built by my parents. Now the road I drive seems similar, and that thought settles me. As I slowly drive down the road, it makes me a little homesick. It makes me think of my parents. It reminds me of my upbringing—a long dirt road with no mailbox by the house and no concrete sidewalk to run down. Wild turkeys roaming the yard. Home.

The sounds of singing pull my attention back to the students in front of me. The hot sun is blazing down on us. Am I so different from the students I lead? I look around at the hundreds of students as they file off the football field to leave and prepare for graduation. I have lived a whole year wondering if I belong with them. Wondering if I fit into this culture.

As a leader who did not match the traditional expectations of who should be the high school principal, I struggled to find my identity and belonging. I searched for ways to connect to this community. I approached leading this high school by protecting traditions and values while pushing the barriers out of the way that hindered student achievement. Feeling out of place, I feel as if I am like Alice, who has stepped through the looking glass to a world that did not make sense (Carroll, 1891). Like Alice, I feel I left an ordinary world and stepped into one that seems upside down. But is it?

There is a southern culture in this unfamiliar place with specific expectations for a high school principal. Expectations I do not meet. As I experienced, female school leaders must overcome the southern perception that women's work is unacceptable (Gill, 1994). The pressure to raise student achievement and protect the traditional values at this high school sometimes clash. As a strong female secondary school principal, my appearance, personality, and focus on academic achievement chafe against the traditional role and norm of the traditional leader for this school. However, throughout this year, I began to feel a sense of belonging. MacLure (1993) shared that an educational leader's identity is influenced and molded by others as much as it is within oneself. Throughout this year, my identity as a leader has evolved through my interactions with the community.

As I learned about the southern rural culture of the students I lead, I began to understand the intense pride that lives in this community. As I stand on the sidelines of the football game, I hear alums share their stories of when they walked these hallways and played on this field.

A couple in their mid-forties walk across the asphalt track to the goal post. They are holding hands and laughing as they approach a group of similar-aged parents who have set up lawn chairs in the grass near the football field. The football players are doing warm-ups.

Whistles peel through the air as the athletes in their crisp uniforms run back and forth in unison. Dirt flies up from their cleats as they sprint, and the smell of grass fills the air. I look back to the group of parents as one man claps another on the shoulder and the women hug. They settle down in their lawn chairs and point towards the stands where their children have joined the student body. They start sharing memories of when they were here as high school students. I hear snippets of their conversation about not getting away with something, how there was not this facility then, and the prank they pulled on the teacher that is still here—they point to him standing on the far side of the track. I hear laughs and see the women smile at their former teacher in admiration.

To observe their retelling of memories and see their interaction is a gift. I am gifted insights into the private connections of people to this culture, this place, and why it is so valued. Observing these interactions helped me understand this sense of belonging I watch. At this moment, I feel like an outsider looking in, but I want to feel that sense of belonging too. The complexity of this moment is feeling the strong ties that bind people to this place and also wanting to be a part of that experience; I want to belong here too. A sense of belonging and emotional value to a particular area is evident in small rural communities and usually centers on the local high school (Perrin, 2012). As I learn about this culture, I feel myself grow as a leader and remind myself that my focus should be more on people, not just on raising student achievement (Harmon, 2001).

It is lunchtime, and I am sitting at a small table in a conference room with four female support staff. We each help pass out plates, forks, and napkins. One sets food on the table, and I notice they are always eager to engage in hospitality to take care of others. As we settle in our seats, we pass the plates of food around, helping ourselves, and I listen to them share their

weekend experiences. Eating lunch together was a tradition; when I first arrived, I did not find time to join them. However, I wanted more connection with the staff as the weeks passed. They have grown up in the area and share stories about their life. I am captivated as their memories spill out, accented by giggles or interrupting each other to retell parts of the story. They attended this high school, and now two generations of their family have followed behind them. They tell me stories of what the small town used to look like, where businesses used to be, and even shenanigans local leaders participated in as kids. I learned of places long built over where the teenagers would hang out and crimes committed in the town. They beam as they proudly share the names of grandfathers of colleagues on campus who saved the day from bouts of crime. I learn lessons about grace as they share events in life they have endured. I sought counsel on proper etiquette when one of our staff members passed away. We cry, laugh, and ponder life decisions together daily around this lunch table. It is a time when I pause to connect and learn not only about this southern culture and the history of the area and school but where I learn about myself and others.

