Religious Sister Educators: A Narrative Study Through a Feminist Lens

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Religious Sister Educators: A Narrative Study Through a Feminist Lens

Lisa Peluso

Submitted for the partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

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Date: December 6, 2019
Dedicated to my family—especially the Peluso sisters
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ABSTRACT

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Lisa A. Peluso

Through the dedicated labor of women religious, the Catholic school system represents the largest private system both nationally and internationally (Arthur, 2005; United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, 2016). Once the backbone of American parochial schools, the presence of religious sister educators within Catholic schools has become an increasingly rare occurrence. Using a theoretical framework based on feminist theory and rooted in the concepts of oppression and identity, this dissertation study examines the personal, religious formation, and professional experiences of two retired religious sister educators who successfully devoted over four decades to the mission of Catholic education as they navigated dramatic changes in demographics, educational policies, and leadership.

Utilizing a narrative inquiry design based on the Deweyan view of the role experience and education (Connelly & Clandinin 1990), I gleaned extensive data from subject and triangulation interviews, archive documents, and personal photos. During the thematic analysis process, I discovered several prominent themes. First, I determined that as educational leaders, the subjects employed a combination of social justice leadership and social-emotional learning, or what I termed social-emotional justice. Second, as nuns, the sisters experienced oppression, specifically at the hands of clergy. Finally, the sisters adhered to a strict educational philosophy of child first, teacher second policy whereby their decisions as administrators reflected high value placed upon the rights of students and strong regard for their faculty members.
Nonetheless, their use of social-emotional learning practices allowed the subjects to form strong relationships with quite a few of the families of the students they served. Catholic schools in this nation have produced more than half of the U.S. Supreme Court justices, hold a nearly 100% high school graduation rate, and are known for their success in educating students most marginalized in society (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2018). The sisters of this study and their predecessors have contributed to these accomplishments through their cognizance of their constituents’ dignity; their emphasis on educating the whole child; their recognition of instances of oppression in their own lives as a means to assuage the afflictions of others and their strict observance of their child first, teacher second maxim. These religious sister educators’ experiences and the lessons that emanate from them can serve not only faith-based institutions but all schools.
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Chapter One: Introduction

[The Sisters of Mercy…] were not simply teachers, but also part of our family and an integral part of the parish. The children they taught were the singular focus of their attention and lives…Our nation continues to reap this harvest that was planted by the teaching sisters. (Dolan, 2011, p. ix)

Background

Very similar to the quote captured above, my life also centered around the Catholic elementary and high schools I attended. Names such as Sister Brigid, Sister Cecilia, and Sister Timothy still draw forth some very fond memories of what seems like moments suspended in time— as vivid and clear as when they occurred. They had a pronounced handprint in shaping my education and my character. As a rebellious college student, and for some time after that, I made many attempts to eradicate the gifts given to me by these sisters. However, fate held in store for me a very different plan when I began a second career as a Catholic elementary school teacher. St. Martin of the Rose, a pseudonym, was where I first encountered two formidable educational leaders who also happened to be nuns. Alas, I found my life and experiences with religious sisters coming full circle.

It was precisely this encounter with these two women religious that not only brought back to life the extraordinary roles nuns played in my life but also made me cognizant of a singular, powerful, and specific brand of education—a culture of care and high expectations—that they and countless others have tirelessly provided in this country since colonial times. I am simply one of millions to experience the profound effect of teaching sisters, and I used a theoretical framework of feminist theory as a lens to capture the stories and educational philosophies of two Religious Sisters of Mercy who recently hung up their proverbial habits as educators.
Within New York City, there are two major Roman Catholic dioceses: the Archdiocese of New York and the Diocese of Brooklyn. Respectively, they are the second and seventh largest dioceses in the United States, and the schools within these two districts bore witness to this culture of care dating back to the mid-19th century. As of the 2019-2020 academic year, there are 10 religious sisters serving as principals in the 165 Catholic elementary schools within the five boroughs of New York City. Statistically, these women constitute 6% of a labor force that was once comprised exclusively of religious sisters. As this resource of educational professionals narrows almost to the point of closure, it will also put an end to a nearly 200-year legacy of pedagogical expertise within the Catholic schools of New York City.

In response to an ever-swelling and highly impoverished Irish immigrant population, the Religious Sisters of Mercy were invited to minister in Manhattan in 1846 and began their teaching ministry shortly after that in 1849. Commencing in 1855, the congregation of the Religious Sisters of Mercy expanded their educational services to what is now the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn. In August 2017, 162 years later, marked the retirement of the last two sisters from this order to oversee an elementary school within one of the two main dioceses. These nuns served the school of St. Martin of the Rose since the mid-1970s, first as teachers and for most of their careers as principals.

During their tenure as administrators, they witnessed a multitude of transformations ranging from the ethnic composition and socio-economic stature of the area in which the school and convent are located to numerous educational initiatives, trends, and shifts. These religious sisters spent over 40 years serving a school, its community, and environs, and they represent the end of an extensive educational endowment. Thus, before this long-standing instructional
resource completely vanishes, we need to capture their stories to assist in preserving and perpetuating this long-standing culture of care.

Chapter One Overview

In this chapter, I provide an historical overview of the Religious Sisters of Mercy, the congregation to which the subjects of this study belong. I also present this order’s integral role in establishing and expanding the Catholic school system in New York City. I also outline the statement of the problem under investigation, the purpose and significance of this study, and the theoretical framework I used as a lens through which I focused my research. In the next section, I highlight my research questions, methods, and design. In the following section, I briefly describe this study’s limitations and how I mitigated these issues. I also define terms commonly utilized in this dissertation. In the final part, I state a summary of this chapter and provide an overview of chapters two through five of this study. I use the terms religious sister and nun interchangeably throughout this dissertation although these words are distinct in meaning. Additionally, I use the term women religious.

History

Regarding word association, perhaps one of the most repeated ideas to follow the term Catholic school is nun (Caruso, 2012). Historical evidence proved this image to be quite accurate. It was Bishop John Carroll, the first Catholic bishop of the United States, in the early 1800s and then his predecessors who sought to establish a private educational system for a marginalized and mistreated flock. Nonetheless, were it not for the toil and dedication of countless religious sisters, these schools would never have existed, nor would the United States’ largest private school system (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2018) have thrived. Many authors (e.g., Caruso, 2012; Shelley, 2010; Walch, 2003) agree that anti-Catholic
sentiment of the 19th and early 20th centuries served as the catalyst for the construction of a plethora of Catholic schools; however, Caruso (2012) made one point extremely clear “… the sacrifices that women religious made substantiated the survival of the schools” (p. 9). To expand on this notion, religious sisters served not only as teachers but also as educational administrators, financial managers, building custodians, social workers, and spiritual advisors, to name a few—labor not borne out of social or financial ambition but true dedication to their vocation.

One such group of religious sisters that played an important part in creating the largest network of private schools nationally is the Religious Sisters of Mercy. Founded in Ireland by Catherine McAuley in 1831, the Religious Sisters of Mercy is an order dedicated to social justice principles, particularly working with the poor, the ill, the uneducated, and women’s issues (Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, 2017). Initially known as the walking nuns (Fialka, 2003; Gately, 1931), they received such nomenclature as they actively ministered outside of religious edifices and church and convent walls. In 1843, several women dressed in plain black dresses so as not to arouse suspicion or incur the wrath of the strong anti-Catholic sentiment of the time. After they made the arduous journey to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, they expanded the ministry of the Sisters of Mercy to the United States. Moreover, as the Catholic population exploded into the new country, so did the presence of this order of nuns.

Since Manhattan was one of the main ports of entry for the influx of Catholic European immigrants, it was inevitable that the Religious Sisters of Mercy tended to these new arrivals, most of whom were poor and uneducated. They did so at the behest of Bishop Hughes in 1846. Known as Dagger John for his ferocity in defending his persecuted Catholic worshippers, one of Bishop Hughes’ greatest concerns was for the many desperately impoverished young, female Catholic immigrants (Herron, 1922). The work of the Mercy Sisters for this vulnerable group,
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along with the care and attention they provided to low-income families and those in ill health, did not go unnoticed by a priest serving under Bishop Hughes. This priest would become the bishop of a new diocese—the Diocese of Brooklyn—and, as a newly consecrated bishop, John Loughlin would request the assistance of Catherine McAuley’s disciples to tend to the members of his congregation (Gately, 1931).

The work that the Mercy Sisters did after they arrived in New York City did not go unnoticed; furthermore, in a public letter to all clergy and members of the diocese, in 1854, Bishop Hughes stated that the “Sisters of Mercy had accomplished a work of charity without parallel in the United States” (Gately, 1931, p. 256). Additionally, for the first 60 years of their presence in the New York area, their educational ministry was dedicated solely to females in single-sex schools (Gately, 1931). In discussing the role that the Sisters of Mercy played in the development of the Catholic school network in the boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens, Sharp (1954) contended that they “enjoyed a conservative and steady development in their educational and charitable institutions” (p. 214). Given the times of the mid to late 19th century and the gender beliefs of that era, this notion may very well explain the conservative development in that they were focused on tending to the needs of girls and women and not as much on their male counterparts.

Currently, the Religious Sisters of Mercy still represent the largest order of nuns in the United States (Berrelleza, Gautier, & Gray, 2014); however, it is no secret that the total number of women entering Catholic religious institutes has declined significantly since the mid-1960s. Despite the Mercy Sisters’ accolade of having the largest presence, Berrelleza et al. (2014) also pointed out that in 1970, there were approximately 13,000 Religious Sisters of Mercy. As of 2014, this number is diminished by almost 75%, with little over 3,400 nationally. This decline in
numbers has affected many of Catherine McAuley’s communities of followers, with those who served and worked in New York City as no exception.

**Statement of the Problem**

As is highlighted from a more historical perspective in the previous section, religious sisters were instrumental in the development and growth of the Catholic school system in the United States. While there was an initial stream of Catholic immigrants after the American Revolution and during the first few decades of the 19th century, the potato famine in Ireland followed by the Great Wave of Immigration at the turn of the 20th century saw an explosion of Catholic newcomers. In response to public schools’ partiality to the use of the Protestant King James Bible, and coupled by these schools’ harsh treatment of Catholic students, Roman Catholic bishops sought an alternative school system (Caruso, 2012; Shelley, 2010; Walch, 2003). Nuns offered a surefire means of maintaining and propagating the faith and, vis-à-vis their vows of poverty, a cost-effective method for staffing and running these schools (Caruso, 2012; Walch, 2003).

Attendance at the religiously affiliated institutions gained momentum throughout the 20th century. Most notably, Catholic schools in the United States were at their absolute pinnacle in terms of student enrollment and staffing by religious sisters in 1965—almost five million students (Defiore, 2011) and 104,000 teaching sisters serving these children (Caruso, 2012). However, by 2011, Caruso (2012) reported that there were roughly 5,000 teaching sisters in American Catholic schools. As of the 2019 academic year, there were approximately 2,600 nuns (McDonald & Schultz, 2019). Given the advanced age of most American nuns as well as the scant number of those entering religious life, this declining trend will most likely continue with few, if any, teaching sisters in existence in the next 10 years. Since the physical presence of nuns
in U.S. schools will quite possibly cease to exist, through this study, I capture their unique style of leadership and the culture of care that is at the very core of their educational philosophy.

In the past, media have depicted nuns either as romanticized figures or as stern disciplinarians, but perhaps Caruso (2012) and Dolan (2011) touched most closely upon the quality that has rendered an education provided by religious sisters so unique—the culture of recognizing every child as an individual with different needs, skills, abilities, and circumstances. Carpenter-Aeby, Aeby, and Raynor (2013) posited that “Catholic school communities are unique in that they are comprised of three entities—the church, the school, and the family service organization” (p. 203). By combining Beauchamp’s (1982) curriculum description as “an organized explanation for an observed set of events” (p. 23) with Glatthorn, Boschee, Whitehead, and Boschee’s (2016) ideas on what is learned unintentionally through school climate and culture, I determined that in a certain way, this culture of care was the nuns’ hidden curriculum.

While there are those who subscribe to the notion that a hidden curriculum is meant to subjugate some while raising others to a loftier status, this concept is the antithesis of what I intend. Dolan (2011) explained it quite succinctly when stating that the nuns were “part of our family… the children… were the singular focus of their attention and lives” (p. ix). In essence, all students were their children, and they made it their mission to know and understand the children to educate them.

**Purpose and Significance of the Study**

The purpose of this narrative study is not only to examine the stories of two religious sister educators that remained dedicated to the Catholic educational mission for over 40 years, even as student demographics, educational policy, and leadership shifted, but also to disseminate
their stories of educational leadership and instructional philosophies for the benefit of all those involved in education—be it private or public.

Much of the popular literature focuses quite often on the more ominous aspects of being a Catholic nun with tales from those who renounced their vows and vocations (e.g., Armstrong, 2005; Howe, 1996; Jardine, 2017; Zenchoff, 2017) or the maltreatment of religious sisters by the church as an institution (e.g., Briggs, 2005). There is also a more romanticized or quixotic aspect of religious sisterhood, as demonstrated by the works of Wade (2010) and Agatha (2017).

Regarding scholarly literature, as it pertains to teaching sisters, there is a great emphasis placed on their stark numbers (e.g., Caruso, 2012; DeFiore, 2011; Gihleb & Giuntella, 2017). This study, on the other hand, seeks to make sense of the stories of two religious sisters who were devoted to the traditional ministry of education in the 21st century for 40-plus years to capture promising leadership practices that could be beneficial to other school leaders, particularly those in an urban setting.

I use their narratives, experiences, and thoughts not only to acquire and frame what is being lost to the passage of time but also to benefit the world of education as a whole. As servants to those of more trying financial and socio-emotional circumstances, from their words and the nearly 200 years of teaching experience of their order, I wish to derive lessons and possible maxims for current and future educational leaders of both private and publicly funded institutions.

**Theoretical Framework**

The root this study’s theoretical framework is in feminist theory, with particular emphasis on the feminist ideas of oppression and identity as derived from the seminal works of both Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (2013) and hooks’ *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*
Ironically, or perhaps not so, the arrival of the Religious Sisters of Mercy in the United States and the expansion of their network within this country coincides with what is considered the First Women’s Movement. However, in this dissertation, I will focus on the ideas that emanated from the Second Women’s Movement of the 1950s through the 1980s. Although the writings of Friedan and hooks target two very distinct populations, white, middle-class homemakers as opposed to black and socio-economically marginalized females, the subjects of this study, the work that they have done, as well as the religious order to which they belong, straddle both these seemingly discrete populations.

Regarding oppression, Friedan was not simply aiming at the lack of career choices available to women of the 1960s. More importantly, she was highlighting the lack of intellectual and emotional fulfillment tied to a dearth of opportunities (Levine, 2015; Turk, 2015). While hooks was primarily directing her work to “end the degradation and exploitation of black women” (Specia & Osman, 2015, p. 196), she was also aiming her ideas at the oppression of all marginalized women and not simply those of color. Specia and Osman (2015) also made clear that hooks’ target audience found themselves in a “double bind” (p. 196) of oppression because of gender and race, subjugated by white-male dominance; nonetheless, I will extend this concept of oppression further by including females of low socio-economic status, such as the two religious sister participants of this study who have experienced poverty for much of their lives, both as children and adults.

Friedan’s notion of identity is closely related to societal images in that they served as constant audio-visual reminders of what a woman of that era should aspire to look and act like (Turk, 2015). Fraterrigo (2015) expanded this idea of identity by placing culpability squarely on marketing companies and mass media of the time. Also, hooks’ view of identity is rooted in
suppression in society and in the feminist community, which has been largely dominated by white, middle-class females (Specia & Osman, 2015).

Although not specifically linked to the concepts of oppression and identity, a large body of literature exists aligning Catholic nuns with feminist theory and its various branches. Most recently, Thompson (2016) linked Catholic sisters’ response to Vatican accusations of radicalism among nuns to feminist organizational theory and feminist spirituality. In a quest to raise the U.S. government’s awareness of social justice issues such as immigration and poverty, Brigham (2015) invokes feminist theology. Even though the participants of Greene’s (2017) phenomenological study were not solely nuns, the author utilized feminist theory as the theoretical basis for her investigation of perceptions of women leaders in a Catholic Archdiocese. Pauly (2018) did not use feminist theory as the backbone of her research on Catholic women religious and their concerted efforts to tackle a completely male-dominated Vatican hierarchy; however, she made clear reference to the concept of feminism in her research.

It is perhaps Michaelides' (2012) study on Catholic feminist activism between the 1950s and 1990s that is most relevant to this study in that the author specifically referred to a Catholic feminist movement sparked in part by Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique. Although they were not feminist activists vocally protesting, the subjects of this study experienced their formative years as teenagers and burgeoning nuns in the 1960s. They began their professional lives as educators in the 1970s, became educational leaders in the 1980s, and served as such well past the first decade of the 21st century.

In addition to the historical time frame in which the participants were growing and developing as nuns and educators, I contend that the seeds of feminism were also planted by virtue of the religious order to which they belonged. They were adults amid a crucial time for
women, and their religious studies and vows inculcated them with a message of uplifting the oppressed and giving voice to those who had none. Through my experience working with them, I also maintain that historical events and religious formation influenced their dispositions and philosophies of education.

Therefore, I utilized feminist theory, particularly the ideas of identity and oppression, as the lens through which I examined data to construct answers to how these religious sisters make sense of their four-decade commitment to Catholic education, their multitude of experiences, and the lessons that can be drawn from their endeavors as educators. I also used feminist theory when analyzing sources for triangulation purposes, be it interviews with former parents, students, and employees, or when assessing archival items such as photos and documents. Lastly, I also examined the responses of the supplemental interviews for triangulation purposes for the concepts of oppression and identity as well. What I intend here is not solely reserved for the subjects, the religious sisters, but extends to how identity and oppression may have also affected those who came into closer contact with them.

**Research Questions**

In considering the questions that framed this study, I focused on three in particular to understand the unique educational philosophies and approaches to educating the whole child and discerning the personal histories and motivation to remain dedicated to the vocation of being school principals as religious sisters in a highly secular world. These framing questions also encompassed the numerous shifts the subjects experienced in neighborhood and student demographics, in educational policy, and the notion of accountability.

At the beginning of their careers as educational administrators, they experienced *A Nation at Risk* (1983), which provided a grim picture of American schools and sparked the wave
of greater local, state, and federal involvement in education. They then went on to see the
development of state learning standards, the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act, and the
implementation of high-stakes testing. Finally, they ended their careers in the era of the Common
Core Learning Standards

Creswell and Creswell (2018) advised that questions should be aligned with the
qualitative method of choice. Thus, as I used a qualitative, narrative approach, all three questions
entailed either the subjects relaying their experiences, ideas, and thoughts, or the researcher
seeking their interpretations of such for the benefit of the field of education:

1. In what ways do the childhoods, religious order formation processes, educational
backgrounds, and professional experiences of two religious sisters relate to the feminist concepts
of identity and oppression?

2. How do religious sister educators make sense of their 40-year commitment to the
Catholic educational mission, even as student demographics, educational policy, and leadership
have shifted?

3. What lessons can we learn from these religious sisters’ stories that can be applied to
our current system of education, be it private or public?

3a. How do they describe their philosophy of education and leadership style?

Research Methods and Design

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) likened a qualitative researcher to a “bricoleur and quilt-
maker” (p. 4). The authors further qualified these notions by explaining that those who endeavor
to use qualitative methods must be investigators and thoughtful and reflective practitioners.
Qualitative methods weave together a multitude of perspectives and ideologies as well. Despite
quantitative methods’ concreteness and objectivity, Creswell and Poth (2018) pointed out that
qualitative research also has the potential to alter and transform thinking. This feature appealed greatly to me as the researcher in that it aligned closely with one of the main purposes of this study—to disseminate educational leadership lessons gleaned from the subjects for the benefit of education as a whole.

The word *narrative* in and of itself implies a story of some sort. When applied to qualitative research, it still denotes storytelling; however, as Creswell and Poth (2018) pointed out, narrative design in qualitative research is locating and examining the story within the story—in this case, the story of the subjects’ lives intertwined with those of their students. In 1990, Connelly and Clandinin brought the integration of narrative design with educational research to the forefront. Moreover, in this original article titled *Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry*, the authors maintained that such a design brought forth theoretical concepts vis-à-vis a humanistic and experience-laden approach. This idea of the humanistic/experience methodological approach aligned well with this study. Whether it was the principles on which the Religious Sisters of Mercy were founded, the experiences of Catholic immigrants, or the treatment of women both in society and the Catholic church, there is great emphasis placed on human dignity throughout the chapters of this study.