Through listening to stories, I feel connected. Robinson (2022) shared that storytelling is almost a currency in the south. The trading of stories is a way to connect. These stories share memories, emotions, and also values. In southern culture, folk narratives are actual events or fictional, but they explain community attitudes and values (Burrison, 2003). Listening to the stories shared over lunch, I understood the importance of this southern culture. Over time I feel my identity has shifted to lead with more southern grace and respect for this culture. Cunliffe (2009) found that leaders change through social experience and dialogue about fundamental assumptions, values, and ways of interacting with the self. This self-reflexive process opens up new ways of being and acting; therefore, our identity changes. As I reflect on who I am and my

mission to lead here, I think about the lessons I have learned from the staff and community of respect, honor, and value of traditions and connection. I am making sense of this new world I have stepped into and have grown as a leader. Like Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*, my identity shifted due to interactions with the culture around me. As the school year ends, I feel like I have become part of this community. It reminds me again of the graduation practice as I stand on the football field in the hot May sun and look out at the group of students before me, my students.

As I listen to the boys singing, "country roads, take me home, to the place I belong," I smile and turn away so they can't see my eyes water. I feel I have found the place I belong.

CHAPTER 7: LESSONS LEARNED

This autoethnography is a reflective account of my experiences in my first year as a high school principal. I shared my pressures and challenges as a female principal in the south through fictionalized composite examples and analyzed my experiences through several theoretical frameworks. I was able to see how specific feminist leadership theories offered certain metaphors that centered around glass. I used the metaphors of the glass ceiling, glass escalator, glass cliff, glass walls, and the glass slipper within this dissertation to help explain these experiences. I also discovered evidence of role incongruity theory as I reflected on and analyzed my struggle to fit into a specific leadership norm. In experiencing the theory of glass walls, I learned about southern identity theory to understand the culture I lead. Using Keller's (1995) small-town community building block criteria, I realized what was occurring that helped me assimilate into this Southern culture. In struggling with the perceived fit of the leader for this school, I analyzed the glass slipper metaphor and feminist theory with professional dress in gendered organizations. I found a connection and understanding of this community's values through southern storytelling culture. Finally, I experienced a sense of belonging in this new culture and felt as if I had stepped through the looking glass and the world that did not make sense to me now is normalized.

While I will share lessons I learned throughout this process, the beauty of autoethnography is the reader may also have seen these same lessons emerge or have learned different lessons from this research. I recognize I am writing and analyzing my experiences as a white, cis-gendered female secondary principal in the south. Each reader brings a different background and perspective as they experience this research. Autoethnography allows the reader into these experiences, yet a reader's reflection and analysis may differ entirely from mine.

Through this process of writing a dissertation, I learned many lessons about leadership and autoethnography. This research method allowed me to look outward at my various experiences and inward to see the emotional truths I experienced. I feel like I was on two journeys, one as a leader and one as a scholar. I learned lessons from experience as a principal and writing this autoethnography that mirrors each other.

Lesson 1: It is Surprisingly Difficult.

As the last bell for the school day rings, I slide into my desk chair and rest my palms on the only bare surface in front of me. I glance over at the books and papers stacked on one side of the desk. Among the pile are handwritten notes scribbled hastily in blue or black ink, journals open with their spines broken and worn from remaining in that position. I notice the corners of yellow or pink notes sticking to research articles jutting from the sides, small flags that act as reminders. I grab a pen and trace the long list of things to do; only two of thirteen are complete. I kick my feet in frustration, and my toes brush the broken heels under my desk. I pull my laptop in front of me and stare at a blank screen, the cursor blinking—no words on the page. Yet words surround me. They are scribbled, typed, highlighted, and circled on notes littered on my desk. My fingers rest perched, unmoving on the keyboard as I think of everything and nothing. Words are everywhere, and yet I find I am at a loss.

Sitting in my office struggling to write a response is a regular occurrence in my profession and as a doctoral student. Writing an autoethnography and leading a high school were very similar in the struggle to find the right words and seek understanding of the events around me. In leading a school and writing a dissertation, I thought the task was easy. I watched others accomplish professional goals and write a dissertation, yet they had not shared their struggles with the process. While I felt I had the right resources to be successful, I soon realized that

leading an underperforming high school as an outsider and writing an autoethnography were both surprisingly difficult.

Before writing this dissertation, I did not have any experience with autoethnography. I thought it would be just sharing lived experiences with others, and it seemed so simple to narrate the first year of my principalship. However, as I began understanding this qualitative research method, I realized it required much more than rewriting journal entries. Analytical autoethnography (Anderson, 2001) requires being reflective and looking outward from the experience to observe the reactions and interactions around me. Also, I had to look internally to analyze my thoughts and responses to the school culture I was experiencing. As Ali-Khan (2005) explained, it is creative and analytical, emotional and scholarly. It was not an easy task to be creative with describing fictionalized composite experiences and then analyzing those experiences for using feminist leadership theories.

Like my journey in writing an autoethnography, this new principal role was more difficult than I had expected. I look forward to a challenge; however, this culture was completely different, and I experienced new challenges in raising student achievement. It surprised me how difficult it was to assimilate to a new southern culture and motivate a reluctant staff to change past practices. The same research approach had to be applied to my leadership as I looked outward to observe reactions to my decision-making and inward to reflect on the outcomes I saw and how I interacted in a new culture. Writing an autoethnography helped me lead more effectively as I became more observant and reflective in my practice.

Just as I have benefited from this process, I believe any leader can benefit from participating in writing an autoethnography as it requires reflection. The leader becomes the researcher analyzing themselves in a particular culture. Through journaling about their

experiences, the leader must reflect and revisit those emotions, reactions, and motivations behind their decisions and actions. As the process moves on to analyzing those experiences, theories emerge that bring a new understanding of self and others. Writing an autoethnography is transformative, therapeutic, and a method for leaders to grow through reflection and analysis.

Lesson 2: I am Not Alone.

I sigh as I pace the room's length. I pick up different items, shifting them around on the counter. My husband reminds me it is part of the process. I know this. I have monthly conversations with him as I prepare for a meeting with my chair. While I look forward to meeting with her, I also dread it because there will be feedback, revisions, and more research. I know this is part of the process. I feel stretched through each step—my mind races with words, researcher's names, and more questions. The process does not end. But with each new revision, I am also refined. Each time I read over my writing, push deeper into analysis and find research that ties to what I see, it is as if something has clicked into place. Emotions come alive as I relive the experiences with each revision. I become worn with emotion as I continually reflect and grow in understanding my experiences. This journey of writing an autoethnography is a process—a process I do not do alone.

I am now in a meeting with one of my doctoral chairs. I stare at my words on the computer screen. My co-chair color-codes them in pink and purple. She asks me why this word. Did you mean to use that word? She circles another phrase in blue. I am silent for a minute and wonder myself. I answer honestly; I do not know! We both laugh, and she gives me questions to ponder.

I look forward to these meetings with this chosen advisor as she pushes my thinking, questions my word choice, and wonders alongside me at what the data reveals. I feel as if it is a

workout for the brain. She watches me ponder and grabble with questions. She praises evidence of hard work and challenges lackluster effort. I replay my monthly pep talk as I write down my next revision steps-- you can do this; it is part of the process.