The participants for this study are two retired Religious Sisters of Mercy who served the St. Martin of the Rose Elementary School since the mid-1970s. Both Sister Rose and Sister Angela, pseudonyms, were born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, and came from lower-middle-class homes where limited finances were always a concern. Each of the two became nuns a relatively short time after high school. Sister Angela began religious life in 1966, and Sister Rose entered the convent a year later. The sisters briefly functioned as teachers, but the greater
duration of their tenure, commencing in 1980, was spent as principals in the same Catholic elementary school.

**Data Collection Procedures**

**Interview Process.** While there is no prescribed instrument for using narrative methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018), I used semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions. These interviews were followed up by inquiries tailored to participants’ responses to elicit greater detail of the participants’ stories of experience.

I met with the subjects six times for approximately two-hour face-to-face sessions, and I divided the interview sessions into three phases. During phase one, I asked the sisters to discuss their childhoods, families, schooling, and any other relevant information regarding their experiences as children and teenagers that might have influenced their choice of profession and their leadership style. This related directly to question one of my research questions and how the childhoods, religious order formation processes, educational backgrounds, and professional experiences of two religious sisters relate to the feminist concepts of identity and oppression.

In phase two, I focused on the subjects’ choice to become religious sisters, influencing factors, family reactions, and religious formation experiences to elicit how these aspects may have shaped them as female educational leaders. This phase was directly aligned to the second research question in how the subjects make sense of their 40-year commitment to the Catholic mission of their school in light of shifts in educational policy, neighborhood and student demographics, and the transition from primarily clergy members serving as faculty and central administration leaders to 98% lay people assuming these roles. It also delved into the third research question of how they described their respective philosophies of education and their leadership styles.
In the final interview phase, I discussed the nuns’ experiences as educators and educational leaders, their time as teachers, and to a much more considerable extent, the wide range of happenings during the period as school administrators. I also asked them to discuss their undertakings with educational and demographic shifts. As this would require the participants to look back on their careers from a much wider angle, encompassing 40 years, in this portion of the interviews I explored possible responses to research question two as well as research question three and its sub-question.

Using purposeful sampling, I also interviewed four former students, three parents of former students, and five former employees. I conducted these sessions in two parts. During the initial sessions, I probed their dealings with and memories of the participants and inquired about instances that related to the theoretical feminist themes of oppression and identity. The second round of meetings involved transcript analysis and follow-up questions for clarity. These interviews took place concurrently with those of the subjects.

Validity. To validate interview data, as stated above, I used member checking as well as data triangulation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I conducted member checking in two ways. First, three of the interview sessions were devoted specifically to clarifying my interpretations of their stories. Second, although I offered the sisters opportunities to review the narratives of their lives that I had constructed, they found it difficult to read about themselves and abstained from doing so. However, a third Religious Sister of Mercy, Sister Gene, who studied with the sisters during their religious formation years and has worked and lived with the subjects for the entirety of their careers at St. Martin of the Rose, assisted. Sister Gene read much of this dissertation, particularly Chapters Four and Five, and offered input and insight.
I triangulated the interview data with my field notes of the interview sessions and interviews with four former students, three parents of former students, and five former employees. Additionally, I examined the plethora of personal photos provided to me by the subjects as “photos can offer setting information... as well as factual information that can be used in conjunction with other sources” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 143). I also included a few of these photos within this dissertation study to support findings to a greater extent.

I used thematic analysis to understand and make meaning of my data. Although I had other methods of examination at my disposal, such as discourse analysis, I utilized content analysis (Riessman, 2008). I did not focus on the socio-linguistic aspect of how the subjects provided their answers as is prescribed by Labov and Waletsky (1967) but on making the “text of what they say the actual data” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 34).

**Summary of Findings**

The first research question revealed three findings. First, both sisters’ experiences with inequities as children conflated with their continuous exposure to the principles of social justice through their families’ religious beliefs, their own religious formation experiences, and their actions and experiences with their constituents. Second, these experiences rendered their identities to be that of social justice leaders; their childhood experiences with Religious Sisters of Mercy fostered their desire to become nuns in the same order and sowed the seeds of their identities as practitioners of social-emotional learning. Third, teenage and adult years put the subjects into contact with other religious orders and instilled an identity of high academic standards. Although there was economic oppression present during their childhood, teenage years, and as religious sisters, the subjects experienced blatant oppression as women by members of the clergy.
In terms of the second research question, the subjects made sense of their four-decade commitment to Catholic education during times of change in demographics, leadership, and policies through (a) social justice leadership in the form of student and teacher-centered advocacy and (b) practices that resembled the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning’s framework of social-emotional learning competencies.

Last, the sisters explicitly described their philosophy of education throughout their stories as above all *child first, teacher second*, meaning that their ultimate and first responsibility was always to the children they served; however, they also valued and respected their teachers and staff. They saw to the needs of all those served through practicing what I have termed *social-emotional justice*—a combination of the elements of social justice leadership and social-emotional learning.

**Limitations**

One limitation to this study was the educational context in which the participants found themselves—an urban school setting as opposed to a suburban one. Nonetheless, the culture of care and leadership practices that I explore know no boundaries between city and country. As well, some maintain that the data in narrative research, literally the stories told, are somewhat jaded in that participants relay stories possibly not as they were but how the narrator perceives them (Mitchell & Egudo, 2003). I will counter this notion from the ontological perspective that reality is not a singular entity but exists manifold and has a variety of perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Another factor I considered was that narrative inquiry involves a smaller scope of subjects (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). However, I considered the
richness of the participants’ stories of much greater value than the actual number of persons
telling stories.

Lastly, regarding the religious aspect of this study, there were two specific points I took
under consideration: religious affiliation and gender. Both subjects were from the same religious
order, the Religious Sisters of Mercy, and there are numerous congregations that had or still have
teaching sisters within their communities. In terms of gender, this study focused solely on
women religious and did not investigate in any way the male perspective of teaching priests or
brothers. Nonetheless, I address this last constraint within the Limitations and Recommendations
for Future Research section of Chapter Five of this dissertation.

Definition of Terms

The terms below are used quite often throughout this study. There are some items defined
below according to how I, the researcher, view them. In other cases, I have used the words of
outside authors to denote what is intended in this dissertation.

*Bishop* - a member of the hierarchy of the Catholic church and who leads a diocese

*Diocese* - a territorial organization of the Catholic church, which includes Catholic
schools (United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, 2018)

*First Women’s Movement* - took place from 1848 to 1920. This movement highlighted
the rights of women. It also brought about women’s suffrage

*Nun* - within a Catholic tradition, is a member of a religious community who takes vows
of poverty, chastity, and obedience, especially one who lives in a cloistered and contemplative
monastery (Saunders, 2003)
Parish/parochial school - a commonly used term for a Catholic school in that the school was aligned with a particular church parish. Not all Catholic schools are parochial schools; nevertheless, it is still a commonly used term to denote Catholic schools.

Perfectae Caritatis - a Vatican II decree that modernized clergy members’ religious life, customs, and practices (Clark, 2013)

Religious Sister - a term used interchangeably with nun in this study. However, although they take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, they do not live in a cloistered setting.

Second Women’s Movement - took place from the early 1960s to the 1990s. This movement was sparked in part by Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. As well, there was a serious call to pass into legislation the Equal Rights Amendment, guaranteeing women social equality with their male counterparts (Rampton, 2015)

Vatican - the seat of the central governing body of the Roman Catholic Church, of which the Pope is its head.

Vatican II - Also known as the Second Vatican Council, a meeting of Roman Catholic religious leaders from 1962 to 1965 intending to settle doctrinal issues and modernize the Catholic church, its practices, and its teachings (Teicher, 2012)

Whole-child approach to education - based on social-emotional learning, this approach encompasses five basic competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Moreover, these competencies affect students, their relationships, and their communities (Collaborative for Academic, Social, Emotional Learning, CASEL, 2019).
Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of the study in terms of historical background, the problem, purpose, and significance of the study. Additionally, I have outlined the study’s theoretical framework, research questions, methods and design, main findings, and limitations. Finally, I have dedicated a section to defining terms relevant to this dissertation.

In chapter two of this dissertation, I delve deeper into this study’s theoretical framework and provide the reader with a more intricate explanation of how feminist theory and its notions of identity and oppression relate directly to this study, the participants, and the research questions. In chapter three, I outline how I conducted this study, taking into consideration the worldview, the study’s design, the subjects and setting, data collection and analysis procedures, ethical considerations, and design limitations. In chapter four, I outline my thematic analysis process from codes to themes. As well, I provide detailed explanations as to how I interpreted and applied these themes that led to the major findings of this study and answered my research questions. Within chapter five, I present a summary of the study, a discussion of the findings of this study related to the literature, unexpected outcomes that emanated from the findings, as well as my conclusions.
Chapter Two: A Review of the Literature

For many, the words Catholic school conjure up a myriad of images, with one of the most popular being that of a religious sister in full habit (Bryk, Lee & Holland, 1995; Caruso, 2012; McGuiness, 2014). Yet, this iconic image is not one easily seen in today’s world. Catholic schools date back as far as colonial times in the United States, and, as this nation expanded both in size and population, so did the number of Catholic immigrants entering the country. As the number of followers of this faith grew during the 19th century, so did anti-Catholic sentiment and attacks on them in the media, politics, the streets, and public schools. This oppression, coupled with the fear of public schools’ heavily Protestant beliefs and use of the King James Bible infiltrating the minds of Catholic children, led to the opening of private, parochial schools.

However, most Catholics of the time were poverty-afflicted and in no financial position to pay for exclusive instruction. Thus, one way to mitigate costs, educate the flock, and maintain a Catholic identity was the use of religious sisters as educators (Walch, 2003). As the number of Catholics grew into the 20th century, so did the number of Catholic schools, with religious sisters advancing children’s development. However, that iconic image of a woman in full habit that these women once cut has become an ever-fading figure as the number of nuns here in the United States has dwindled over the past 50 years and continues to do so.

Among scholars of Catholic education, the year 1965 was pivotal and dual edged. On one hand, it represented peak enrollment of students in parochial schools in the United States at 5 million (DeFiore, 2011); it also reflected the highest employment of teaching sisters numbered at 104,000 (Caruso, 2012). On the other hand, the year denoted the proverbial beginning of the end to the number of religious sister educators as well as to Catholic vocations in general as the underpinnings of Vatican II were beginning to make themselves known.
The 1965 Vatican publication of *Perfectae Caritatis* called for clergy to return to their orders’ original missions and goals and move away from medieval practices that had no bearing on their true purpose. This decree was also compelling in that religious sisters and priests were required to examine their roles, actions, and personal motivations as they corresponded to their orders’ unique foundations and intentions (Allen & O’Brien, 2008). The ramifications of this pronouncement affected communities in a multitude of ways, but most notably in roles and ministries, manner of dress, and communal living.

Naturally, while some embraced this new way of life, some could not resign themselves to break with traditions or sustain the requirement to exert greater independence of thought, action, and ministry (Allen & O’Brien, 2008; Caruso, 2012; Clark, 2013). Bezjak (2012) also pointed out that Catholic women, many who were the daughters of poor immigrants, no longer needed the social mobility once granted by being a religious sister. They were now in an era of civil rights and gender equality in which access to education and social promotion was viable through other avenues. This combination of Vatican II ideals, as well as the infusion of feminist principles, also compelled women, both lay and religious, to further examine the world around them and the role they as women play in this evolved universe (Katzenstein, 1995).

However, despite all the factors mentioned above, within this country, there still exist those few females who joined a religious order during the tumultuous 1960s and remained faithful to the traditional ministry of education and educational leadership. Their numbers are in stark contrast to the roughly more than 100,000 teaching sisters at their peak in 1965, with only about 2,600 currently serving in these roles (McDonald & Schultz, 2019). But as educators and educational administrators, they do, in fact, still exist. Nonetheless, since nuns in the United
States represent only 7% of the world’s entire population of religious sisters (Lipka, 2014), there is not much likelihood of them being replaced by other members of their orders in the future.

**Problem**

Within the two major Catholic dioceses of New York City, the Archdiocese of New York and the Diocese of Brooklyn and Queens, the second and the seventh-largest dioceses in the United States, respectively, there are currently 10 religious sisters who are principals out of the 165 elementary schools within the five boroughs. The leadership of these schools was once the sole domain of nuns; however, administration of these educational institutions is now almost made up exclusively of lay personnel. These 10 remaining women religious represent the close of a legacy that began close to 300 years ago in this country.

One such order that began this ministry of teaching in New York City is the Religious Sisters of Mercy, whose instructional legacy dates back to 1849 in this area. In August of 2017, one of these dioceses saw the retirement of the last two sisters from this congregation to run an elementary or high school and effectively put an end to nearly two centuries of ministering, both academically and spiritually.

For over 40 years, Sister Angela and Sister Rose have been an integral presence at St. Martin of the Rose. Since their arrival in the mid-1970s, they witnessed a multitude of changes. Neighborhood demographics altered, with white families leaving the neighborhood, school, and parish at an accelerated pace. Children of two-parent homes of European backgrounds were replaced by those with Afro-Caribbean roots and single mothers as heads of household. An all-Catholic pupil population was replaced with Christians, but not necessarily those of the Catholic faith. Last, teaching nuns and administrators were aging and retiring, and with no one joining the order of the Sisters of Mercy to replace them, the faculty became almost
entirely lay members. Both Sister Angela and Sister Rose dedicated almost their entire professional careers to the St. Martin of the Rose school, its community, and its environs, and these religious sisters reflect the end of an extensive legacy.

While various works have focused on the motivations for leaving the clergy or the handing over of the administration of Catholic schools to lay members, few, if any studies have sought to explore the motivations of those who remained in their posts. How do religious sister leaders make sense of their education leadership roles in a highly secular world in which they are a true minority, particularly within an ever-changing educational context of standards, accountability, and choice?

**Methodology of the Literature Review**

I determined the materials for this literature review in five stages. I conducted an initial search for peer-reviewed materials related to the study’s purpose and research questions utilizing Molloy College library databases. Simultaneously, I perused materials related to the general topics of Catholic education and its historical background, clergy motivation and job satisfaction, feminist theory and nuns, as well as Catholic school leadership. I then created a literature review map corresponding to the purpose of the research as well as the research questions. This map, in turn, assisted me in deciphering pertinent sections for deeper investigation. Submission of this map to literature review mentors affirmed and expanded relevant areas. Step three of the literature determination process included two parts: review of seminal works central to this study and creation of an annotated bibliography as well as specific Molloy College library database searches related to the sections determined by the literature review map. In step four, I completed an initial draft of the theoretical framework. Although I had already chosen the framework of feminist theory, I discovered two pivotal themes of oppression and identity during
the preparation and writing process. A perusal of the literature of the other sections of this literature review revealed the emergence of the same overarching themes within the theoretical framework. Thus, within the final stage of this literature review, I examined materials through the critical lens of oppression and identity.

**Organization**

This literature review contains four main sections: theoretical framework, historical background, leadership, and motivation. Each of these sections utilizes the subsections of oppression and identity as derived in the methodology. The segments are not systematized to fit the order of the purpose statement and research questions of this study; rather, they flow in order from the theoretical framework to historical background of Catholic education based on the themes derived from the framework. Historical developments then led to the leadership section, which then flowed into the motivation to perpetuate the discoveries of the three previous sections.

The first major part of this literature review is the theoretical framework and its overarching themes—oppression and identity—stemming from feminist theory. As the subjects of this study are females and became nuns during the 1960s—a time when women gained greater rights, freedom, and choices—the rationale for conducting this research is based on feminist theory in that they utilized this liberation to choose their paths. This section corresponds closely to the first research question in this study of how the childhoods, religious order formation processes, educational backgrounds, and professional experiences of two religious sisters relate to the feminist concepts of identity and oppression.

The historical background section, the Catholic experience of oppression in the United States, leading to the creation of Catholic schools to preserve and promote identity, answers the
second research question of how the subjects make sense of their commitment to the Catholic mission in their former school. It also provides possible answers, explanations, and insight into the lessons we can learn from these religious sisters’ stories that can be applied to our current system of education today as well as the subjects’ philosophies of education.

The leadership portion’s subsection of oppression in this literature review combines works regarding public school administration as well as Catholic school leadership; by doing so, this will provide answers to the questions of how the subjects have seen their vocation and mission changing in the current educational context of standards, accountability, and choice, as well as the lessons we can learn from their stories and possibly apply to education as a whole. It also parallels the research inquiry regarding the participants’ descriptions of their respective leadership styles. The identity subsection of leadership is specific to Catholic schools, and it focuses on the second research question of how the sisters make sense of their commitment to education in light of the many shifts they have experienced. It also assists in articulating research question 3a and the subjects’ descriptions of their respective philosophies of education and leadership styles.

The final major section, motivation, explores the participants’ choice to remain dedicated to the dual vocation of being religious sisters and educators in a highly secular world. In essence, theirs has been a dual commitment to both the academic and spiritual growth of children. They demonstrated this two-pronged obligation to both the school and the order to which they belonged long before the term the age of accountability was coined. This section explores possible answers to the lessons we can learn from these religious sisters’ stories that can be applied to our current system of education.
Theoretical Framework

Within the confines of secular society, the terms Catholic religious sister and feminist are not frequently paired items. Visible and prominent positions of power and authority in Catholicism—be it the global governing body of the Vatican or a local church—are all held by males, leading many to conclude that nuns are subservient and complicit in perpetuating a patriarchal hierarchy in which they voluntarily place themselves at the lower echelons with minimal influence or impact (Brigham, 2015; Brock, 2010). However, the stereotype is not always reality. To construct answers to the research questions posed in this study, and to obtain a greater understanding of the personal histories and motivation of the religious sister leaders in this study who entered religious life in the late 1960s, I utilized feminist theories stemming from the Second Women’s Movement to serve as the theoretical framework.

Feminism has often been criticized for its lack of clearly delineated parameters and a concise description as to what it is and what it is not (hooks, 2015; Turk, 2010); and yet, there are different and conflicting definitions of feminist theory. Nevertheless, Beasley’s (1999) depiction of feminism as something that lies on a continuum is perhaps closest to the truth. Because of the wide-ranging socio-political dimensions and the difficulty in defining clear parameters, the author maintained that on the left side of this continuum there is the radical aspect, which is explained as a narrow and rigid view, with distinct class dimensions. In the middle of the range is a wider, moderate form concerned to a greater degree with equality, and to the right is the provisional side to feminism as it morphs and changes to current and cultural events of the times in which they occur. However, no matter where a person’s beliefs are positioned on this continuum, intersectionality, defined by Davis (2008) as “the interaction of
multiple identities and experiences of exclusion” (p. 67) plays a key role in shaping feminism’s commonalities.

For this literature review, the basis for the feminist theoretical context are the philosophies that emanated from the Second Women’s Movement, especially, common themes stemming from Friedan’s (2013) *The Feminine Mystique* and those from hooks’ (2015) *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Unlike the First Women’s Movement in the United States, which spanned from the 1840s to the early 1920s (Epstein, 2002) and was concerned with obtaining the right to greater and higher education, female suffrage, temperance, and the abolition of slavery, the Second Women’s Movement in this country, which began in the mid-1960s through the early 1980s (Bowden & Mummery, 2014), was concerned more with women putting to use the rights afforded to them by their feminist forbearers (Freidan, 2013; Goldstein, 2014).

Published initially in 1963, on the cusp of the Civil Rights Act, and considered one of the catalysts for the Second Women’s Movement (Levine, 2015), *The Feminine Mystique* and the ideas it eschewed was in clear juxtaposition with those espoused by society at that time. Drawing on interviews with hundreds of American homemakers, Betty Friedan proposed that post-World War II women had been conditioned to believe that being wife, mother, and housewife was life’s ultimate achievement. However, through discussions and research, Friedan found that existing vicariously through the lives of husbands and children led to great dissatisfaction and discontent among these women. The author employed a variety of theories such as psychological misconceptions on the part of Sigmund Freud and his followers, the sociological discipline of functionalism, gender-constructed curriculum by educators, and the work of Abraham Maslow to uncover this myth. By meshing these notions along with others,
Friedan proposed a new life plan that encouraged women to seek self-actualization and meaning through diverse avenues other than the trifecta of husband, home, and children. In short, she beseeched women to carve out lives for themselves outside of the husband, home, and children triad.

Nonetheless, while The Feminine Mystique was inspirational and innovative for the times in which it appeared, whether by accident or design, it was limited in scope in terms of audience appeal and was pertinent only to educated, middle- and upper-class, white females (hooks, 2015; Levine, 2015; Turk, 2015). On the other hand, hooks’ work, Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center (2015), spoke to the portion of the population that Friedan had overlooked—women of color as well as those living in poverty. Like her predecessor, hooks sought to open the public’s eyes to oppression and domination, but from different angles, with consideration of racial and class dimensions. She pointed out glaring distinctions between the lives of suburban white homemakers and those on the opposite end of the spectrum. Distinct from Friedan, hooks (2015) viewed subjugation and domination not as being unable to enact certain choices, but rather, the “absence of choices” (p. 5). In writing about the stations of the female subjects of her book, hooks pointed out that these women were in great need of being heard, as they were at some of the lowest rungs of the societal ladder, occupationally or otherwise. The author desired that the feminist movement not be a war on men but on the ills of society that precluded collaboration and cooperation to end sexist oppression. In addition, hooks also encouraged all women to unite and not to view racism and classism as byproducts of sexist oppression but as equal partners, all caused by a culture of domination. She also found a bit of absurdity in the fact that Friedan and her acolytes were urging women to seek employment outside the home for fulfillment since employment was not an option but an obligation for many black and poor women.
Yet, despite the notable differences between the works of Friedan and hooks, when analyzed holistically, they do share certain common themes that are highly relevant to this study. Female oppression and identity are two aspects that stand out, and I examine these concepts more closely in the upcoming sections, in conjunction with their relationship to the spiritual and career facets of the religious sisters in this study.

**Oppression**

*The Feminine Mystique* maintained that female oppression occurred in several ways: societal hierarchy, gender-driven school curriculum, the mass media, as well as through strategic marketing tactics (Fraterrigo, 2015; Friedan, 2013). As stated previously, hooks viewed oppression as a lack of choice and cultural dominance. Minority and poverty-stricken women most certainly did not have access to the opportunities that their female, white, more economically advantaged counterparts did. Conversely, it can also be argued that no one from either of these groups would have been privy to the same advantages as white, middle- or upper-class males (hooks, 2015). And while these issues have not all supernaturally disappeared, it is through these works as well as the socio-political efforts of these authors and women like them that many American females today have greater choices and opportunities (Epstein, 2014).

Likewise, an interesting parallel can be drawn to the evolution and semi-emancipation of Catholic nuns. The historian JoAnn McNamara (1983) pointed out that during the early days of Christianity, religious sisters who had decided to devote their lives to God and not to a husband and children were suspect and radical to those in power within the emerging church. However, in time, they were accepted, but solely under the proviso that they answer to the males at the helm of the religion. Thompson (2016) emphasized that this has been a constant within the history of the relationship between nuns and the male Catholic hierarchy. However, there has
been a slow but definite dissent that has continually grown since the decrees of Vatican II, which spanned from 1962 to 1965. The contents of these pronouncements have served to transform manners of dress, ministries, as well as living arrangements (Caruso, 2012; Clark, 2013). Some clergy members, both male and female, met these alterations in tradition with opposition and resistance (Allen & O’Brien, 2008; Caruso & Clark). Furthermore, although Pope John XXIII is recognized for spearheading the initiatives of the Second Vatican Council, credit should also be given to those women religious who implemented and carried out these changes.

Nevertheless, those who have shaped and supported these changes have not always experienced laudations from particular factions of male elders of the Catholic Church. Within the past 10 years, religious sisters have been accused of promoting “more radical feminist themes” (Brigham, 2015, p. 111) for involvement in seemingly benign activities such as a museum exhibit of artifacts of female Catholic clergy in the United States as well as for being part of a movement titled “Nuns on the Bus,” which was part of a greater crusade that advocated for immigrant rights. However, as Thompson (2016) pointed out in her essay on U.S. nuns’ conflict with the Vatican, seriously declining numbers of religious sisters catalyzed Vatican investigation. Through this inquiry, it was found that 21st century nuns “were engaged in pastoral ministry, spiritual direction, and social justice-related activities” (p. 65). To those of a previous generation, these undertakings represented extremist works completely out of the traditional occupational realms; actions such as these inspired derision and suspicion.

However, these forward-thinking nuns prevailed as Pope Francis I has made both public and private conciliatory remarks and gestures stating his deep value and appreciation for the work these religious sisters do (Goodstein, 2015). In terms of mitigating sexist oppression,
actions on the part of these “radical” nuns closely mirror Friedan’s notion of self-actualization through meaningful work. They also reflect hooks’ concept of breaking the cycle of domination.

With regard to this dissertation study and how religious sisters make sense of their dual role as spiritual and educational leaders, there is a definite departure from male oppression and domination. Because of the extinction of the parochial model of Catholic schools in which a male pastor is at the titular helm of both the church and the school, there no longer exists this single deference to one priest. The schools in the subjects’ former diocese now belong to a greater community, and religious and secular board members choose leaders. Principals, such as the women in this study, are in these schools because they choose to be and not only to suit the whim of one male clergyman. Moreover, this voluntary action to be school leaders also plays a pivotal role in the next dimension of feminism for discussion: identity.

Identity

The concept of identity and a woman’s lack thereof was an integral part of The Feminine Mystique (Fraterrigo, 2015; Levine, 2015; Turk, 2015). Friedan (2013) accused advertising agencies, educational institutions, and popular psychology of having corroborated in what might now be loosely termed a form of identity theft. To Friedan, women were being held in captivity by the idea that being a housewife was the ultimate identity, and that meant “sacrificing their own interests and desires in support of the family” (Turk, 2015, p. 25). In contrast to The Feminine Mystique, hooks (2015) maintained a broader and more diverse outlook regarding this notion, viewing identity as a cultural and sometimes individual phenomenon. In other words, feminist identity is multi-dimensional (Carolissen et al., 2011; Valdivia, 2002) and based on a myriad of experiences.
Perhaps the most visual representation of religious sisters was their manner of dress. While affirming that being a religious sister did provide women with an alternative identity to being a wife and mother, Sullivan (2000) also pointed out that Hollywood played a large role in promoting heroines enshrouded head to toe in traditional long robes and habits. Holscher (2012) even went so far as to state “between 1930 and 1965…sisters became the de facto face of Catholicism…wearing clothing that was a billowy contrast with the slim silhouettes typifying post-war women’s fashion” (p. 68). However, the advent of Vatican II and the decrees from the *Perfectae Caritatis* (1965) called for a change in traditional religious garb to blend in rather than stand apart from the communities they served. Ironically, both Caruso (2012) and Clark (2013) noted that there was initial resistance on the part of the nuns to change their wardrobe because it was the emblem of their religious order; nonetheless, the modifications in clothing also served as a conduit to embracing enhanced social interactions, financial responsibility, and professional identities (Brock, 2010; Clark, 2013).

In line with Friedan’s theories, the choice to be a nun was in and of itself rejection of the housewife role and assuming identity as wife, homemaker, and mother. Additionally, no longer constrained by a uniform that denotes strict homogeneity, through the shedding of the robes and the consequences that followed, religious sisters were able to embrace hooks’ notion of identity through diversity.

It was interesting that prior discussions with both religious sisters involved in this study initially revealed that, concerning identity, they view themselves dually as nun educators. In other words, they consider both identities of equal importance. Since they wear no outward manifestations of being members of a religious congregation other than crosses, which many times are not even visible depending on the type of clothing, one might put into question whether
this would be the case if they chose to dress in more traditional Catholic nun robes and habits of the past.

**Conclusion**

In this section of the literature review, I distinguished the theoretical framework used as a basis for this study. From the varying feminist movements and theories, I determined that two particular works of the Second Women’s Movement, *The Feminine Mystique* and *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* and two common themes that emerged from them—oppression and identity—serve as the foundation for this framework.

**Historical Background**

A review of the historical background and development of Catholic education in the United States provides greater depth and perspective to understand the personal histories and motivation of the subjects of this study and their dedication to the vocation of being school principals as religious sisters in a highly secular world. Similar to this study’s theoretical framework, the themes of oppression and identity play a pivotal role in shedding light not only on the pertinent events that took place but also on how their impact assisted in shaping a vast school system of which the subjects of this study were a fundamental part. This historical information also aids in answering how these religious sisters make sense of the commitment to the Catholic mission in their schools.

Albeit they were an extremely small presence, Catholic schools in the United States date back as far as colonial times. Walch (2003) maintained that the first somewhat formal Catholic school was established in 1640 in Maryland. Other authors described the existence of Catholic mission schools, with the intent of proselytizing Native Americans in what is now Florida and Louisiana (Bryk et al., 1993; Hunt, 2005) also during the 17th century. Whatever the initial
objective of these institutions was, nearly 400 years later, “Catholic elementary and secondary schools in the United States represent the prevailing private education system in this nation and the world” (Notre Dame Task Force, 2008, p. 277). However, this prestigious position did not come about easily; and it is perhaps through the struggles Catholic worshippers experienced, that would assist in clarifying how these schools rose to such prominence.

Beginning with the Pilgrims’ arrival in Plymouth in 1621, this nation’s first European settlers and those immigrants that subsequently followed throughout the 18th and part of the 19th centuries were primarily adherents of Protestant faiths. However, there were Catholic immigrants present in this country both before and after the American Revolution (Bryk et al., 1993; Caruso, 2012; Walch, 2003). The population was quite small, constituting a true minority (Bryk et al.1993), and as such, the indignities this minor faction suffered were not of minimal consequence.

**Oppression**

Although it may not be highly publicized, Catholics in the United States faced a great deal of oppression beginning in colonial times and not truly abating until after World War II. Walch (2003) depicted the harsh treatment of Catholics during the years under English rule as a series of denials. Certain colonies imposed severe restrictions on the right to worship, practice, or teach doctrine. As well, the right to vote or hold public office was also forbidden. This suppression of Catholics and their freedoms took place for over 100 years and only lost ground with the advent of the War of Independence and the birth of a new nation.

In direct contrast to the colonial period, Walch (2003) characterized the years encompassing the American Revolution as more harmonious. Catholic or Protestant worship became of little significance to colonists in the struggle against English imperial rule. In fact,
“state legislature in the 1770s dropped legal restrictions keeping Catholics from full citizenship and added statutes on the freedom of conscience and religion” (p. 15). However, this unity was short-lived, and as early as the 1790s, the rumblings of discontent and anti-immigrant/anti-Catholic sentiment were heard (Caruso, 2012).

During the first half of the 19th century, the United States received new groups of émigrés coming, particularly from Ireland, France, and Germany. With their arrival, a new form of apprehension, suspicion, and subsequent persecution arose from those already established in this nation in the form of nativism, or extreme ethnocentrism. A major factor for this bigotry was rooted in the perception that these foreigners’ religious beliefs put their allegiance in clear opposition to American democratic values and in the hands of an extraneous ruler in Rome—the Pope (Bryk et al., 1993; Caruso, 2012; Hunt, 2005; Walch, 2003). Concerns regarding papal loyalty, coupled with the impoverished and uneducated circumstances from which many of these newcomers hailed, led to dire consequences. There were difficulties for Catholics to find employment or hold office. There were also much more violent aspects to this timeframe with Catholic churches burned, properties destroyed, and blatant acts of brutality between Catholics and Protestants carried out openly in public streets (Caruso, 2012; Walch, 2003).

The years 1800 through the 1850s marked highly contentious times for Catholics as worshippers in this nation. Ironically, perhaps one of the most vicious attacks occurred against Catholic females. In Charlestown, Massachusetts, in 1834 an Ursuline convent and its adjoining farmhouse were obliterated in an act of arson. Yet this timeframe signified an important turning point for Catholics as well. According to hooks (2015), subjugation or power was “commonly equated with domination and control over people or things” (p. 84). However, it was during this
height of great tension, oppression, and dominance that the Catholic school system was born, carving out its own unique identity.

**Identity**

There are several conflating factors that served as catalysts for the establishment and development of Catholic schools in the United States. Naturally, there are those who viewed some incidents as having greater influence than others, but when examined as parts of a whole, these occurrences served to shape, develop, and solidify what was once considered a liability as an identity in this country. As this land morphed from a colony into a nation, the education of its people took on a more critical role in shaping society. Thus, starting approximately in the 1830s, the common school movement or universal elementary education was born. Horace Mann is the historical figure most closely associated with this crusade, and he believed that education was a panacea that could create good citizens of strong moral character, even those members of society deemed the most hopeless of cases (Goldstein, 2015).

The notion that all citizens are entitled to free and basic education was quite beneficial to all recipients, but the heavily Protestant-leaning curriculum and choice of materials utilized during this time were not. A central text for all students’ instruction was the Protestant King James Version of the Bible. The use of this text led directly to this country’s Bible Riots of the 1840s, as the majority of Catholic students compelled to interact with this work were Irish immigrants who had fled from British-Protestant domination and subjugation in their own nation (Caruso, 2012; Walch, 2003). Additionally, Walch noted the use of readers developed by William H. McGuffey, also known as the McGuffey Readers, as tools of instruction. McGuffey based the contents of these volumes on morals reflecting distinctly Protestant values. Walch (2003) pointed out that books such as these were employed as homogenizers, trying to eradicate
the foreignness from non-native Catholic students. However, educational tools and instructional strategies utilized to diminish Catholic identity were not lost upon the elders of the developing Catholic Church in this country, and steps were taken to counteract this attempt at religious and cultural dilution.

**Birth of the Catholic school system.** As stated previously in this section, Catholic schools in the United States comprise the largest private school system, both nationally and globally. These facts can most likely be attributed to the efforts and perseverance of the Catholic bishops of this country during the 19th century. Although there were many people who assisted in creating and establishing Catholic schools during this time frame, perhaps the two most acknowledged were Bishop John Carroll of Baltimore and Bishop John Hughes of New York.

Born in Maryland before the United States even existed as a nation, John Carroll has the distinction of being the first Catholic bishop of this country, serving his religious constituents as such from 1790 until his death in 1815. Descended from a prominent Catholic family, Carroll was trained as a priest in Europe, as public worship was prohibited to Catholics during the years before the American Revolution. Post-revolution, he became a fervent supporter of the Constitution’s Bill of Rights—especially freedom of religion (Mazzenga, 2010). After a personal recommendation from Benjamin Franklin to the Vatican, Carroll received a request to create and lead a Catholic hierarchy in the recently formed country. The cleric obliged this entreaty by expanding Catholic presence through the construction of churches and encouraging orders of priests to minister within these new edifices. He also had a formidable vision regarding how to retain his ever-increasing number of worshippers from being subsumed by the nation’s Protestant majority.
Both Mazzenga (2010) and Walch (2003) contended that Bishop Carroll realized that the key to maintaining and expanding the Catholic faith in the burgeoning United States was through education. Additionally, both these authors credited him for two other matters: identity preservation and the use of religious sisters to staff schools. Carroll presented these new religious schools as means of conserving religious traditions, coupled with ethnic ones, by breaking ground with new churches and schools in immigrant zones tending and catering to the specific needs and customs of a particular cultural community. However, as is the case today, there was a heavy economic burden in operating educational institutions, and the financial conditions of its poverty-stricken pupils prohibited their ability to pay school fees. What is more, local priests, not being educators and unfamiliar with running schools, created more discord than harmony within these educational institutions (Mazzenga, 2010).

It was Bishop Carroll’s wisdom in 1809 to request the assistance of Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton and her order, the Sisters of Charity, to staff and run one school initially and then others. The sisters brought order, organization, and stability to what was primarily a fledgling attempt at creating a school system to preserve and propagate identity (Walch, 2003). The presence of clergy in schools also had two additional benefits. The nuns, with their religious garments, vows, and communal living, served as a highly visual reminder of identity to its students, parents, and the community. Of even greater impact, Carroll’s request to Mother Seton established a precedent of teaching sisters that has continued for more than 200 years as is witnessed in this study. Nonetheless, Bishop Carroll is not solely worthy of recognition in the advancement of Catholic schools and the promotion of Catholic character.

The torch of the expansion of the Catholic school system was proverbially passed to Archbishop John Hughes of New York City, both slightly before and during the Common School
Movement in the United States. An Irish immigrant himself, Hughes was known as “Dagger John” for his indomitable spirit and fierce espousal of Catholic education and schooling.

According to Shelley (2010), Hughes made significant contributions to the Catholic school system in two pivotal ways. Ten years after Carroll’s death, Hughes clashed with New York City’s Public School Society, a “Protestant elite” (p. 68) group and type of predecessor to today’s New York City Department of Education. His main point of contention was the school taxes that Catholic immigrants were required to pay; yet, these same individuals were not sending their children to these schools because of the bias launched against their offspring displayed both implicitly in the curriculum and explicitly by educators.

Fifteen years later, a proposal was made to the New York State legislature to create schools that addressed the needs of Catholic immigrants. The Catholic population expected that the money from their tax contributions would support these institutions. What ensued was nearly a 10-year battle between Hughes and New York City school officials as to whether Catholic schools should be supported by public funds. Hughes was not successful in this endeavor; nonetheless, “Catholic elementary schools were established…under the auspices of the parish to protect the faith of an immigrant and poor population” (Hunt, 2005, p. 163). Thus, his second accomplishment was the establishment of the parochial school model to serve a marginalized population supported by the contributions of lay members. He further followed suit from Bishop Carroll, by almost exclusively staffing his schools with religious sisters. As is evidenced in the introduction section of this literature review, the number of religious sisters staffing Catholic schools today is minimal. However, the parochial model of school subsidies derived from lay-tithing still very much exists almost 170 years later.
As the Catholic population within the United States increased, especially within the Great Wave of Immigration to this country during the latter part of the 19th and early 20th century, so did the number of Catholic schools. Up until 1920, many Catholic schools were ethnically associated, and religious sisters from these countries of origin served these populations (McGuiness, 2013). After World War I, a greater demand for assimilation came into play (Hunt, 2005); however, this did not preclude parents from sending their children to Catholic institutions. The 1950s presented another peak time for Catholic education. The population explosion with the Baby Boom led to great demand for Catholic schools. Catholic military personnel had very much contributed to the struggles of World War II, and the shame and stigma of Catholic identity were waning (Walch, 2003). In fact, “Catholic K-12 enrollment reached an all-time high in 1965-1966 at 5.6 million pupils” (Hunt, 2005, p. 166). This expansion and peak enrollment of schools also coincided with the largest number of women joining religious orders in this country (Caruso, 2012). This fact is particularly relevant to this study as the subjects were among the students enrolled in Catholic schools during this era; moreover, through private conversations with them, both maintained that they were inspired to become nuns by their religious sister teachers.

**Conclusion**

The historical background regarding Catholicism and Catholic education is quite relevant to this study for several reasons. Similar to the theoretical framework, oppression is a key theme to emerge from the literature. Denial of rights—occupational, religious, and educational—were all forms of subjugation experienced by Catholics for an extended time in this nation’s history. This concept of domination and struggle mirrors not only the experience of women, the gender of the subjects of this study, and their plight to be religious sisters in a secular world, but
also the immigrant Caribbean community they have served for the greater portion of their careers.

Furthermore, it was through oppression that a desire for maintaining identity was born vis-à-vis a school system that would nurture and advance identity rather than distort it. It is perhaps through this history of growth and promotion of the identity of marginalized, immigrant groups that the subjects of this study make sense of the Catholic mission in their school. Last, with the cognizance of the historical background, the way is now paved for the discovery of what it means to be a school leader in an age of standards, accountability, and choice.

**Leadership**

An integral component of this literature review is the topic of *leadership* and how it extends and reflects the concepts of *oppression* and *identity*. Although the subjects of this study were school leaders, they were Catholic school leaders, which denote dual roles as both institutional administrators and spiritual guides. Furthermore, as nuns, there is a third leadership factor to consider: their obligation to serve as models of the values and mission of the clerical order to which they belong—the Religious Sisters of Mercy. This section will address research questions exploring how they witnessed their vocation and mission changing, particularly in the current educational context of standards, accountability, and choice. It will also seek to explain the lessons we can learn from these religious sisters’ stories that can be applied to our current system of education today—be it private or public—as well as how they articulate their leadership philosophy.

Lortie (2009) pronounced elementary school principalship as “a particular kind of occupation” (p. 2) that stemmed beyond a more simplistic managerial model; as well, perhaps unwittingly, he asserted the tremendous power educational administrators have when he
contended that elementary school principals have a specific and direct impact on the climate and effectiveness of their respective institutions. Naturally, this type of influence has direct outcomes for the students these schools serve. Moreover, the relevance of these notions is twofold for this study. On one hand, the subjects were elementary school principals. On the other hand, and of even higher importance, is the fact that these women have served as principals in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood where the importance of education bears greater consequences.