In writing an autoethnographic dissertation, I realized there is no auto in autoethnography. My advisors on my committee were with me every step of the way. One advisor helped me understand this qualitative research method and the autoethnographic writing process. Writing an autoethnography required me to read and reread the composite examples to analyze my experiences. Being able to talk through the process and seek advice from my chair and co-chair was vital. Each time I met with any of my committee members, I was able to share my experiences and seek advice on ways to compile, analyze, and disseminate the information. I also recognized that my research implicates others in the process. Our discussions remind me of this vulnerability. I experience watching one of my advisor's reactions to the writing. The sharing of lived experiences is the essence of autoethnography, and observing the process the reader shares through conferencing with her was helpful. Through discussions around the writing, each chair guided me to further research and analysis. I cherished the conversations and advice I received from my external committee member, who shared research, lessons learned, and the passion for southern culture. He pushed me to seek evidence in my lived experiences for more southern culture, and I was amazed to find it emerged. I valued the push from another committee member to seek theoretical frameworks to make sense of my lived experiences, thus adding more validity and reliability to the autoethnography. In finding theoretical frameworks, one of my co-chairs saw evidence emerge of glass metaphors in the feminist leadership theories and encouraged further embracing of the theme of glass. My committee walked alongside me on this

journey, and this autoethnography took form through their guidance on my writing. Therefore, writing an autoethnography is not done alone.

I realized, too, that there is no auto in authority. While the principal position is authoritative, there is more perceived power than acting power. As the first outsider and second female principal, I chose to make collective leadership decisions and used many surveys for students and staff to understand the culture. I also assembled teacher leaders to help guide the focus on academic achievement. While I wanted to address many concerns, I held back on tackling them due to the direction from my supervisors to observe the first year. This approach did help to establish relationships and trust, which later helped create buy-in for change. However, throughout the first year of leading, I realized authority does not solely belong to me but to the staff I lead and the supervisors who advise.

Leading a high school and writing an autoethnography required me to seek advice and guidance, which shifted my decisions and actions around both endeavors. Also, I realized that interactions with others in both leading a high school and writing an autoethnography required me to evolve and change throughout the process. The community I interact with and work alongside shaped me through becoming part of their culture. Similarly, my committee shaped me throughout the research and writing process through their guidance, teachings, and exposure to other researchers in the field. I am shaped and refined through both writing the autoethnography and leading because of the interactions with others.

Lesson 3: The Right Fit

A cat tail crosses the front of my computer as I lean in to hear my professor greet me on the screen. She comments on the cat, brushing up against my side before he saunters away. She swivels her camera screen so I can see her cat curled in a ball at the back of the couch. She

smiles as she tells me how she acquired this pet, finding her washed up at her doorstep from a hurricane. I share how I received my two cats.

We shift to discussing one of her autoethnographic texts about teaching students.

Reading about her experiences makes me feel closer to her and empathize with her experience. I point to a passage, and we discuss techniques for writing an autoethnography. We discuss her experience and her impact on adding to the research. I am beginning to see the power of this type of research. It is a type of research that creates connections with others and pushes the reader to think differently about the world. This research can be raw, beautiful, emotional, and life-changing by allowing the researcher to expose data and the human condition in the process.

This type of research method requires vulnerability. The process exposes my thoughts, insecurities, and beliefs. In writing a dissertation, it is imperative to find the right fit for who becomes the chair of your dissertation committee. This journey was challenging and required me to seek guidance and support. Because of this vulnerability, I learned the relationship with the doctoral chair is vital to success in writing a dissertation.

I always looked forward to our conversations about my work, even when my thinking was challenged and my word choice questioned. Our discussions were life-affirming. I realized it was important my chair was always compassionate and encouraging. As a leader, I realized I also should be compassionate and encouraging. Like at the end of every meeting with my committee, I would leave with clarity, direction, and words of encouragement. As a leader, I strive to have those who meet with me have a similar experience.