While Lortie’s 2009 study of suburban school principals in Chicago and Iowa is considered a seminal body of research, it was limited to public school administrators and did not touch upon a component critical to Catholic school leadership: the moral aspect. Conversely, Fullan’s (2003) work titled The Moral Imperative, also aimed primarily for public school leaders, was aligned closer to the overall driving factors of Catholic school principalship. As Fullan clearly outlined, the motivation to have a successful school should not be for better test scores or nationally ranked scholars. Rather, it should be a moral obligation for the betterment of students and, ultimately, society. By no means was Fullan referring to a religious component; however, in the case of Catholic school leadership, the moral obligation stems from “simultaneous responsibility of the principal as spiritual leader and as educational, instructional and managerial leader” (Boyle, Haller & Hunt, 2016, pp. 293-294).

The history of Catholic education in the United States, its original purposes, and guiding principles continue to be a factor in Catholic school leadership (Belmonte & Cranston, 2009). Initially, schools were established to maintain the faith in an overwhelmingly domineering Protestant country, but as more and more impoverished and illiterate Catholic immigrants came to these shores, the purpose of Catholic school institutions expanded from the
spiritual and social to the academic. With the advent of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, in which the demand for adequately yearly progress is proven vis-à-vis rigorous standards and annual testing of students beginning in grade three, scholastic expectations and outcomes for students of all abilities are of major concern to all schools. Polka, Litchka, Mete, and Ayaga (2016) underscored this burden when they stated, “…at no time in the history of education in North America and globally has there been more pressure on school leaders to improve the achievement of all students” (p. 220). Thus, Catholic educational leadership can also be examined through both the lenses of oppression and identity.

**Oppression**

One of the major findings of Lortie’s 2009 study of suburban elementary school principals was strong gratification in “smooth [school] operation and the satisfaction of those involved in and around the school” (p. 98). This statement implies an organized and safe environment in which teachers, students, and other members of the school community can thrive and grow. This concept resonated quite closely with the primary discovery of Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore’s (1981) longitudinal study of public and private schools. A pivotal outcome of the research was that private schools, of which Catholic schools comprised 66%, produced better cognitive outcomes primarily because of more ordered and organized learning environments. “Effective teaching and learning cannot take place in poorly managed classrooms” (Korporshoek, Harms, de Boer, van Kuijk & Doolaard, 2016, p. 643). Likewise, a multitude of classrooms of this nature cannot occur in poorly managed buildings (Boyle et al., 2016). As is evident in Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs, a safe and secure environment for students, free from oppression, is fundamental to learning.
Nevertheless, an organized, secure, and non-threatening school climate is not the only form of oppression with which leaders must contend. There is also high-stakes testing. Although Lortie (2009) did not address this concept explicitly in his study, he posited that the attention and demands brought by these “singular quantitative measures” (p. 205) would place pressure on school leaders, and subsequently their respective faculties and students, and divert attention away from equally important matters. Be it public or private, if a school receives federal support, that institution is compelled to administer these exams. The consequences of the results of such tests may vary between private and public institutions; nevertheless, the responsibility for administering them and reporting scores exists for all administrators involved with these tests (Fraser & Brock, 2016; Polka et al., 2016). As well, the pupils in these schools are still subjected to long and arduous exams.

A final form of increasing oppression with which school leaders must contend stems from parent-teacher interactions. To a greater or lesser extent, parents have always played a role in a child’s education; nonetheless, within the last 50 years, Whitaker and Fiore (2016) found that there are greater visibility and more vocal parental sentiments caused by changes in society. While the authors viewed it more in terms of the changes to family structure, there is also the advent of greater access to teachers and administrators through electronic means. Additionally, there is a prevalence of the use of social media that did not exist years ago. This increased access by no means indicates that all parents are attacking teachers, but, parental dynamics have certainly changed over time, causing a greater need for principal intervention (Fraser & Brock, 2006).

Furthermore, “teacher responsiveness to principal leadership lies in the buffering and protective functions they can perform” (Lortie, 2009, p. 177). In other words, principals need to
protect their students as well as their faculty and staff, from oppression. Naturally, these circumstances apply to both private and public school leadership, but there is one important differentiating factor. In the case of Catholic schools as well as other private schools, parents are paying taxes that contribute to public school funding. Also, they are also paying several thousands of dollars in tuition.

In the case of this study, the order to which the subjects belong, the Religious Sisters of Mercy, was established out of concern for the poor but grew to advocate for numerous social-justice causes, particularly those involving women, children, the poor, the uneducated, and immigrants (Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, 2017). This mission serves as one possible reason as to how the religious sisters make sense of their commitment to their dual roles as both educational and spiritual leaders in that the fulfillment of their religious vows to social justice act as a guide for creating a safe learning environment, help in the protection of students and teachers from the negative consequences associated with high-stakes testing, and assist in creating an atmosphere of respect between faculty and parents. This undertaking may also aid in creating a school identity.

**Identity**

Although the identity of a Catholic school seems well defined by its very name, this belief may not necessarily be the case as there are several competing aspects to consider (Belmonte & Cranston, 2009; Convey, 2012; Spesia, 2016). Catholic school leaders are “confronted by the encroachment of accountability, government protocols, and the general rationalization of education…and a technological-secular-consumerist culture that is universal to those under 35 in every part of the world” (Schuttloffel, 2012, p. 152). Nevertheless, there remains the current Vatican call for New Evangelization—the teachings of the Bible and the
examples of Jesus to be rooted and integrated into all aspects of learning—to produce students who will then bear witness to these notions to others in the world.

There are very few educational leadership programs designed to meet these specific needs (Boyle et al., 2016), and one factor to examine is whether school leadership by a clergy member enhances the spiritual character of the school under clerical membership. Studies by Belmonte and Cranston (2009) in Australia, and Hobbie, Convey, and Schuttloffel (2010) in the United States indicated that a vowed religious school leader did not shape the Catholic identity of a school. Conversely, in a previous discussion, one of the subjects of this study stated that she “is a principal first and a nun second.” But she also felt that her identity as a Religious Sister of Mercy “is imbued in her actions and judgments as a school leader” (S. Angela, personal communication, April 6, 2017). This concept may be a phenomenon singular to this study, but by those words as well as being a nun for over 50 years and serving as principal of the same school for almost 40, there is the implication that the spiritual life influences decisions, which, in turn, creates a school culture and identity.

Conclusion

Leadership in this literature review is surveyed through the themes of oppression and identity. Oppression in school leadership occurs in preventing student subjugation and maintaining a safe environment for teachers and students alike. As well, oppression is experienced by school leaders through the pressures of rigorous standards, ensuring learning for students of all abilities, and achieving and maintaining results of high-stakes tests. It is also felt by acting as buffers and establishing an environment of respect when dealing with aggressive parents.
For Catholic school leaders, identity is an integral part of their responsibilities. Although studies have shown that clergy membership does not guarantee a school’s Catholic character, the comments made by subjects of this study have indicated otherwise. Finally, while this section focuses on the research questions of how religious sisters make sense of their 40-year commitment to the Catholic mission of their school in light of shifts in educational policy, neighborhood and student demographics, and the lessons we can learn from their leadership experiences, there is one last factor to consider: the motivation to possess this dual role as educational leaders and religious sisters.

**Motivation**

I dedicate this last part of the literature review to the concept of *motivation*. With specific regard to clergy vocation and motivation, Conway, Clinton, Sturges, and Budjanovcanin (2015) found that “if people are offered opportunities to enact their calling, then this contributes to their motivation and well-being” (p. 1129). To gain further insight into the unique educational philosophies and personal histories, once again, I utilize the overarching themes of oppression and identity.

Within motivation and how it pertains to oppression and identity, I examine the concepts of *collective efficacy*, *greater freedom*, *job satisfaction*, and *feminist ethic of care*. Collective efficacy explains the first two research questions. Greater freedom corresponds closely to the first research question. Job satisfaction relates to the third research question, and feminist ethic of care is closely aligned with the third research question.

**Oppression**

Stemming from Bandura’s (2002) work on social cognitive theory from a cultural perspective, *collective efficacy* is described by the theorist as “people acting in concert on a
shared belief, not a disembodied group mind that is doing the cognizing, aspiring, motivating, and regulating” (p. 271). The subjects of this study were educational administrators. They were also Religious Sisters of Mercy and bound by a common set of beliefs to a much larger group of women committed to the principles of social justice as prescribed by their founder Catherine McCauley: poverty; chastity; obedience; and service to the poor, sick, and uneducated (Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, 2017).

Bandura (2002) stressed the agentic aspect of efficacy, or “people acting in concert to shape the future” (p. 269). As religious sisters, the subjects of this study both took common vows that impacted their ministry. These nuns’ careers in education spanned well over 40 years, and naturally, there had been changes to their daily actions, behaviors, job duties, demographics in their schools, etc. However, the “agentic aspects” of the original mission of the order are very much alive. As the Religious Sisters of Mercy of the Americas stated, they “are focused on responding to unmet needs, through direct service as well as seeking ways to change unjust systems” (Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, 2017). Although now the order’s members may have varied ministries, the collective mission remains the same: to assuage the plight of the oppressed. The continued belief in this common vision allows these nuns to carry out this shared vision daily.

One other notion to consider regarding motivation that is connected to the theoretical framework of feminist theory and the third research question of what we can learn from the sisters’ stories and how they describe their philosophy of education is the idea of the feminist ethic of care. Gilligan (2003) asserted that women were not substandard to men in their moral development but divergent in that females focused on establishing relationships and caring for those with whom they had these relationships. In an interview with Gilligan in 2011, the theorist
stated that a feminist ethic of care “transcends the gender binaries and hierarchies that structure patriarchal institutions and cultures” (para. 11). In other words, another driving factor for the subjects was the feminist ethic of care through their development of relationships and the ongoing support for all stakeholders in their school community as they were pre-wired for this ethic as females.

**Identity**

The first aspect to consider is the greater freedom granted to those in dedicated service of the Catholic Church vis-à-vis Vatican II’s dissemination of the *Perfectae Caritatis*. This decree called for clergy to return to their orders’ original missions and goals and move away from medieval practices that had no bearing on their true purpose. It compelled priests and nuns to examine their roles, actions, and personal motivations as they correspond to their orders’ unique foundations and intentions (Allen & O’Brien, 2008). The ramifications of this pronouncement affected communities in a multitude of ways, but most notably in roles and ministries, manner of dress, and communal living. This decree was optimal for those who sought greater independence, and religious sisters were “no longer the models of submissiveness that canon law [initially] aimed to create” (Clark, 2013, p. 224).

Additionally, it allowed these women to break away from traditional ideas and expand into other agencies, permitting members of the congregation to live outside of closed-off communities to be closer to those they serve. What is more, this decree’s compelling force for reflection and introspection may have permitted those who would naturally have been constrained by obedience to flourish beyond the parameters set forth by a more rigid order. Finally, the historical timing of the *Perfectae Caritatis* does give credence to the point that poverty-stricken female children of immigrants in the United States no longer needed to rely
primarily upon the Catholic Church for social status (Bezjak, 2012). The era of civil rights and gender equality may have deterred some from joining a religious order; conversely, those who joined from this point on did so with wider social and career opportunities available to them than their predecessors.

When considering the second research question and ways the childhoods, religious order formation processes, educational backgrounds, and professional experiences of two religious sisters relate to the feminist ideals, its possible answer may very well be the greater liberty afforded to them post-Vatican II. This freedom granted these sisters greater latitude in thought, movement, and ministry. It may have also removed stigmas normally associated with the traditional image of nuns. However, as helpful as this freedom was and is, it came quite a few decades before those who chose to remain as religious sister educators faced the age of accountability standards, testing, and choice; but job satisfaction may very well be the reason these nuns remain in their jobs, despite the changes in educational contexts.

Smith’s 2007 survey work on job satisfaction in the United States revealed that members of the clergy or those serving in religious roles ranked highest in occupational fulfillment, with educational leaders at position number four. What is more, evidence suggested that those in dedicated service to their faith experience high levels of job-related gratification when there is no “perceived dissonance between emotions that are genuinely felt and those that they believe are required for the job role” (Kinman, McFall, & Rodriguez, 2011, p. 677). Additionally, in looking at clergy engagement from a quadripolar perspective, Parker and Martin (2009) found that the greatest levels are enjoyed by those who are success driven and yet open-minded.

These high levels of job satisfaction, from both a spiritual and occupational perspective, link directly to the second research question concerning how these religious sisters make sense of
their four-decade educational and spiritual commitment in light of the shifts that occurred during their tenure. Perhaps, it is the high levels of satisfaction that assisted them in adapting to and accepting these changes and working to implement them in effective ways for the betterment of their students.

Regarding motivation and the feminist ethic of care and how they are both linked to the concept of identity, Gilligan (2003) found that women base their identities not on achievements, but on the development of relationships and their capacity to express care within these relationships. As the narratives of the subjects of this dissertation are closely intertwined with the students, teachers, and families they served, this formation of relationships and the genuine interest that the subjects extended to their community served as evidence of the subjects’ recognition of the existence and identities of all their constituents.

Conclusion

With very few religious sisters in the world and many of their contemporaries either having passed away, left religious life, or avoided religious life altogether, motivation is a key component to the literature review of this study. In their vows as religious sisters, collective efficacy provides a shared belief in actions that combat oppression and subjugation. This group effort, in turn, provides answers to the second research question of how the subjects make sense of their commitment to their mission. Greater freedoms gained through the reforms of Vatican II might serve to explain how the participants’ experiences relate to the feminist concepts of identity and oppression and how job satisfaction might have allowed them to accept and implement the many changes they underwent in the careers. Last, a feminist ethic of care in the desire to attend to, build relationships, and display care within those connections might explain
the final research question of the lessons that can be derived from their stories as well as a possible description of their educational and leadership philosophies.

**Summary of Literature Findings**

In this review of the literature, I sought to understand the unique educational philosophies and approaches to educating the whole child from the perspective of religious sister educators. As well, I looked for possible answers to discern the personal histories and motivation to remain dedicated to the vocation of being school principals as religious sisters in a highly secular world. Through the use of two overarching themes derived from the theoretical framework—oppression and identity—I have uncovered key findings.

The theoretical framework I utilized for this literature review was rooted in feminist theory derived from Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (2013) and hooks’ *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (2015) and based on the overarching themes of oppression and identity. Within the framework section, several findings came to light. In terms of oppression, Catholic nuns have a history of experiencing this notion dating back to the first days of Christianity; however, through their upholding of the egis of the *Perfectae Caritatis* as well as their highly vocal advocacy of social justice causes, they are no longer “models of submissiveness” (Clark, 2013, p. 224). Through the framework, I have also distinguished the identity of religious sisters in the modern manner of dress and the roles assumed outside the traditional realms of wife and mother as was expected of the subjects’ generation.

In the review of the literature for the historical background of this study, I found a repeating pattern of oppression and identity. The oppression experienced by Catholics in this country, first as an English colony and then as a formal nation, forged a desire to uphold, preserve, and perpetuate Catholic identity; this took form in the development of a Catholic
Religious sisters were instrumental in the establishment and growth of the Catholic school system and contributed largely to the creation of a Catholic identity.

Changes in student demographics, educational policy calling for greater accountability, and the overall decline in the popularity of Catholic schools as a viable educational choice also reflected a continued pattern of oppression and identity. Students such as the ones in the subjects’ former school are no longer from white, middle-class families, but from ethnic minorities who are financially challenged. Education has also morphed into statistical data with a focus on students as numbers rather than as humans. As well, Catholic schools find themselves in an enrollment crisis, which has led to partnerships with secular institutions such as the New York City Department of Education.

Concerning leadership, I discovered that oppression manifested itself in three ways: the establishment of a safe and secure school environment, pressures from the government and local school authorities generated in this era of rigorous standards and accountability, and an ever-increasing parental aggressiveness toward teachers. While oppression takes place both in public and private schools, the concept of identity was regarded from a Catholic school leadership standpoint. Furthermore, while studies showed that membership of a religious congregation of school principals did not influence the Catholic identity of a school, the views of both subjects imply that they do.

As stated at the beginning of this literature review, religious sisters currently make up a very small percentage of the world’s population. Therefore, with so few women entering religious life, and with so many that have departed, motivation is also highly relevant to the research questions. Bandura’s (2002) concept of collective efficacy and the subjects’ vows and alignment to a religious order dedicated to social justice played a key role in explaining the
sisters’ dedication to the Catholic mission. Greater freedom and fewer constraints served as an explanation for identity and answering how these women religious make sense of their four-decade ministry in an ever-changing educational landscape. Also, in terms of identity, job satisfaction may explain how these religious sisters have adapted to this era of standards, accountability, and choice and could adjust, accept, and implement these changes. Last, Gilligan’s concept of a feminist ethic of care relates to the third research question of lessons that can be derived as well as educational philosophy. As per the feminist ethic of care, they had a pre-wired motivation to establish relationships and nurture those involved. In this case, they tried to thwart oppression from patriarchal constraints and acknowledge the identities of all students, staff members, and parents.

Beyond the key findings of this literature review, there is also one other relevant factor I wish to address. After viewing hundreds of studies and books related to this topic, I found that there was not one solely dedicated to investigating the educational and leadership philosophies that could be gleaned from religious sister educators. There is an abundance of literature related to Catholic school leadership of a completely bygone era of the past when schools were brimming with nuns. There is also a wealth of information regarding lay leadership of Catholic institutions. However, there are no recent studies involving religious sister elementary school principals and how they make sense of their leadership work in the current complex and ever-changing educational context.
Chapter Three: Research Design

In this chapter, I describe the research methods I used to conduct this qualitative narrative study. As outlined in chapter two, I used the concepts of identity and oppression derived from feminist theory and directly based on Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* and hooks’ *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* to frame my study and situate the findings. Moreover, these feminist constructs served as a lens through which I sought to understand how two religious sisters make sense of their former educational leadership roles in a highly secular world, particularly within an ever-evolving educational context of standards, accountability, and choice. Identity and oppression also provided as views for making sense of the lessons that can be gleaned from their stories and applied to our current educational system.

I divide this chapter into four major sections: study overview, research methods, conclusion, and appendices. The first major category, study overview, contains the subheadings of the study’s problem, purpose, and research questions. The methods portion includes the study’s worldview, its design methodology, the participants and the setting, a description of the interview protocol, data-collection procedures, validity measures, the role of the researcher, data-analysis procedures, ethical considerations, and limitations to the research design. The third segment of the chapter, the conclusion, serves to sum up this chapter and provide future implications. Following this dissertation’s references, the final component, the appendices, will have two sections. Appendix A contains the interview protocol I used with the study's subjects, and Appendix B includes questions I posed to participants' former employees, students, and students’ parents for data triangulation.
Study Overview

In this section, I outline this study’s central problem and a brief overview of existing literature on the topic along with the methods associated with these works. The next subheading discusses the purpose of this study. And last, I reiterate the research questions to which I sought answers.

Problem

Within New York City, these two Catholic dioceses that also have elementary and secondary schools aligned to them are the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn. There are currently 10 religious sisters serving as principals within 165 Catholic elementary schools. Statistically, these women constitute a minimal percentage of a labor force that was once dominated by nuns. As of 2009, only 9% of religious sisters in the United States were under retirement age (Berrellezza, Gautier & Gray, 2014). Moreover, with the expansion of the missions of nuns beyond the scopes of teaching and nursing, this statistic is further reduced in terms of the number of available nun-educators. As this resource of educational professionals narrows almost to the point of closure, it will also put an end to a nearly 200-year legacy of pedagogical expertise. Thus, before this long-standing instructional resource completely vanishes, we need to capture their stories and skills for all those involved in the field of kindergarten through grade 12 education.

Commencing in 1849, the congregation of the Religious Sisters of Mercy played an integral role as teachers and administrators of both elementary and high schools of schools both in the Archdiocese of New York and the Diocese of Brooklyn. In August 2017, 162 years later, the last two sisters from this order to serve as administrators retired in one of these districts. These nuns served the elementary school of St. Martin of the Rose since the mid-1970’s as both
teachers and principals. During their tenure, they witnessed a multitude of transformations, ranging from the ethnic and socio-economic makeup of the area in which the school and convent are located to numerous educational initiatives, trends, and shifts. These religious sisters spent over 40 years serving a school, its community, and environs, and they represent the end of an extensive legacy.

**Existing Literature and Respective Research Designs**

Many authors have researched the integral role religious sisters played in the establishment of both the world’s and United States’ largest private school system, with quite a few even attributing the image of a nun in full habit as one of the most iconic images associated with Catholic education (Bryk, Lee & Holland, 1993; Caruso, 2012; McGuiness, 2014). Yet, there are very few that take a purely narrative approach, with the nuns as the protagonists, telling their own stories. Clandinin (2013) posited, “the institutional stories of school profoundly shape us all” (p. 22), and surely this statement applies to educators who have the added dimension of being religious sisters.

Currently, the majority of literature regarding religious sister educators is qualitative in nature, with one quite recent exception being Ghileb and Giuntella’s (2017) study on the “causal effects of Catholic school attendance on educational attainment” (p. 191), which found a positive and significant association between the greater number of nuns teaching in Catholic schools and the likelihood of parochial school attendance. Nonetheless, the more extensive qualitative works of Fialka (2003), McGuiness (2013), and Walch (2003) weaved the third-person stories of various orders and particular nuns through a qualitative and historical context. O’Donoghue and Harford’s (2013) qualitative research bears a direct relationship with this study’s theoretical concepts of oppression and identity by employing an oral history approach to examine the
contradictory ideas of the central role of obedience in religious sisters’ formation with the natural ability of assuming educational leadership roles in Ireland. In essence, these women were able to make a 360-degree shift to making decisions for themselves and others despite their training and vow to abide unquestioningly by what they were told. Caruso’s 2012 work on the transition of Catholic schools in the United States from completely religious order administration and faculty to almost entirely lay people also took on a qualitative and more retrospective approach for a little more than two-thirds of the book. Although these authors’ findings revealed thoughts, educational philosophies, sentiments, and tales from these women’s rich experiences as educators, the authors take a highly active role in creating meaning for the participants. As well, much of the research focuses primarily on religious sisters, specifically as clergy members and not the feminist aspect of these educators.

One way of considering narrative or narrative methods is the recounting of stories from the past, but Labov (2013) clarified that there are greater messages embedded within the delivery of personal accounts. There were two studies that I found related to religious sisters as leaders that utilized narrative methods from Eze, Lindegger, and Rakoczy (2015) and Johnson (2009). Although Eze et al.’s (2015) work dealt with identity construction and did have religious sister educators as part of its sample, the study took place in Nigeria, and not all participants were involved in education. Johnson's (2009) dissertation captured narratives of women who held leadership positions within the Roman Catholic Church, but with only about 30% of the subjects being nuns involved in education. Nevertheless, I have yet to come across the use of a purely narrative research design focused solely on religious sister educational leaders actively collaborating with the researcher to capture and create their stories directly in their own words.
Purpose

The purpose of this narrative study is not only to examine the stories of two religious sister educators that remained dedicated to the Catholic educational mission for over 40 years, even as student demographics, educational policy, and leadership shifted, but also to disseminate their stories of educational leadership and instructional philosophies for the benefit of all those involved in education—be it private or public.

Research Questions

Creswell and Creswell (2018) advised that questions should be aligned with the qualitative method of choice. Thus, as I used a qualitative, narrative approach, all three questions entail either the subjects relaying their experiences, ideas, and thoughts, or the researcher seeking their interpretations of such for the benefit of the field of education:

1. In what ways do the childhoods, religious order formation processes, educational backgrounds, and professional experiences of two religious sisters relate to the feminist concepts of identity and oppression?

2. How do religious sister educators make sense of their 40-year commitment to the Catholic educational mission, even as student demographics, educational policy, and leadership have shifted?

3. What lessons can we learn from these religious sisters’ stories that can be applied to our current system of education, be it private or public?

3a. How do they describe their philosophy of education and leadership style?

Research Methods

In this section, I discuss the worldview in which this study is framed and provide background regarding the selected design. As well, I describe the sampling process used and
provide greater detail regarding the participants and school setting. I also elaborate on data-collection procedures, including the interview process, my role as the researcher, data-analysis procedures, ethical considerations, and the study’s limitations.

**Worldview**

The worldview for this research design is social constructivist in which I will “rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 8). Ontologically, I held the view that reality is not a singular entity but exists manifold and has a variety of perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In the case of this study, the reality was that of two religious sister educational leaders, co-constructed with my positionality as a teacher who worked with them before they retired. Epistemologically, I constructed meaning through the participants’ experiences. Both Clandinin (2013) and Riessman (1993) acknowledged that from a philosophical worldview perspective, there is definite overlap between narrative studies and phenomenological ones in that they both involve lived experiences. However, in using narrative inquiry, I did not focus on one specific event or experience but an accumulation of both personal and professional experiences throughout the participants’ lifetime. Knowledge was co-constructed between me as the researcher and the religious sisters as subjects of the study.

**Design**

As mentioned in previous sections, I used narrative inquiry to conduct my research. Although this method was in existence before the last decade of the 20th century and utilized in other disciplines, Connelly and Clandinin’s 1990 article titled *Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry* is highly regarded as the catalyst for applying this type of approach to educational research. The authors’ rationale for utilizing narrative inquiry was rooted in the
Deweyan notion of experience as an integral component of education. Dewey (1938) underscored the significance of narratives, the relation of life events, and their strong ties with education when stating, “Education in order to accomplish its ends both for the individual learner and for society must be based upon experience—which is always the actual life-experience of some individual” (p. 89). These words are highly poignant as this study endeavored to capture and disseminate the participants’ stories and their significance to publicize their skills and expertise as successful educators of students considered at risk because of race and socio-economic circumstances.

The notion of narratives usually implies stories of some type. However, narrative inquiry extends way beyond the simplistic idea that it is merely story-telling (Clandinin, Pushor & Orr, 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Riessman (1993), narratives "are essential meaning-making structures" (p. 4). As this study will seek to make sense of the subjects’ experiences as educators and leaders, the re-telling of their own stories may serve as a valuable conduit for its extraction with the use of open-ended questions and allowing the subjects to take on active rather than passive roles (Elliot, 2005).

In terms of connection to this study’s theoretical framework of feminist theory borne out of the Second Women’s Movement of the 1960s, Davis (2002) pointed out the strong link between social movements and narratives. Fraser and MacDougall (2017) also supported the connection between feminism and narrative inquiry by illuminating the fact that as the feminist movement gained momentum 40 to 50 years ago, there was a marked increase in relaying the stories of the marginalized to highlight glaring differences and to reject the accepted norms of white, male-dominant tales during this era.
Finally, I would like to point out something noted during the investigation and preparation of this research design chapter. Connelly and Clandinin’s initial 1990 article on the connection between education and narrative inquiry began with a quote from Heilbrun’s 1988 book titled *Writing a Woman’s Life*, which is a feminist piece of literature.

What matters is that lives do not serve as models; only stories do that…We can only retell and live by the stories we have read or heard. We live our lives through texts. They may be read, or chanted, or experienced electronically, or come to us, like the murmurings of our mothers, telling us what conventions demand. Whatever their form or medium, these stories have formed us all; they are what we must use to make new fictions, new narratives.

Whether this was a conscious decision as Clandinin is a woman or a subconscious choice on the part of both authors, the selected quote reflects the synergistic ties between feminist theory and narrative methods.

**Sampling Process, Participants, and Setting**

Although the concept of samples and sampling is usually associated with quantitative methods, I worked with participants that could be construed as a convenience sample in that they are already known to the researcher. The decision to work with the subjects is not so much because of “convenience and availability” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 150), but rather purposeful because of my keen interest in understanding how the subjects made sense of their dual roles as spiritual and educational leaders.

The participants for this study are two retired Religious Sisters of Mercy who served the elementary school St. Martin of the Rose since the mid-1970s. Both Sister Angela and Sister Rose, pseudonyms, were born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, and came from lower-middle-
class homes, where limited finances were always a concern. While each of the two became nuns in relatively a short time after high school, Sister Angela began religious life in 1966, with Sister Rose entering a year later. The sisters briefly functioned as teachers, but the greater duration of their tenure, commencing in 1980, was spent as principals in the same Catholic elementary school.

The participants’ religious order played an integral role as educators and administrators of both elementary and high schools of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn and Queens, but as of August 2017, 162 years later, their retirement marked the departure of the last two sisters from this congregation to lead a school within the district. During the subjects’ time as educational leaders at St. Martin of the Rose, they witnessed a multitude of transformations ranging from the ethnic and socio-economic makeup of the area in which the school and convent are located to numerous shifts in educational initiatives.

According to the United States Census Bureau, the most current statistics regarding the urban community where the participants have served and resided for the bulk of their professional and spiritual careers has a population that is over 90% Black or African-American, with almost 20% of the residents below the poverty level (2016). In comparing this data with that of the year 2000 census information, both racial and financial figures have remained relatively consistent, with perhaps a 1% or 2% increase in these areas within recent years. This information is in direct contrast with the ethnic, financial, and faith-based demographics the religious sisters encountered when initially working at the school as teachers.

Within the participants’ four decades at the school, neighborhood demographics altered abruptly between 1978 and 1982, with white families leaving the neighborhood, school, and parish at an accelerated pace. Children of two-parent homes of European backgrounds were
replaced by those with Afro-Caribbean roots and single mothers as heads of household. Additionally, the new population was far less economically prosperous and led to the school’s Title I category. As recently as this year, the neighborhood continues to be troubled with an extremely high murder rate, gang-related incidences, and drug-associated violence (Groves, 2018). Religiously, an all-Catholic pupil population was replaced with Christians, but not necessarily those of the Catholic faith.

Last, religious sister teachers and administrators were aging and retiring, and with very few joining the order of the Sisters of Mercy to replace them, the faculty became almost entirely lay members. From a pedagogical perspective, the subjects also experienced educational preoccupations, trends, and initiatives at the national and state levels ranging from A Nation at Risk to the Phonics vs. Whole Language debate to the implementation of state standards, and the age of accountability with No Child Left Behind, and finally, the Common Core Learning Standards.

**Data Collection Procedures**

**Interview Process.** While there is no prescribed instrument for using narrative methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018), I used semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions. These interviews were followed by inquiries tailored to participants’ responses to elicit greater detail of their stories of experience. Chase (2005) depicted a meaningful interview as one in which life stories from participants were full of definitive stories and details. However, the interview process of narrative inquiry reaches far beyond mere question and answer periods in which the subjects relay stories and the researcher captures such tales. As explained by Connelly and Clandinin (1990) and Clandinin et al. (2007), there are multiple layers and complexities within these stories that compel the researcher to make decisions regarding deeper probing to
elicit greater detail. A final factor to consider concerning the interview process of narrative inquiry is the relevance of life experiences, considered as a whole being an integral part of the participants’ stories. Since I examined the subjects’ stories through a feminist lens of identity and oppression, I utilized a biographical type of narrative in which queries will explore experiences over a lifetime.

I met with the subjects six times for approximately two-hour face-to-face sessions, and the interview sessions themselves were divided into three phases. All interviews took place at the convent where the subjects live and which is also very close to the school they served. The research site is an essential component to narrative inquiry as all events are associated with a location (Clandinin et al., 2007).

During the first phase, I inquired about their childhoods, families, schooling, and any other relevant information regarding their experiences as children and teenagers that might have influenced their choice of profession and their leadership style. In the next set of interview questions, I focused on the subjects’ choice to become religious sisters, influencing factors, family reactions, and religious formation experiences to elicit how these factors may have shaped them as female educational leaders. The final phase of interviews examined the nuns’ experiences as educators and educational leaders, their time as teachers, and to a much more considerable extent, the wide range of happenings during the timeframe as school administrators. I asked them to discuss their undertakings with educational shifts that have occurred regarding standards, testing, accountability, changes in parental attitudes, and demands from the central district administration. I also probed their possible feminist identities and experiences of oppression as females and as religious nuns and educational leaders in a secular world.
In addition to dialogues with the subjects, I interviewed four former students, three parents of former students, and five former employees. These sessions were conducted in two parts. The first portion was the initial conference in which I posed the questions as outlined in Appendix 2. During these sessions, I probed about their dealings with and memories of the participants and inquired about instances that relate back to the theoretical feminist themes of oppression and identity. The second round of meetings involved transcript analysis and follow-up questions for clarity. These exchanges took place concurrently with those of the subjects.

All interviews took place between April 2019 and July 2019. The sessions with the participants lasted approximately 120 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. The interviews with former students, parents, and employees lasted approximately 30-60 minutes. The first two interview phases involved an initial interview with each participant alone and a joint follow-up interview approximately one week later to discuss further questions and clarifications. The third interview phase entailed a joint interview and joint follow-up session. Participants also reviewed transcripts and assisted the researcher in interpreting what was relayed and told to ensure a collaborative effort in creating meaning out of the subjects' stories.

Validity. To validate interview data, as stated above, I used member checking as well as data triangulation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I triangulated the interview data with my field notes of the interview sessions and interviews with five of the subjects’ former employees as well as four alumni and three parents from their tenure as principals. In addition to these interviews, I also examined the plethora of personal photos shared with me as “photos can offer setting information...as well as factual information that can be used in conjunction with other sources” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p.
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Last, I used demographic data available from the United States Census Bureau to broaden and further develop understanding.

Table 1
Demographics of Participants of Triangulation Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Former Faculty</th>
<th>Time Working with the Subjects</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. S</td>
<td>33 years</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. G</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. V</td>
<td>21 years</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. C</td>
<td>19 years</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Afro-Caribbean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. T</td>
<td>19 years</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former Students</td>
<td>Graduation Year</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. J</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Afro-Caribbean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. B</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. L.F.</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Afro-Caribbean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. M</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black-Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former Parents</td>
<td>Number of Years Acquainted with the Subjects</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. T</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. F.</td>
<td>25 years</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Afro-Caribbean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. N.</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black-Hispanic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table Note: Race/ethnicity in this table reflects how these participants identify themselves.

Role of the researcher. Before I examine my role as the researcher, I reflected on my own insider/outside positionality. The Catholic education system has been a part of my life since September 1974, the year I entered kindergarten. Perhaps, it was even earlier than this. As the youngest of five children, I constantly accompanied a parent or grandparent to pick up an older sibling from school, and all levels of schools, be it elementary, middle school, high school and college were Catholic institutions. Not truly cognizant of the motives for this, but compliant, through my upbringing, I always displayed respect and reverence for all members of the clergy. In addition to these facts, the house in which I grew up was diagonal to our church and directly next door to the convent that housed the nuns who serviced my elementary and middle school.
Moreover, because my family was active in the church and the aligned school, I was acquainted with most of the religious sisters and priests in my neighborhood.

High school took me out of the local microcosm of the neighborhood in which I grew up and transplanted me into a different borough, but the institution was Catholic as well. Those four years provided me with even greater contact with religious sisters, as most of my teachers and administrators were nuns. In looking back at my formative years, I can safely say that they were spent in close contact with members of the Catholic Church, and principally religious sisters. Therefore, it is no surprise to me that I was a Catholic school teacher for 13 years. Catholic schools have almost always served as my educational reality.

My initial reaction to meeting my former school administrators for the first time was absolute shock—gone were the habits and usual religious accoutrements to which I had grown accustomed as a child and adolescent. Yet, I attribute this lack of literal physical impediments as the conduit for forming a strong professional and emotional bond with these women that has existed almost since the very day I began working with them well over a decade ago. Some may contend that my personal relationship as a former employee of the participants might cloud my judgment; nonetheless, the purpose of this study was not to examine participants’ character but to understand how the subjects make sense of the driving forces behind their commitment as educators and to religious life in this overtly secular world.

I am in no way in tune with grasping what it means to take religious vows that include obedience, poverty, and chastity. I acknowledge the fact that there is great mutual fondness and respect between the subjects and myself. However, it is with this admiration that I intended to comprehend how they make sense of their roles as educators who are religious sisters when most women have rejected this as a viable path. I listened to and recounted their stories to comprehend
what compelled these sisters to remain true to their religious and educational vows for over 50 years. During their tenure as school administrators, they held the reputation as the best in the diocese. To create their stories, I collaborated with the participants to build meaning behind what practices assisted them in gaining the title of best of the best for the benefit of education as a whole.

Although Creswell and Creswell (2018) stated that the final result of the narrative method is a combination of the participants’ stories along with that of the researcher’s, McAlpine (2016) pointed out that narrative methods allow for a collaborative relationship between the subjects and the researcher, in that the researcher assists the participants in the construction of meaning. Likewise, I aimed to recount the participants’ stories as close to the protagonists’ interpretations as possible and not create my version of them.

**Data-Analysis**

There are several data-analysis procedures linked with narrative inquiry, including those based on themes, structure, dialogue, or the visual; however, “the ‘text’ of the story forms the data set for what is analyzed in this type of research” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 34). In addition to the subjects’ words, I transcribed all utterances, circumlocutions, omissions, and as many other linguistic moves noticed. I considered that what was said could have been of equal importance with how it was said (Chafe, 1985; Mulrooney, 2009). Mulrooney (2009) maintained that if disfluencies are left out, this somehow can affect transcript analysis. I then shared transcripts with participants for accuracy and validity. Reissman (1993) depicted the role of the researcher to analyze these transcripts from various angles and assemble some type of story. However, to "protect the context of the narrative" (Labov & Waletsky, 1967, p. 32)
and maintain the integrity of the participants’ stories, I asked the subjects to review all transcripts for feedback.

There is no one specific and prescribed data analysis technique for narrative inquiry, so I used thematic analysis. The emphasis for this type of investigation is based on the content of what is said rather than the sociolinguistic of how it is delivered (Riessman, 2008). Nonetheless, as is mentioned in the previous paragraph, I keenly attempted to preserve the narrative to its fullest extent, with language serving as “a resource rather than an inquiry” (Riessman, 2008, p. 59). As well, I assessed the stories for cross-cutting themes that corresponded to the research questions for this study.

Perhaps one of the more significant challenges of using narrative research was the interpretation of meanings and themes as closely as possible as to how they were understood by the narrators. I took several steps to achieve meaning construction aligned with that of the storytellers. First of all, as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018), I provided the participants with their narratives in written form as close to the original as relayed to me during our interviews. This technique, among others, is advised as a general reporting guideline for readers unfamiliar with the participants’ story (Creswell & Poth, 2018); however, I felt it also served to assist myself and the subjects with greater clarity in examining recurrent themes in their lives. Secondly, I reviewed recordings and transcriptions multiple times and over several months to gain greater and broader perspective (Clandinin et al., 2007; Josselson & Lieblich, 2003).

One final point I considered in the data-analysis portion of this study was Riessman’s (2008) admonition against “corroboration from participants” (p. 197) when discussing transcripts and assessing for meaning. As is stated in the worldview section of this chapter, I held the view that reality is not a singular entity but exists manifold and has a variety of perspectives (Merriam
& Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, if participants’ views and interpretations were not consistent with mine, as is suggested by Riessman (2008), I regarded them as part of the many truths that exist.

To manage and organize all the data I wished to capture and assess, I relied on technology. Numerous authors have commented on the usefulness of computers and data analysis software in the qualitative data-analysis process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Various programs can warehouse data and interview transcripts, field notes, and provide coding assistance. Likewise, these same authors that advocated for the use of software programs commented on the limitations of their utility in that coding and interpretation of data for thematic elements remain at the discretion of the researcher(s). Notwithstanding these restrictions, I used the data analysis software Dedoose as it not only had text capability but also features to assist with audio and photograph storage and coding. I leveraged this software as a central data repository for the development of recurring themes and patterns, using the critical lens of feminist theory to extract such findings. Once I ruminated on and determined viable themes, I had an additional face-to-face meeting with participants to discuss noticed patterns and trends for further evaluation, input, and insight. I also compared these themes with the data generated from interviews with past faculty members, students, and parents, as well as notations on photographs relevant to the study.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations play a vital role when conducting any research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Roberts, 2010). Furthermore, Clandinin (2013) posited that since another’s story is usually related to narrative design, ethics must permeate throughout the entire study—from idea inception to publication. Bearing Clandinin’s thoughts in mind, I employed quite a few measures to ensure the ethical integrity of this study. Both
Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Roberts (2010) provided an extensive list of possible issues to anticipate, and I used these authors’ suggestions along with the standards and codes established by Molloy College’s Institutional Review Board before, during, and after the research process.

I provided both participants with informed consent explaining any possible risks, an outline of the interview process, and procedures, including the number of meeting times along with a general idea of the topics covered during each session. As well, this document also ensured that the subjects understood that participation is of their own volition and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason (Roberts, 2010). Beyond the informed consent, I added an extra measure of confidentiality in which the subjects and their institution had pseudonyms to protect identity. They also had the right to disallow any revealed information as part of the study. I also asked for permission to use photographs and personal documents relevant to the study. Creswell and Creswell (2018) explicitly stated, “respect the research site and disrupt as little as possible” (p. 93); therefore, I conducted interviews in a private room at the participants’ home at their convenience. As stated previously, I knew the subjects personally but made every attempt to remain as unbiased as possible by keeping a reflexivity journal (Riessman, 2018) and refrained from making leading comments during the data-collection process while the participants relayed their stories.