After another meeting to discuss the writing process, I am writing down the next steps of what to revise and research. I notice my chair always leaves me with affirmations. You are

brilliant, and your writing is beautiful. You can do this. Her words encourage me to continue. I replay her encouragement and direction when I stare at a blank page.

In writing a dissertation and leading a high school, I realized that both institutions rely on strong interpersonal relationships. These relationships are part of the support structure in both the academic and professional worlds. There is power in positive interactions in relationships that create synergy. Experiencing work in academia and leading a school, I found through fostering relationships, I learned more about the world, myself, and others. My positive interactions with my chair and committee through the writing process encouraged me to move forward and be successful. As a leader, providing encouraging words to others creates momentum to achieve greater success. Writing a dissertation and leading a high school cannot be done alone, and strong relationships must be formed to succeed.

Another lesson I learned through my struggle with the perceived fit of being the principal of this high school. Through this dissertation, I analyzed my role and how I fit in as the first outsider leading at the high school. This transition year as principal was emotional and eye-opening, and through analyzing those experiences, I continued to change as a leader. Leaders should share those experiences so that other leaders do not feel alone. As I learned, adapting to or shattering the expectations of the perceived right fit for the principal position requires vulnerability to continue to lead. Writing about those experiences helped me adapt and change as a person, as it was a way to explore my emotions and be vulnerable with others. As a leader, I had to evolve to understand the culture I lead. As a researcher, the process helped me grow as a person learning to lead in a new environment.

Lesson 4: Constantly Evolving.

Writing an autoethnography is a constant, continual process. As Ali-Khan (2015) explained, autoethnography is messy and left to interpretation by the reader. In reading and analyzing composite examples to examine a year of transition, there is always more that I could add or go back and interpret differently. Some of the ways this autoethnography continues to change are I have changed as a leader through this process. Even as I analyze my experiences a year later, I find new things in the research as I have changed as a student and female leader. Also, every reader brings a different background, creating different interpretations of the research. Unlike a positivist research method, autoethnography poses no absolute truths (Denzin et al., 2008). Therefore, I am aware that this autoethnography is subject to interpretation. I like to think of it as a living document that can change and mean something different to each reader.

I run down the sidewalk, music blaring in my ears to muffle the sounds of passing cars. Yet, I barely hear the music as I focus on my thoughts of the day. I pick up the pace, pushing off my toes; I pump my arms as I race up the hill. I think about the two people I hired today to join the staff after the holiday break. Both new hires are alum. A tradition that I used to question when I first joined the staff at this high school. However, I am delighted to be able to hire staff already invested in the school's success. I watch the joy and pride cross the faces of my staff as I share the news of who will be joining the faculty. I feel the same satisfaction as welcoming a family member home. I now understand why hiring an alum is essential. I notice the change in my leadership decisions. I know I have evolved in my understanding of this culture. I smile as I continue to run up the hill.

Just as an autoethnography constantly changes meaning, the principal's job is also evolving. Managing and leading a group of people is also fluid and messy. You manage

personalities, agendas, and tasks. While the people you lead constantly change and evolve, so are you as a leader. I have changed as a leader through the year of leading at this school. Through interactions with the community, the staff, and the students, I learned about the school's culture and the importance of traditions. I started this journey as an outsider, and as the year progressed, I slowly became accepted into the community and developed a sense of belonging. I continue to change and grow as a leader and member of this school community. I also realized I have evolved as a writer and became an autoethnographer. I have found a sense of belonging in the community of researchers using this type of qualitative research.

Lesson 5: Using Theory to Understand and Share the World.