Additionally, during the interviews, I asked very open-ended questions for the participants to use their own words and phrases and not lead them to a certain answer. Probes and follow-up questions were used mostly for clarification purposes and to probe about identity and oppression. During the data analysis/thematic analysis process, I gained input from the participants to relay their stories as carefully and as accurately as they conveyed them. Thus, if
they disagreed with conclusions drawn or if follow-up interviews contradicted inferences made or stories told, I reported these factors as well.

All data has been kept under lock and key at the researcher’s residence. All electronic documents, including transcriptions and Dedoose thematic coding, was password protected on the researcher’s personal computer. The personal computer is double password-protected and was not used in public places outside of the research setting. All data has been saved on a password protected cloud service with two-step authentication. All hard files will be shredded after three years.

**Limitations**

As with any study, there were several limitations to this dissertation that I would like to acknowledge. I also offer explanations as to how I, as the researcher, sought to mitigate these possible shortcomings.

One limitation to this study was the educational context in which the participants found themselves—an urban school setting as opposed to a suburban one. Nonetheless, the culture of care and leadership practices that I explore know no boundaries between city and country. Additionally, some maintain that the data in narrative research, literally the stories told, are somewhat jaded in that participants relay stories possibly not as they were but how the narrator perceives them (Mitchell & Egudo, 2003). I will counter this notion from the ontological perspective that reality is not a singular entity but exists manifold and has a variety of perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Another factor I considered was that narrative inquiry involves a smaller scope of subjects (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). However, I considered the richness of the participant’s stories of much greater value than the actual number of persons
telling stories. Lastly, regarding the religious aspect of this study, there were two specific points I took under consideration: religious affiliation and gender. Both subjects were from the same religious order, the Religious Sisters of Mercy, and there are numerous congregations that had or still have teaching sisters within their communities. In terms of gender, this study focused solely on women religious and did not investigate in any way the male perspective of teaching priests or brothers. Nonetheless, I address this last constraint within the Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research section of chapter five of this dissertation.

Conclusion

Through the use of qualitative methods, and narrative inquiry design, I drew upon the concepts of identity and oppression derived from feminist theory and directly based on Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* and hooks’ *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* to frame my study and situate the findings. Moreover, these feminist constructs served as a lens through which I sought to understand how two religious sisters made sense of their former educational leadership roles in a highly secular world, particularly within an ever-evolving educational context of standards, accountability, and choice.

As stated in the existing literature section of this chapter, there was an abundance of qualitative studies dealing with religious sisters in the field of education, yet there was not one that uses narrative inquiry to investigate the experiences of nun educators. Over the course of six two-hour, open-ended, face-to-face interviews (three interviews per sister), I attempted to portray the life experiences of two religious sisters in educational leadership roles in the following ways: (a) paying close attention to how their stories related to the theoretical framework of identity and oppression; (b) exploring how the sisters make sense of their commitment to the Catholic mission of their school in light of shifts in educational policy, neighborhood, student, and faculty
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demographics; and (c) seeing how the lessons from these sisters’ stories can be applied to our current system of education, be it public or private. I reviewed transcripts and field notes with the participants to explore further questions as well as for clarifications. I also triangulated my data in three ways. First, I examined photos from the subjects’ private collections for greater meaning and further discussion. Second, I conducted interviews with five of the sisters’ former employees, four former students, and three parents of students who attended the school they served for over four decades. Finally, I used documents from the subjects’ private archives to triangulate their narratives.

In tandem with the ethical considerations outlined and intended to permeate all phases of this study, I used thematic analysis to recount and extrapolate how the sisters make sense of their experiences and create meaning from their lives' encounters. In addition to my personal computer, Dedoose software served as a central repository for transcript upload, coding, and for storing audio-recordings and photos. I also solicited active engagement of the participants in the creation and determination of themes and patterns as these stories were theirs, not mine. Last, I attempted to include opposing viewpoints and ideas that might be contrary to my own to reflect both the stated ontological and epistemological perspectives.

Both dioceses that encompass the schools within New York City have had the educational support of the Mercy Sisters since the mid-1800s. There were and are other religious orders of nuns who have also played central roles equal to that of the Religious Sisters of Mercy; however, the majority of these women are no longer living to tell their stories. The participants of this study, along with countless others, are part of the proverbial bricks and mortar that created the United States’ largest private school system.
These nuns and the subjects of this study represent the end of an era, but their accomplishments speak for themselves. Just to name a few of the achievements, five out of nine supreme court justices attended Catholic school. Also, the more marginalized a child is, the greater the “relative achievement gains” with Catholic school attendance. On a related note, minority students are more than twice as likely to graduate college if they attended Catholic school (United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, 2016, p. 3).

Before this long-standing instructional resource vanishes altogether, we need to capture their stories and skills for the benefit of education as a whole. Moreover, within the next chapter of this dissertation, I will discuss the findings of this study that serve as answers not only to the research questions posed in this dissertation study but also provide possible insight into how Catholic schools were able to achieve accomplishments such as those mentioned in the previous paragraph.
Chapter Four: Overview of Findings

In this chapter, I sought to answer research questions that explore the issue of an exceedingly diminished Catholic school resource: religious sister educators. Once an integral and almost inseparable staple of this educational system, to date, nuns represent a little less than 2% of the entire labor force of Catholic schools in the United States (McDonald & Schultz, 2019). With the scant number of nuns involved in Catholic education currently in this country, through narrative methods, I aimed to give voice to two veterans of an increasingly narrowing resource to preserve historical significance and, more importantly, to disseminate educational leadership insights from a representational segment of a population that successfully built this nation’s largest private school system.

I examined the narratives of two former religious sister educators to understand how both their personal and professional experiences related to the feminist concepts of identity and oppression. I also wanted to comprehend how these women made sense of their four-decade commitment to Catholic education in an ever-changing educational context. Additionally, through the subjects’ educational philosophies, I strove to extrapolate the lessons that can be derived from their experiences and be put to use for the benefit of both public and private schools. In analyzing the narrative data for this study, I utilized the overarching feminist concepts of oppression and identity as guiding lenses. And through these oculars, I found answers regarding a unique style of leadership and brand of educational culture, distinctive to Catholic schools with religious sisters as administrators.

Inasmuch as the subjects served the same school and community and collaborated for more than 40 years, they are usually referred to and many times thought of as a singular entity known as Rose and Angela, Angela and Rose, or one of those variations with their religious
prefixes attached. However, they have very distinct characters, with differing experiences, outlooks, and perspectives; so, I put forth both subjects’ stories individually to ensure that I remained true to each of their life encounters.

Although I presented the sisters’ respective stories separately, during the thematic analysis process of the data, I discovered that despite their differences in personality, attitudes, and perspectives, the paths of their journeys as religious sister educators intersected thematically in three major ways. The themes common to both nuns’ accounts are: (a) born and formed social justice leadership, (b) social-emotional learning, and (c) the influence of other religious sisters and clergy oppression. The narratives of both nuns interviewed in this study serve as the bedrock upon which I based the responses to the research questions; however, the themes derived from these stories provided for clearer and more tangible answers.

Chapter Overview

This chapter is divided into four major sections. Part One provides a graphic and brief explanation of how I determined my data codes into themes. It also explains how I defined and interpreted these major themes found in the subjects’ narratives. Lastly, it includes a summary of the research questions posed in this dissertation, along with each question’s respective findings. Part Two of this chapter discusses Sister Rose and Sister Angela’s childhood and teen years and how the themes derived from this part of their lives answer the research questions. Part Three examines the religious formation experiences of the nuns of this study, the corresponding research questions, and the themes determined from this facet of their lives. To conclude, Part Four provides the sisters’ professional experiences, the research questions answered, and the themes that explain these queries.
Part One

In this section, I provide a graphic and explanation clarifying how I developed the overarching themes derived from the data. I also offer detailed explanations of my interpretations of the pre-eminent themes of this study utilized to present answers to the research questions. Additionally, I include a reiteration of the three research questions investigated and a summary of each question’s findings.

**Codes into Themes**

**Leadership (Parent Code):**
community, courage, cultural mediation, decision making, family, defense of constituents, innovation, problem solving, strength, vulnerability, compassion

**Motivation (Parent Code):**
Collective efficacy, feminist ethic of care, job satisfaction, belief in Mercy charisms

**Identity (Parent Code):**
Childhood/teen years, Catholic/Religious Sisters of Mercy identity, self-identity, self-awareness

**Catholic Church Influence (Parent Code):**
Other Religious Sisters: Mercy sisters and other orders
Clergy Involvement: Oppression

**Social Justice Leadership**

**Social-Emotional Learning**

**Influence of Other Religious Sisters and Clergy Oppression**

*Figure 1. Visual representation of data codes and themes borne out of these codes.*
During the data coding process, I utilized the lens of the feminist concepts of oppression and identity. As well, as I coded the subjects’ interviews, I found parallels between the codes that appeared and the topics and subtopics of my theoretical framework, with leadership, motivation, identity, and Catholic church influence being the four key parent codes.

The overarching code of leadership encompassed a variety of associated skills, with communication, cultural mediation, family, decision making, and defense of constituents being the most frequently coded. Under the parent code of motivation, the feminist ethic of care was identified to a greater extent than collective efficacy and job satisfaction. The topic of identity seems rather broad; nonetheless, I broke it down into codes that reflected phases within the subjects’ lives as well as their identities as women religious in all its facets. Lastly, the major code of Catholic Church influence reflected not only the participants’ experiences with other religious sisters, both those from their own religious order and those from others as well; it also represented their encounters with members of the clergy and the Catholic Church as an institution.

**Emergent Themes**

In this part of the chapter, I provide explanations of each of the three themes and two corresponding sub-themes that emerged from Sister Rose and Sister Angela’s stories. These clarifications provide insight as to how I interpreted the stories. They also reveal how I applied them to their accounts.

**Born and formed social justice leadership.** The term social justice leader may conjure up a myriad of meanings, connotations, and mental pictures; however, in this study, I was focused on the educational dimensions of this form of leadership. McCray and Beachum (2014) posited that a 21st-century principal is no longer a school manager, concerned only with daily
operations but accountable to support every individual child within the school walls. Moreover, in this study, I view social justice in the same vein as Marshall and Oliva (2010) who depicted the concept as purposeful and meaningful actions on the part of the leaders as opposed to well-meaning but empty rhetoric.

To narrow the concept of what a born and formed social justice leader is, I employed the research of several different authors. While the work of two of the researchers is devoted to leadership studies in general, the third study was specific to the social justice branch. In their 2017 investigation of whether leaders are born or made, Boerma et al. stated, “historical examples exist to support both a genetic and environmental component to leadership” (p. 5). Linsky (2007) of Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government maintained the belief that leadership ability is inherently restrictive in that it “leaves little room for self-doubt or self-reflection” (p. 3), thus thwarting the growth and development process as leaders.

While Linsky (2007) did not directly state that there was any genetic component to leadership, Boerma et al.’s (2017) research laid direct claim to the interpretation of leadership as a combination of nature and nurture. Last, I utilized Merchant and Shoho’s (2010) study of characteristics common to what they termed bridge people, who are individuals “committed to creating a bridge between themselves and others for the purposes of improving the lives of all those with whom they worked” (p. 121). The researchers found that there were attributes and personal experiences common to the social justice leader participants in their study; these qualities were relevant to the subjects of this dissertation. Within Sister Rose and Sister Angela’s stories, social justice leadership was a key theme in answering all three research questions. Furthermore, the theme of social justice leadership and the principles espoused from this concept are also highly interconnected with the order to which both subjects belong.
Sisters of Mercy charisms. Closely related to this theme of social justice leadership are the Religious Sisters of Mercy’s charisms. The word *charism* in and of itself has a multitude of implications, both positive and negative. Nonetheless, to define this term for the thematic findings of this dissertation I utilized Roccasalvo’s (2015) definition in the context of religious orders in which she described the term as “essentially rooted in the founder’s spirit and special purpose” (para. 3). As I have denoted in previous chapters, the order to which the subjects belong, the Religious Sisters of Mercy, are unique in two particular ways.

Before becoming a formal religious order, in 1827, the foundress of the Mercy Sisters, Catherine McAuley, had the intention of establishing safe-houses for Irish society’s most marginalized, with an emphasis on assisting and educating women and girls (Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, 2017). Although the notion of a feminist ethic of care was nowhere near its discovery, Catherine McAuley’s “ethic of resistance to the injustices inherent in patriarchy” (Gilligan, 2011, para. 11) was quite evident in her aim to provide comfort to and development of less-fortunate females.

It was not Mother McAuley’s objective to establish a religious order; rather, she aimed to alleviate the burdens of the downtrodden. Her initial goals may have been with women in mind; however, her ministry and that of her followers were not restricted to one gender. Thus, what also renders the charisms of the Religious Sisters of Mercy unique is their fourth religious vow dedicated to service of the sick, the poor, and the uneducated. In describing the term *ethic of care* without the feminist component, Gilligan (2011) interpreted this concept as “grounded in voice and relationships, everyone having a voice...being listened to carefully...and heard with respect” (para. 4). This fourth vow of the Mercy Sisters provides care, kindness, and dignity to those who might otherwise be overlooked. The subjects of this dissertation make direct reference to their
attraction to the charisms of the Sisters of Mercy; as well, they are embedded in their stories and the stories of others.

**Influence of other religious sisters and clergy oppression.** The theme of the influence of other religious sisters and oppression from members of the clergy is somewhat dual-edged. It is not as prevalent as the others highlighted; however, it is important to include it for several reasons. In the subjects’ stories, they mention the influence of religious sisters in their own order. They also refer to other orders. And it is this influence, both in personal encounters and observations, that distinguishes both Sister Rose and Sister Angela’s identities as nuns. In utilizing the lens of oppression, interactions with clergy took precedence above all others. This fact is not to say that the subjects dwelled upon this topic for extended periods, nor did they permit these less pleasant instances to taint their overall experiences as religious sister educators. However, it gained importance not only by the nuns pointing out particular incidents but also with this aspect of clerical oppression mentioned in 6 of the 12 triangulation interviews. Interactions with others in dedicated service of the Catholic Church served to influence the sisters’ identities and assisted in gaining better insight into other people’s characters.

**Social-emotional learning.** As the subjects discussed both their personal and professional experiences, there was a substantial emphasis on educating the whole child. Sister Rose referred to this concept from the beginning of her first interview, and Sister Angela followed suit. Moreover, through my interviews and discussions with the subjects, there was repeated importance of advocacy of the child in all senses, extending way beyond the academic.

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, CASEL, (2019), social-emotional learning is a “process for both children and adults to understand and manage emotions…feel and show empathy for others…create and maintain positive
relationships, and make responsible decisions” (What is SEL? section, para. 1). Through a proposed framework, CASEL maintained that social-emotional learning is not a one-time classroom offshoot; rather, it is fostered through the contexts of family and the greater community and is reflected in the climate of a school as revealed through its administrative and instructional practices (2017). What is more, the framework involves self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. While CASEL’s framework represented underlying competencies and not necessarily a hierarchical relationship, Goleman (2005) argued that “self-awareness is the keystone of emotional intelligence” (p. 43). Throughout the sisters’ lives, self-awareness or a struggle with this concept played a crucial role.

**Knowing thyself to know others.** The stories of both sisters involved a great amount of self-awareness and introspection, and they employed the word *stories* quite often when referring to their former students, these students’ families, and their faculty members. It was this repetition throughout the sisters’ interviews of the stories within stories that brought about this theme. I chose the Greek aphorism of “know thyself” as “it is impossible to understand everything about all other cultures; you need to learn what you can about your own group and use it as a basis of understanding others” (Murphy-Shigematsu, 2010, p. 340).

Mayer (2014) added to this concept by positing that those who possessed *personal intelligence*, a true understanding of oneself, were much more equipped to understand others. Although one of the sisters had a greater sense of self since her childhood, the other seemed to experience a greater evolution process in negotiating her identity. Nonetheless, both seemed to have had a strong sense of self throughout much of their careers. This acute awareness of their own identities served as a major conduit for their ability to understand the educational
community they served. The subjects of this dissertation study did not use the term social emotional learning directly; rather, their narratives and actions within their narratives reflected CASEL’s social-emotional learning competencies included in the framework.

**Role of the Researcher**

As pointed out in chapter three, I have known the subjects of this study for more than a decade both on a professional level, as one of their former faculty members, and on a personal level, as one of their many children. Moreover, the importance of this deeper connection cannot be underscored concerning the narrative inquiry research design I utilized.

Clandinin (2013) suggested that there is almost a natural expectation on the part of researchers employing a narrative design that all people are willing to share their experiences and readily relay their stories. Nonetheless, this is not necessarily the case. In their discussion of the role of the researcher in narrative inquiry, Marshall and Rossman (2016) indicated that this type of research design required “a great deal of openness and trust between the participant and the researcher” (p. 157); as well, the authors asserted that there needed to be “sincere collaboration” and a “caring relationship akin to friendship” (p. 157) to gain full access and insight into a participant’s life.

Through my pre-existing relationship with the participants, I had already established this type of rapport. I was able to gain access to their stories through traditional oral methods, and I was also privy to enter the place they have called home for most of their professional careers. The subjects further entrusted me with their personal photo albums as well as documents from their years in religious formation; additionally, the sisters gave me no time constraints to review these supplemental items. Last, Marshall and Rossman (2016) found that narrative inquiry required “intense and active listening and giving the narrator full voice” (p. 157). Having worked
with and known the subjects for so many years, I had a ready-made collaborative and trusting relationship, which allowed for honest and frank interviews and exchanges during the data-collection phase. There was also an implicit confidence on the part of the participants in how I would convey their life accounts.

**Research Questions and Summary of Findings**

With regard to the first research question, the ways the childhoods, school experiences, religious order formation processes, educational backgrounds, and professional experiences of two religious sisters relate to the feminist concepts of identity and oppression, the themes of born and formed social justice leadership, social-emotional learning, and the influence of other religious sisters and clergy oppression played crucial roles.

In terms of the second research question and how the religious sister educators make sense of their 40-year commitment to the Catholic religion’s educational mission despite the numerous changes that took place, the subjects’ stories revealed a commitment to social justice leadership in upholding and maintaining a student-centered approach and extending a high degree of respect and care for their faculty and staff members. As well, there was a continual adherence to the charisms of the Religious Sisters of Mercy despite external shifts, attitudes, and beliefs. The data also uncovered the utilization of social-emotional learning practices by taking a student-centric approach, and by considering the academic, social, emotional, and physical well-being of students, their families, and their community.

Finally, the lessons we can learn from these religious sisters’ stories that can be applied to our current system of education today—be it private or public—and how they describe their philosophy of education and leadership style is the combination of the use of social justice
leadership practices coupled with those of social-emotional learning. In short, I have termed this conflating leadership style *social-emotional justice leadership*.

**The Tales of Two Religious Sisters: Part Two**

In this section, I recount both sisters’ formative years as children and teenagers. The first part is dedicated to Sister Rose’s story, while the second portion recounts Sister Angela’s narrative. After each sister’s story, I highlight the research questions addressed as well as how the nuns’ stories reflect all emergent themes.

**Sister Rose’s Story- Childhood and Teen Years**

A Religious Sister of Mercy for 51 years and a product of Catholic elementary, middle, high school, and colleges, Sister Rose described her childhood in very succinct terms. “I grew up in Brooklyn, New York. I don’t have any strong memories that stand out. I can give you a general overall sense. I was happy. My family was very loving. I came with myself and three siblings: a sister and two brothers.” Despite her proclaimed lapse in memory, she went on to explain some very important details about her experiences and the crucial role that religion and the Religious Sisters of Mercy played.

Beyond bearing witness to a working mother at a time when it was not very common for women to be employed and helping her mother launder the Mercy Sisters’ habits, Sr. Rose stated that religion played an integral role in her home growing up. “It was very strong. Both my parents were involved in church activities...So, I would say we were extremely active. The other thing that probably contributed to that was that we only lived a block from the school and church.”

While most of what she relayed about her childhood parallels many Catholic children growing up in urban areas in the two decades following World War II, there is one striking
difference; from the tender age of five or six, Rose knew she wanted to be a religious sister. “I can remember being a little child, and you know when the famous question, ‘What do you want to do when you grow up?’ It was always, ‘I'm going to be a Sister.’ She further added that this conviction of identity and professional life never wavered at any time during her childhood or teenage years. When asked whether she would have attended college had she not become a nun, she stated that “there was no question that I wasn't gonna go into the Sisters of Mercy. I was that sure. There was no alternative plan.”

Sister Rose depicted her teenage years as fairly quiet and described her high school years as challenging, particularly as it pertained to the new religious order of nuns that she experienced during those years.

The Sisters of Mercy had impressed me for those eight years [of elementary school], and when I got to St. Joseph's, it was almost like a shock because there was just a whole different atmosphere. They were very professional. Excellent educators. But they were not warm and fuzzy like the Sisters of Mercy were.

Upon hearing what strong educators her high school teaching sisters were, I asked her about the possible influence they may have had on her teaching style and educational philosophies, to which she replied emphatically “Absolutely! I got a marvelous education at St. Joe's.” Nevertheless, she was quick to qualify this statement.

I believed in the standards that they put forth, but I didn't believe in their philosophy of putting forth those standards. I think the philosophy and my philosophy of education came from the Sisters of Mercy. It's a much gentler approach to educating a child, and I think I consider it educating—before it became popular, the buzz-word of educating—the whole child.
With very minimal prompting on the part of the researcher, Sister Rose further elaborated on her pedagogical approach to teaching and learning. “...That was something instilled in me by the Sisters of Mercy because it was more than just school...It was family. They were chatty, friendly, warm. Asked you about things other than school. The others, not so much.” This sense of warmth and family is something she would implement in her educational practices.

Regarding her plans after high school graduation, Rose repeated her childhood mission by conveying that it was her firm intention to become a Religious Sister of Mercy.

It had always been in my head, and all my friends knew that. So, it wasn't a surprise when we came to that point. My parents did ask a couple of months before graduation to consider working for a year before making a final decision, and I wasn’t opposed to it.

And I said, ‘Sure, that's fine’ because I knew it wasn't going to change my mind.

When questioned several times about her belief in her vocation since she was a little girl and whether or not she was that sure, Sister Rose countered with the same response “I was that sure.” She emphasized her conviction in her vocation in her choice of words and in her tone of voice.

Rose did not go to great lengths discussing the year she spent in the business world before entering the order of the Religious Sisters of Mercy. Nonetheless, before she recounted her formation experiences, she relayed a very interesting realization she experienced while still a teenager: her family’s monetary struggle. Although she described her family as “lower-middle-class,” she distinctly recalled:

I remember when traveling to high school because I had to take the train to high school. There were a couple of days before payday when we would be out collecting soda bottles to try to get money to get to school because I needed 15 cents to take the train to school.
As an educator, Sister Rose attributed this experience and the understanding of her family’s limited financial resources to help her be more understanding of the community that she served, particularly as an administrator and in charge of the financial aspect of running the school.

From this experience during her formative years and having this awareness occur when she was old enough to understand what it meant, she noted that

Socioeconomic struggles are very real, and they impact so many, so many things. So, if people came with a story, I think I was more likely to believe it than not believe it.

I would always err on the side of believing them. I think that gave me a sympathetic ear, and I think folks sensed that when they talked with me. I wasn't pooh-poohing their story. I wasn’t saying 'that's too bad, but let's get back to the fact that you owe [money].'

This use of the term *story* is the first time of many that Sister Rose will employ this word about the people she ministered to while relaying her narrative, and the expression had greater bearing as she continued her tale.

**Sister Angela’s Story: Childhood and Teen Years**

A Religious Sister of Mercy for 52 years, and like her long-time colleague, Sister Rose, Angela was also a product of the Catholic school system for her entire education. She bore a huge smile on her face when describing her childhood.

I think I would change not a second of how I grew up. As an Italian, the extended family was always present. From my first birthday on, I was Miss Queen of Linden Street. Every Friday night, we had supper at my mother's—everyone [in the family] came...That extended family gave such a...a different view of how to look at life, I guess. You have to speak up 'cause you were one of 25.
Angela went on further to credit all these members of her family with shaping her into the person she is.

Sister Angela also came into contact with the Religious Sisters of Mercy in elementary school. She recalled being one of 97 in her first-grade class and somehow magically learning how to read as she did not remember any formal literacy instruction. When asked about her childhood impressions of the Mercy Sisters, she stated:

My fifth-grade teacher was absolutely wonderful. My eighth-grade teacher was absolutely wonderful. But did I have a personal relationship? Absolutely not. No...My girlfriends all would say, ‘You want to come to the convent? I would like to talk to Sister So-And-So’ And I would go and sit there and be like, ‘Why are we here??’ They were lovely. And I liked them, but if you're asking if there was an under-thing? A vocation? Then, no.

Her reaction and thoughts were quite in juxtaposition to those of her colleague and best friend, Sister Rose.

Angela was one of three children, and her mother worked as a seamstress to augment the family finances.

My mom worked when I started, I guess, third grade. And she worked collars and sleeves on coats. Every Friday night, we would sit in the kitchen. It was my math lesson. She got paid 11 cents per collar and maybe six cents per sleeve. So, it was minimal wage. Looking back on the enjoyment and love she experienced as a child, based on these factors, Sister Angela declared herself one of the richest girls she had ever encountered.

Angela’s faith played a strong role in her household. However, it did so in rather a unique manner. She explained her “mom always prayed, but I don't ever remember them [my parents]
going to church” even though her father was a member of the Catholic-based, fraternal organization, the *Knights of Columbus*. She discussed how her parents compelled her and her brothers to go to mass but did not have any recollection of them being present at mass with her.

Sister Angela did not seem to believe that monumental happenings took place while attending high school. However, there are some quite significant events that unfolded. She only became cognizant of the importance of these events after she recounted them.

In describing her childhood, Angela claimed that she was not the most materially wealthy child, but she was prosperous because of her family’s love and care. Nonetheless, she became acutely aware of her family’s financial challenges early in her teens.

I was about 13. I had to have a yellow pillbox hat. I had to have it. I had to have it. And I said that to my mom. My mom and dad slept on a pull-out couch in the room next to me. I heard them discussing how they would get the money for my hat, and my brother needed new shoes. And, it stuck here [pointing to her head]. I guess it was the first time that I ever recognized money could be an issue.

As she went shopping for the hat, she told her mother that “I don’t think yellow is my color. I don’t think I want it. Let’s go look for Albert’s shoes.” Her parents’ conversation had remained in her mind.

In reflecting on how her family’s economic status might have shaped her as an educator, Sister Angela conceded that in her initial teaching experiences, monetary struggles were not a large issue for the families that made up the student population. As an administrator in the school in which she served as principal for 37 years “Poverty was real. Poverty was there, and we as administrators, any way we could cut corners for them, we would.” Nonetheless, she also underscored the importance of maintaining the dignity of those she served who required
economic assistance. Angela also relayed a typical scenario that would take place many times in her years as a principal. To show their gratitude, parents would ask them to their homes for dinner.

The parents would come, all dressed up-- gold earrings, gold bracelets, etc. And, when we go into the house, there's the refrigerator box. And that was their closet full of the clothes that were folded there. So, you knew. You know, if you went in and then you said, ‘Kyle, where do you do your homework?’ And there would be this much space [gesturing with her hands] on a pull-out bed…

Sister Angela felt that both she and Sister Rose were sensitive to the poverty experienced by their former students and their families because of their own respective family’s socio-economic status.

Despite Sister Angela having been emphatic that she felt no calling whatsoever as a child to live in dedicated service of the Catholic Church, her teen years marked a change of thought. This development did not come without a fight.

When I was in high school, my brother's fourth-grade teacher said to me, ‘Angela, you should probably think about a vocation.’ I said, ‘I'm going to become a prostitute before I wear something like you're wearing.’ I said that publicly.

Upon hearing that blatant statement, the nun laughed and told Angela that she would pray for her. Angela remarked that perhaps this religious sister had seen something in her that she simply could not or would not at the time.

Angela did not attend her senior prom. She explained that by her senior year in high school, she had begun talking about a vocation openly and entering the Religious Sisters of Mercy. She was not sure what exactly had transpired to cause this flowering of a vocation. What
she was well aware of was her parents’ displeasure with her projected career path. Moreover, because her parents were not happy with this decision, they had informed her that any money that was set aside for senior prom or college was no longer available.

Sister Angela mentioned that when a woman entered a religious order during her time, she was required to donate somewhat like a dowry. As mentioned above, any funds her parents had allocated for her college studies were no longer available. Therefore,

They took the money that they had been saving out of the account so that I had nothing to offer as a dowry. So, I had to wait a year. And, they figured if I waited a year, I’d forget about this idea of becoming a nun.

So, with the idea of joining the Mercy Sisters right after high school no longer a feasible plan, Angela took a job working for Social Security.

Even though Sister Angela processed death claims, she found her year as a federal employee beneficial. “Whatever you did for movie stars or regular people, the people in the family were hurting, so that was a very nice exchange in a very cruel or difficult situation.”

When asked whether or not this experience influenced her educational practices, she considered it preparation for what she deemed more than simply for education and stated that it prepared her for “compassionate ministry.”

Even though Angela’s parents had hoped that the idea of becoming a religious sister would gradually slip away and disappear altogether, this year of employment after high school, the opposite took place.

It was bizarre working in Manhattan. Just bizarre. You had cops there constantly to protect you from people with knives, and all the while, I was praying the novena to the Miraculous Medal. And suddenly it just stuck in my head. Be a nun. Be a nun.
Working for a year and praying to make sure it was a true vocation were not the most difficult scenes in Angela’s journey to decide to become a religious sister. She described in vivid detail the day she took her first steps in becoming a Religious Sister of Mercy.

When I went to have my psychological evaluation done in order to enter, my father stood at one side of our front stoop, and my mother at the base. He said, ‘If you walk out the door, I’m nailing it that you can never come back.’ He then slapped me. It was the only time my father hit anyone of us—me or my brothers. But I kept walking. It’s [her vocation] just what had me by the neck. You know—like a puppy dog?

Rattled, but not deterred from becoming a nun, not only did Angela proceed to have her psychological evaluation, but she also did return home that night. Her father had not nailed the front door as promised. However, it took her parents time to get used to the idea of their daughter becoming a nun.

As well, they were not the only family members troubled by her choice. The older of Sister Angela’s two younger brothers would not speak to her for over a year. When asked why her family took such a dim view of her becoming a religious sister, she suggested that she was the only girl in the family; and, as such, “I was supposed to make supper, babies, and coffee.”

The path that Angela chose did lead her to make plenty of meals and numerous cups of coffee. As for the children, she had an active role in raising thousands of them.

With regard to the first research question, and the ways in which the childhood experiences of two religious sisters relate to the feminist concepts of identity and oppression, as well as the third research question of the lessons we can learn from the sisters’ stories that can be applied to our current system of education today, all three themes of born and formed social justice leadership, other religious sisters, and social-emotional learning played a crucial role. In
addition to this, in recounting their formative years, the sisters indirectly address the second research question of how they make sense of their 40-year commitment to the Catholic educational mission, even as student demographics, educational policy, and leadership shifted.

**Born and formed social justice leadership.** Both religious sisters were born into practicing Catholic families who took part in religious services regularly. They also attended Catholic elementary and high school. While Sister Rose stated that her entire family was highly active in her local parish, Sister Angela’s parents made sure that their children went to church every Sunday and holy day, with Angela attending mass daily from the time she was able to take herself. Therefore, the significance of continuous exposure to social justice teachings both in religious services and at school cannot be negated as social justice reflects one of the major tenets of the Catholic faith.

As well, Merchant and Shoho (2010) posited a strong inclination toward the path of equity at a young age vis-à-vis the examples provided by parents and their commitments and beliefs to combating inequities. This notion was also supported by Theoharis (2008) in which his work disclosed that five of the seven principals utilized in his study of identities and leadership traits of principals “committed to social justice” (p. 3) described family influence as a major contributing factor to their orientation as such.

Another binding factor common to both nuns’ childhood and teen years is their families’ financial struggles and their awareness of such during their teens. Personal experiences of marginalization are also powerful contributors to molding leaders who speak out and fight against inequities (Marshal & Oliva, 2010; Theoharis, 2008). Neither of the sisters was homeless or went hungry; however, finances were extremely tight, and there were rarely any excess funds for items outside of the budget.
Triangulation interviews with former faculty members, students, and parents revealed a pattern of education and religious instruction very similar to that which the nuns experienced growing up. While all five former faculty members indicated that the ultimate obligation of the school was to the children who attended, the interviews with the former students and parents indicated actions consistent with those identified by Merchant and Shoho (2010) as “a strong orientation to social justice and equity issues…instilled early in their lives by parents/significant adults whose actions…were unequivocal, consistent, and passionate.” There were quite a few instances of this type of behavior on the part of the nuns as educators in the triangulation interviews, with comments from interviewees below highlighting this fact.

As a little girl, Former Student, Ms. B, attended Sister Angela’s final profession of her religious vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and care for the sick and uneducated. “There was a huge ceremony in the church. I remember where I sat, and I remember looking up at her and thinking, ‘Wow.’” Photos from this ceremony also revealed many attendees with a large celebration that followed in the school’s auditorium.

*Figure 2. Sister Angela’s final vow profession*

In addition to the shared celebration of their own religious lives, Former Student, Ms. J, discussed one of her most indelible moments of the sisters was their active participation in
students’ receiving religious sacraments and in explaining what it meant for the students in terms of giving back to others. Former Parent Mrs. F. supported this by relaying that “at my daughter's communion practice Sister Angela walked around with my youngest son, who was a baby at the time, in her arms while directing the kids on how to walk in and out.” Another former student spoke of his most memorable experiences with the subjects as those times there were school-wide rosary rallies and praying for different causes together.

Former Parent, Mrs. F., whose four children attended the sisters’ school, surmised it most succinctly by declaring “they were as worried about the education as they were worried about the human being, the human condition. Of looking and being aware of the next guy and what the next person needed.” Perhaps, just as the subjects gained familiarity with social justice as children, they, in turn, passed on these types of experiences to their students.

When discussing instances of oppression and the sisters, former student, Ms. J, defined them in terms of experiences within the parish/church community associated with St. Martin of the Rose and particularly pertaining to the concept of culture. Ms. J stated “I would say like how, you know, transitioning from an all-white to all-black and knowing their culture, and knowing how they're…what they want is what they want…not understanding that this is how it is in their culture.” Initially, I, as the researcher, understood this lack of cultural acceptance and understanding to be on the part of the sisters. However, as I probed, Ms. J corrected my misinterpretation. She expressed that she felt her Caribbean culture was the object of oppression by the pastor and priests at St. Martin’s parish, and that Sister Rose and Sister Angela acted as a cultural bridge. “They participated in all the cultural events. They were always there…and they always had a good time.” Whether or not it changed the attitudes of those at the helm of St.
Martin’s parish, Ms. J felt that the sisters’ actions gave credence to the dominant culture of the parishioners.

Social justice leadership in a religious context cannot be applied to our public-school system. However, faculty members and administrators who have received exposure to social justice principles and difficult experiences through childhood and teen years could partake in the active practice of passing on social justice principles of awareness of the human condition of others, concern for others, as well as equity and justice for all.

**Social-emotional learning.** Both subjects stated that their experiences with the Sisters of Mercy as children informed their decisions to join the order. For Sister Rose, their softer spirit in carrying out their educational ministry was in sharp contrast to what she experienced in high school. It was “a much gentler approach to educating a child.” She felt cared for, safe, and nurtured. Sister Angela also indicated that it was the treatment she received while a student in an elementary school run by the Sisters of Mercy that influenced her to select the Mercy order. “The Mercys were always kind and loving. That was my take.” They brought this gentleness, kindness, and loving to their ministry as educators.

Former Student Ms. J recalled her first meeting with Sister Rose. “…She was very nice. She smiled; she spoke to me. She was very, you know, child-friendly.” This former student also added in this interview that she viewed both sisters as “…strong pillars of the [Catholic] church…They were always there for you. They knew everyone’s strengths and weaknesses. They were always there to support you.” Other former students also echoed the same sentiments with stories of public praise and encouragement.

Former parents and faculty members also experienced this compassionate ministry. Former Parent, Mrs. T., stated that “they gave my children so much...They just took such great
care of them… They were always looking out for my kids.” Another former parent recalled that “they helped us a lot. Leading me to the right departments for different things…asking me if I was okay. Taking the time to rally around me. Even bringing in their friends to help me and my family.” Similar to the parents, all faculty members also expressed this culture of care that permeated the school. Perhaps one faculty member summed it up most succinctly.

It was just a special place to be. We were family. We looked out for one another. Our lives here extended outside of school. We had get-togethers. Teachers knew husbands or boyfriends. Both nuns knew our family, took an interest in our families. I say all the time that I lived my life through this school. Sister Angela and Sister Rose walked my life with me.

Both sisters used the word family when discussing former students, teachers, and parents. In essence, as they had experienced in their own lives, they carried on the social-emotional tradition of the school community being a larger family unit through which a culture of care and concern for all were disseminated.

**Knowing thyself to know others.** In terms of the sisters’ childhoods and teen years, Sister Rose was quite emphatic that she had established her career identity of wanting to be a teaching sister at a very young age and that it never wavered. Santisi, Magnano, Platania, and Ramaci (2018) define career identity as not being so much about a particular job but rather “individual dispositions that represent the way individuals define themselves in the context of a career” (p. 189). Although she always wanted to remain in the New York area, as a little girl and in her teens, Rose never stated where she wanted to minister but simply that she wanted to minister. Thus, Santisi et al.’s definition is quite appropriate to explain in part Sister Rose’s self-understanding, even though it was initiated at a young age.
Sister Angela’s career identity did not develop as early as her colleague’s. However, her comments about what was going through her mind during the public argument with her parents the day she was taking steps to become a Sister of Mercy were also similar to Santisi et al.’s (2018) definition of career identity. “I remember saying to myself, 'You don’t have to do this…’ But, I knew it was what I had to do. I was being led by the neck like a puppy dog.” It was an overwhelming sense that the path she was choosing was correct, even though she felt no vocation whatsoever until her junior or senior year in high school.

The theme focus in this section has been on the sisters’ lives solely. The concept of identity, knowing themselves to know others, played a key role, particularly in the sisters’ professional experiences. Nevertheless, the dichotomous experiences of the sisters in gaining greater self-understanding prepared them for the variety of encounters they would have with students, teachers, and parents developing their own identities.

Other religious sisters and members of the clergy. Clergy members did not seem to have wielded much influence in the sisters’ lives during their childhood and teen years. Conversely, the Religious Sisters of Mercy did. Sister Rose had a great fondness for all the sisters in her elementary school. In particular, “I remember my first and second-grade teachers…They were just regular happy folks, not standoffish…They would put their arm around you. They knew your family. They knew everyone’s names” (June 7, 2019). Sister Angela called the Mercy sisters that she had in fifth and eighth grade “absolutely wonderful” (June 7, 2019). However, contrary to Sister Rose’s immediate calling at a young age, Sister Angela did not have any sense of vocation until her mid- to late teen years.

To join the Religious Sisters of Mercy, a woman must have a sponsor who is already a sister in the community. Within the literature regarding becoming a religious sister, active
recruitment carried out by sisters of students in the schools they serviced was common practice (Armstrong, 1981; Sullivan, 2005; Titley, 2017). While Sister Rose’s sponsor was her fifth-grade teacher, whom she described as someone who “took an interest in me...And since I made no bones about what I was gonna do with my life, she kind of nurtured me...” Sister Angela only made passing reference to her sponsor; nonetheless, she did emphasize to a greater extent her encounter with her brother’s fourth-grade teacher, a Mercy Sister, to whom she declared, “I'm going to become a prostitute before I wear something like you're wearing.” Whether or not these particular nuns in both Rose and Angela’s lives were attempting to bolster the ranks of the Religious Sisters of Mercy, Sister Rose and Sister Angela’s encounters with them left their mark.

**The Tales of Two Religious Sisters: Part Three**

In this section, I present Sister Rose and Sister Angela’s narratives regarding their years spent studying to become Religious Sisters of Mercy. The first section is dedicated to Sister Rose’s story while the second portion relays Sister Angela’s encounters during that time. After each sister’s story, I highlight the research questions addressed. The themes of social justice leadership and social-emotional learning are addressed separately; however, I combined Sisters of Mercy charisms and other religious sisters, given the nature of what was taking place in their lives.

**Sister Rose: Religious Formation Experiences**

The time frame was 1968 to 1972, and in considering those years she spent studying to become a Religious Sister of Mercy, Rose’s smiles and laughter conveyed her feelings about this time in her life. From a visual standpoint, she explained that when she entered,
it was the year of the changes in the Vatican, so they gave us this horrific outfit because they didn't exactly know how to dress us. It was an awful outfit that was basically an eighth-grade uniform because the old habit was gone at that point.

And along with this shift in garb, there were modifications made to the formation process. Sister Rose recalled:

there was also a change in the administration of the sisters who ran the formation program. So, they were also kind of, sort of like being a first-year principal. They were kind of running into the classes like, ‘We don't know what to do!’

Rose’s laughter in explaining her religious clothing and her administrators’ experiences was infectious. However, the levity did not stop at that point.