I sip my coffee as I wait to meet my friend for breakfast. My mind is cloudy with words and ideas on finishing my dissertation. This breakfast meeting is a welcomed break from the constant writing that has consumed most of my free time. She hugs me and then slides into the seat across from me. She asks me about my dissertation topic. I begin to explain my research and how it is about my experiences leading an underperforming high school. She stares at me, confused. I pause and search for words to clarify my study in more detail. I begin again by explaining theories and the glass metaphors I have experienced. Sharing the examples of glass barriers I have run up against, the theories on professional dress for women, and why she always sees me in blazers and heels. She nods in agreement and begins to add to the conversation of experiences she has had, like the ones I describe. I relax as she makes connections and makes sense of my research. I sip more of my coffee and settle back in my seat. As I listened to her connections to my research, I realized explaining the theories, and glass metaphors helped bridge the gap in her understanding of my dissertation.

Through telling and retelling my story, I understood how theory comes to life through my experiences. Through analysis, I found feminist theories of the glass ceiling, glass escalator, glass cliff, glass walls, and glass slipper. These glass metaphors helped me to understand the world around me. Lake & Coreil (2011) explained that reflection is essential for forming networks connecting imagination to information to create metaphors. Through analyzing my experiences, glass metaphors in feminist theory emerged. It was not the first group of metaphors I tried to use to make sense of my experiences, but I finally created meaning through these glass metaphors. I can visualize glass shattering, glass walls I press against, and glass slippers my foot slips on and in. It is a creative process that helped me understand the theories tied to my experiences. Getting to this point was not an easy process. It was through the process of reflection and taking time to ruminate on thoughts and ideas that a solution made itself known (Lake & Coreil, 2011). There is a similar process in leading a high school as well. I found it is important to reflect on experiences. In being reflective, I can see what I can do differently as a leader or what worked well to implement next time.

I also found using metaphors and theories helped me to quickly explain to others to make meaning of my lived experiences. I applied theories of role congruency and professional dress in this gendered organization. I explored southern culture learning about the values of loyalty, honor, and the power of storytelling. I hope other leaders can share their lived experiences and continue to add to this valuable research method. As a leader in understanding the world around me better through theoretical frameworks, I find I can navigate and lead others better. I learned through this process that using metaphors and theories helps me to help others to notice and navigate barriers for women in leadership positions. As Burns (2013) explained, sharing our

story with others explores humanity and the shades of gray that exist, and it is within that gray that we connect.

Lesson 6: Stories are Important.

I lean against the door frame of my office and listen as the group of colleagues that stand around the secretary's desk share about their weekend. We all are focused on one male coach as he tells of his trip riding a motorcycle through the mountains. Finishing his story, he sighs and laments that he is now back at work. Another teacher shares that she has a cabin in the mountains near that area and loves watching the leaves change every year. The secretary shares a time she took her family to that same area and tried to navigate the winding roads in the snow. The bell rings. They wish each other a great day as they grab their coffee mugs and head out the door to class.

As I have observed those interacting around me, I created space to analyze my thinking and interactions with the world to understand the school culture I lead. Sharing stories is a powerful way of connecting to others and sharing values (Whitley, 2015). In the age of social media, where sharing lived experiences is fast-paced and cold, southerners would rather you slow down and sit for a while. The south front porches provided a place to sit, visit, and share stories deeply rooted in southern identity (Whitley, 2015). Robinson (2002) explained trading stories share what one values, and at this school, the stories tell of honor, loyalty, and pride. I hear these values in the stories told in the secretary's office, around the lunch table, and under the Friday night lights. Stories create a common ground, and sharing stories in person makes a connection and sense of belonging.

Autoethnography is more than storytelling. Through writing and sharing my story and analysis, I also share lessons that mirror my journey as a principal and writing an

autoethnography. Both endeavors are more challenging than I expected. I learned that I am not alone in leading a high school or in writing; it also requires the right fit to work alongside me. I evolved as a leader throughout my journey, and I learned this type of research is constantly evolving, leading to the understanding that neither journey is ever fully complete. Finally, throughout both experiences, I found the power of storytelling and how it created connection, helped me gain understanding, and fostered belonging.

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