Religious studies, coupled with college attendance, were a major part of Rose’s formation process. The Sisters of Mercy did not have a nearby college, so she, her fellow postulants, and others further along in the formation process commuted to a college specifically for nuns, or, as Sr. Rose more eloquently stated, a school “built around the development of a religious woman.”

Since the college was not located locally, Sr. Rose and her fellow sisters were compelled to make a daily 45-minute drive. Circumstances surrounding this commute were quite entertaining.

They had to buy two or three vans to transport us. They took us out to practice so that we didn't kill each other because we needed to be able to make sure that we could drive the van. It was a lot bigger than what we were used to driving. As a matter of fact, one of the sisters was parking, and she forgot to put it in reverse, and she went through the garage! But it was a lot of fun because there were no superiors with us. We were on the honor system. Those became the most fun moments because there were no rules, no
silence. Every once in a while, somebody would be sitting in the van with a typewriter on their lap trying to finish a paper.

When pressed to clarify what specifically made this time so pleasurable, particularly van time, Rose expressed above all the bonding and friendships that flourished. “It basically created a very good sense of community because you kind of all are in this together. Somebody needed help; you helped them.” She brought this idea of helping those in need with her to her teaching and school administration.

In contrast to what has sometimes been portrayed in the media as monotonous and harsh, this Sister of Mercy provided a clear perspective of her years of preparation to become a nun. She explained that a typical day was quite prescribed and closely scheduled; however, she also communicated her understanding of this rigor.

You had prayer; you had meals; you had to be at bed at a certain time. You had silence.
You had study time. You had chores. You also had recreation, which was your social time. And, you couldn’t skip them because they were trying to create a balance. They tried to teach us how to manage our time.

Sister Rose conceded that it was a hectic daily agenda, but she also interpreted it as a means of shaping herself and the other sisters into more well-rounded and flexible individuals.

When asked to reflect on the socio-political upheaval of the late 1960s and early 1970s and how all this tumult might have had an impact on her religious formation experiences, Sister Rose’s response reiterated the full schedule as outlined above in that there was no time for watching television news or reading a newspaper. She also posited, “I think we missed a lot. I don't know if it was a bad thing because I'm not sure if it would've created some kind of tension among us depending upon the different views that people might have had...” Perhaps the lack of
distractions ensuing in the outside world might have altered her fond memories of spiritual, academic, and communal growth.

Rose’s formation process coincided with the implementation of changes within the Catholic Church stemming from the decrees of Vatican II, and she put forth these insights:

They [the heads of her formation program] didn't tell us about it because we [all religious orders] were in the midst of those changes...trying to implement the changes that were being encouraged through the documents [of Vatican II]…They weren’t discussing it. They were trying to figure it out...I never felt lost, but it was all in flux….I always felt that there was a plan, but I'm guessing if I had asked the sister who was in charge of the novices what the plan was, she would've been hard-pressed to put it into words.

As Sr. Rose pointed out, Vatican II brought about changes in practices in religious orders. She initially had her name changed to a religious one and wore a modified habit along with other garb that denoted that she was a nun. However, as soon as the Vatican determined that neither of these traditions of the past was required, she shed them both as quickly as these new rules were introduced.

**Sister Angela: Religious Formation Experiences**

Angela based her decision to become a Religious Sister of Mercy on her view that the order was and is the “careers of different men;” in other words, these women religious ministered to those on the margins of society. She further articulated that for her, “the Mercys were always kind and loving. That was my take.” She maintained that these views were those ideas that she had formulated vis-à-vis her elementary school experiences.

Sister Angela began college during her first year of formation to become a nun. Like Sister Rose, she attended St. Joseph’s College, which at that time was a school specifically for
women religious. She explained that within her very first few months, she was told that she would become a teacher, but her college years cemented more than just her teaching methods.

We were taught by the Josephites, who were ferocious in education. Ferocious. So, we really got a good education. Again, having experienced the Dominicans and Mercys, and now the Josephites, all the more reason that the Mercys shined for me because it was their life ministry to give mercy to others. Not education, that was the Josephites thing.

This college preparation and experience with another order led to a four-decade career as an educator and a five-decade ministry as a nun.

Sister Angela described her years spent in training to become a Sister of Mercy as “good ones” with a very wide smile and a bit of laughter. “You know, I failed Science. We all did.” When asked for details, she explained in between small bursts of laughter.

We all failed science because one of the group...Well, it was a beautiful day, and they wanted to go shopping. We were going down the escalator, and the superiors were coming up the escalator, and we looked right at each other. We weren’t hard to miss in our religious garb.

The story did not end on the escalator, though.

When we got back to the convent, one of the superiors who had seen us screamed, ‘Euphemia [her religious name at the time], get down here now!’ Everyone was asking me what I was going to say. So, I told them that I would tell her that I saw her at the mall... I went into her room and sat on her bed. I don’t know why I did that. She sat on a chair, and I just slid onto her bed. I told her that I had warned them not to go, but if they were going, I had to go with them because they were my ride. She cracked up and said, ‘Do you know what this makes us look like? It makes us all look like idiots because
we’re [all the Mercy sisters in that particular Science class] all going to fail, and failure is a club. Everyone in the Josephite's group is going to graduate soon, and we’re not.’

Exactly as predicted, she and her Sister of Mercy classmates did not pass Science. Nonetheless, that conversation set the stage for the many challenging situations Angela would face, particularly in her professional experiences. Angela discovered that holding back from the truth was not part of who she was.

In considering the socio-political underpinnings and the upheaval that was taking place in the world during the years she spent in religious formation training, Sister Angela felt that it did not influence or impact her greatly. In fact, she stated that she found the post-Vatican II modified habit to be “a party outfit. It was a make-believe nun outfit.” She continued to explain that when she first entered religious life, the traditional indoctrination program was still in place. She defined herself as a “rigid person” who believed in the letter of the law...I think it took me a long time to jump and be any other person other than what I thought God asked me to be. But, here [the parish she has served for over four decades], I grew as a woman.

Unlike her colleague Sister Rose, Sister Angela took about a decade to shed her religious name as well as the distinctive religious clothing such as a modified habit.

Before ending the discussion about her religious formation, Sister Angela returned her narrative to the changes in society that were taking place during the late 1960s and early 1970s. She stated that she was not part of anti-war protests, nor did she lobby for any particular cause. Studying to be a religious sister, going to college, and adhering to her prescribed schedule took up most of her day. However, she stated that the changes and the attempts to right the injustices did shape her as “you were glued into what was happening. And this would become part of who
you were to your children.” By her children, she meant both the students she taught, those who were in her school as a principal, as well as the teachers who worked for her during her educational administration years.

The sisters’ religious formation experiences directly address the first research question of how these experiences relate to the feminist concepts of identity and oppression. They also answer, in part, the second research question of how the sisters make sense of their 40-year commitment to the Catholic educational mission. Last, they correspond to the second part of the third question, particularly as it relates to leadership style.

Once again, all three themes emerged during the data analysis process. However, during the thematic analysis process of this particular time in the subjects’ lives, I combined Mercy charisms with other religious sisters. It was also during this part of their narratives where archival documents played a role in data triangulation.

**Born and formed social justice leadership.** In terms of their experiences in becoming nuns, I considered that the origins of social justice are rooted firmly in the Catholic faith in that social justice “has been part of the official Roman Catholic Church teaching since 1931” (Burke, 2010, p. 1). Both the sisters attended the same college designed specifically for the “formation of religious women” and spent their second year, as Sister Rose explained, “devoted to spiritual and theological developments.” Therefore, beyond their education in elementary, middle, and high school, the subjects of this study would have also received constant exposure to guidance in social justice matters throughout the years spent in preparation to become religious sisters.

Although this item was not explicit, there is one other matter in which the subjects themselves experienced a form of social justice during their preparation years as religious sisters: manner of dress. While Sister Rose was appalled by the outfit she had to wear as a first-year
postulant, as she felt it was almost belittling, Sister Angela was initially upset by the doing away with the classic, all-encompassing habit worn by the Mercy sisters for over a century.

The habits that were worn by religious sisters in general before Vatican II were “...antiquated but romanticized religious habits that not only set them apart from those they ministered to but required hours of time in their laundering and maintenance” (Confoy, 2013, p. 323). Titley (2017) pointed out that the traditional habits were heavy and were worn in all types of weather, be it extreme cold or heat, and their removal was never permitted during daily activities. Nevertheless, if social justice in its religious context was “a means for society to overcome problems associated with poverty and oppression through societal cooperation and intervention” (Valadez & Mirce, 2015, p. 162), the change in dress liberated the sisters from the constraints of heavy and cumbersome garments to carry out this work. In essence, they could not experience oppression by being easily identifiable and perhaps off-putting to certain segments of the population, nor, from a physical standpoint, would they be impeded from carrying out their ministries due to heavy layers of fabric.

In the photos shared with me, I found quite a few of Sister Rose in what is considered a modified habit. Most of those photos were from her religious formation years. Not one former faculty member, student, or parent can remember her wearing this type of outfit. However, two of the former students interviewed remember Sister Angela initially wearing a modified habit but then removing it as a few years passed. Faculty members interviewed ranged in years of service with the sisters from 35 years to 2 years. Not one of them can recall either of the subjects in religious garb, nor did any of the former parents. Perhaps, the lack of oppressive and impeding dress granted the subjects the permission to gain closer access to the community they served by
literally being unencumbered by layers of cloth and by being perceived simply as women and not the sometimes more intimidating perception of women religious.

**Sisters of Mercy charisms and other religious sisters.** Even though both subjects recalled their religious formation experiences with great fondness and viewed them as quite convivial encounters, the sisters’ religious formation was based upon the principles of the foundress, Catherine McAuley. In her discussion of the history of the Sisters of Mercy in Chicago, Connolly (2014) portrayed McAuley’s “vision of religious life” as “being in solidarity with those who suffer” (p. 3). Further to this, the author pointed out that the foundress passed away in 1841 with the Religious Sisters of Mercy expanding the mission in the years well after her death. Thus, any woman joining the order after her death would not have had personal interactions with Mother McAuley but would inherit her “spirit and vision for religious life” (p. 4). Just as much as Catholic social teachings would have been a part of the sisters’ formation, so would direct instruction about their foundress and her guiding principles.

In reviewing some of the archival documents shared, I found two related items that were of particular interest. The first object is a brief book of about 60 pages titled *The Living Stream of Mercy* written by a fellow sister, S.M. Agneta, RSM, and published initially in 1963. This book outlined the important events of the life of Catherine McAuley. It reflected the history of how the order came to be, and it also explained the reasons for McAuley’s deep dedication to women and children. Inside of this book, I also found an accompanying document.

The letter was dated Christmas 1968, and it was addressed to all the sisters who had recently joined the order. It was from Sister M.E., and it explained that the book was a gift to the new sisters. Sister M.E. was one of Sister Rose and Sister Angela’s mentors during formation, and both sisters smiled and remembered this woman with great fondness and warmth. The last
paragraph of the letter stated, “May you experience to the full all the joys and blessings of this holy season. May you bring to all whom you touch the love of Christ” (S.M.E., personal communication, December 1968). Essentially, both this letter and the gift of the book were influential tools of both personal growth and greater understanding of what it meant to be a Religious Sister of Mercy and a reminder of the obligation to carry on the mission of alleviating the burdens of the “socially ostracized” (Agneta, 1963, p. 30).

**Social-emotional learning and knowing thyself to know others.** For as long as I, the researcher, or any of those who took part in the triangulation interviews, have known Sister Rose, not one of us knew her when she wore a modified habit. However, there are plenty of archival photos of her during her religious formation process with most of her hair covered. Yet, what I found more compelling about her during this time is a specific photo of the day she took her first profession of vows—a picture solely of her hand with a plain gold band around the fourth finger of her left hand. Additionally, some weeks before her beginning religious formation, Sister Rose was also given, for lack of a better term, a *bridal shower*. Rose explained that before entering the convent, the order provided her with a long list of items that she had to bring with her. In the same vein that one gives an impending bride a shower so as to provide the person with household and useful items for setting up a new home with the groom, it was also tradition to have a *shower* for a female who was about to embark upon religious life.
While wearing some sort of band on the traditional wedding finger or having a shower before entering religious life were not uncommon practices, I found it of importance for several reasons. First, both the ring and the shower denote marriage and commitment. A very basic definition of marriage involves a symbolic and public commitment (Kefalas, Furstenberg, Carr & Napolitano, 2011). Second, they underscore Sister Rose’s contention that her vocation began at a very young age. Last, they are in sharp contrast to those of Sister Angela.

Sister Angela readily admitted that it took her much longer than many of her fellow sisters to disrobe. She did not have a shower before entering the convent and worked so that she could purchase the necessary items herself. There were pictures of her both in full and modified habit for her first profession of vows; however, the photos were limited.

Although it was not evident in photos, there was one item that Sister Angela mentioned that could be construed as a pathway of greater understanding. What assisted her in joining religious life was her constant prayer to Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal. “What came was be a nun, be a nun, be a nun.” And, despite her father’s vehement opposition against her joining the Sisters of Mercy, in his later years, “he always wore a chain with the Miraculous Medal.” Perhaps, as Angela’s disrobing process began, to the point in which she wore no outward signs
of being a religious sister, she gained greater insight and confidence in her own identity as a nun. This self-awareness, in turn, might have also assisted her father in understanding that hers was a true vocation and not a passing whim.

**The Tales of Two Religious Sisters: Part Four**

In this part of the findings, I focused on the professional experiences of both subjects. Sister Rose’s tale is followed by Sister Angela’s. After I present each nun’s narratives about their careers as educators, I highlight the research questions addressed along with how their stories correspond to all emergent themes.

**Sister Rose: Professional Experience**

Sr. Rose stated that as soon as she entered religious life, her superiors determined that she would become a teacher. It was, in fact, her desire to be an educator, but she recalled the selection process as:

> I don't remember ever being asked if I wanted to be a teacher or what I wanted to do. It was sort of like, this group will be teachers. We're going to send this person to do social work, and we'll hold off and wait and see if there's anybody else who went to medicine. Unless there was somebody who was really, very hellbent on being a nurse, I think they would've bent. But, I think the majority of us are into education.

Rose expressed that she had no other desire than education, and, as a young girl, she was not aware that Sisters of Mercy had professions other than teaching.

> Additionally, she mentioned that at the point in time when she joined the Mercy community, about “80% of the sisters were educators.” There were other sisters chosen and trained as teachers who never actually pursued teaching. However, it was Rose’s ministry for 45 years.
After six years of teaching on Long Island, New York, Sister Rose accepted a position as a resource room teacher in 1978 in New York City. [The term resource room is in italics as it is a word associated more greatly with today’s educational phrases than those of the late 1970s.]

Neither special education nor differentiation of instruction was part of the Catholic school system’s instructional program at this point. Rose characterized her work with the children as support for “kids who needed additional help. At that point they weren't really diagnosed. They were identified by their teachers as kids who needed extra help in either reading or math.” On paper, Sister Rose is an English teacher, but from that experience of working with children from grades two through eight, she discerned:

I found out I really like math. So, a lot of what I did with the kids was math related. Most of it was using manipulatives because it was the easiest way to make it concrete. When I went home to visit my Mom, I would raid her button box and come back with assorted things that we could use to sort, and count, and stack, and identify.

Rose spent a total of eight years teaching—five teaching fifth grade, one at the high school level, and two as instructional support. She dedicated the next 37 years of her career to educational administration.

When asked how she became a principal, Sister Rose prefaced this part of the story by stating that “the devil you know is better than the devil you don't know.” After some laughter, she recounted how the current principal was leaving and that the position was available. “So, Sister Angela and I put our heads together and decided to submit our names” rather than seeing the job go to someone they did not know. She also added that there were three of them who applied to be principal but that it was between her and Angela. Once again, rather than create proverbial division among the ranks, Sister Rose and Sister Angela decided to propose that they
should work as a team. At the time, this was quite unusual as she reflected, “At that point, there was no recognition for an assistant principal. It was an unheard of concept in the Catholic schools.” Despite this fact, the proposal was accepted by the Sisters of Mercy, who were in charge of the hiring process at that time.

In terms of the reception from the diocese to which her school belonged, Rose painted a somewhat inhospitable picture.

I was not recognized by the diocese for many years. Anything that would come out would only go to Angela’s attention. She would share it with me obviously, and it took a good maybe six years before anybody recognized the fact that we were trying to put forth a different model and that assistant principals should be recognized. Yet she persisted and did not allow the lack of collegiality to deter her.

We were sharing the [work] load, but what would happen when there was a meeting for principals, the two of us would always go. I usually had to take a chair from the wall and put myself at the table because I wasn't exactly warmly welcomed. They didn't quite know what to do with me.

Eventually, her perseverance bore fruit as administrators from other schools came to “realize that the job was just overwhelming and that it required an assistant.” It may not have necessarily entailed a lot of other official assistant principals, but it did finally provide Sister Rose a spot at the table.

Sister Rose recalled her first year as an assistant principal as one wrought with challenges. She was in her early 30s at the time, and she and her colleague, Sister Angela, believed that they had to take a tough stance to be taken seriously. “The first week of school, the gossipers were all out on the corner by the school. There was a group of parents hanging out
there, and we knew they were talking about us.” When asked how she and her colleague knew, she just smiled wryly and said “We just knew.” She then elaborated on the why’s and how’s of the situation:

We needed to lay the law of the land because we were new, right? So, we needed to explain these were our expectations, and we expect you to respect them. We made it very public. It wasn't something that we were just pulling out of a hat, and we probably were more strict than we ended up being at the 37th year…Around the second or third day of this, Angela decided, ‘I’m going outside to talk to them.’ Angela will give you a different version of what happened, but that just began the inroads of respect. It left these parents with the idea of they are who they are. They do have expectations, but, they're, they're also willing to listen.

That particular incident initiated strong parental participation in school activities and also sparked a 40-year friendship with one of the so-called gossipers.

Rose conveyed that the first graduation she experienced as a principal was one of her most cherished. “It just gave a sense of accomplishment that we did it.” She underscored that initial year journey from September 1980 through June 1981:

I think that the first year was hard because we would be the two people who were in charge. We'd go into Angela's office and close the door and say, ‘What the heck are we doing???’ But, we got through the year. We didn't hurt any of the staff. We were forming a team, too, between ourselves. It was a challenge, and it took a lot of sit-down and discussion.
Rose emphasized that the willingness between herself and Sister Angela to talk and collaborate with staff, parents, and others in the community is most likely what attributed to their success and sustained them for nearly four decades as educational administrators.

Sister Rose served as assistant principal for 36 more years. She also noted that she and Sister Angela never had any actual formal training to be school building leaders. When she was reminded of how well-regarded and highly respected she and Angela were within the diocese for their administrative abilities and asked how this came to be, she speculated that “we both ran a good classroom, so we kind of extrapolated that to running a good school. You needed to be organized. You needed to have a plan. You needed to make your expectations clear and understood.” In addition to strong communication, Rose clarified the question mentioned above by defining her leadership approach.

It was always a team effort. The fact that we started out as a team of two. We just extended that, and it became a team of 30 or whatever it was with the faculty and staff. Neither one of us ever wanted to be way up here, away from everyone else. It was just not our style.

What began as a team of two blossomed into a collective team. Both sisters had no interest in isolating themselves away from either the students, teachers and school staff, or the parents.

Perhaps one of the most heart-wrenching experiences that took place early on for Rose in her capacity as an educational leader was the death of a student during a routine school fire drill. “He was in the second grade. He was what? Maybe seven? It was terrible.” Sister Rose explained that the child had a heart condition that was never diagnosed.

The police arrived before an ambulance. An officer picked up the child, put him in his car, and drove him to the hospital. I can’t remember how we got there, but we were there
before the child’s mother. We had to tell the mother the child had died. The mother came in, and she was hysterical. She just kept saying, ‘Don't tell me my baby's dead! Don't tell me my baby's dead!’

Rose was quick to point out that both she and Angela were still quite young and inexperienced both as women and particularly as principals. Yet, they summoned the courage to assist the child’s mother and family. “We had to go to the house because the mother didn't know how to tell the other children...It was heartbreak ing because we just didn’t have the words.” She also added that the child’s passing was harder for her than even her own father’s death. It was, in a way, like losing one of her own children.

When Rose began working as a resource room teacher, the majority of the population she served was white and Catholic. Since she began working there in 1978, she has lived in the convent that was originally built to house the sisters who serviced the school. Upon becoming an administrator in 1980, she characterized the change in the neighborhood, and student demographics as “…it almost happened over a summer. I can’t say it was gradual. It was literally over the course of one summer.” She further estimated that by that summer of 1978, the ethnicity of the students shifted from being almost exclusively Caucasian to 50% to 60% Caribbean/West Indian. Perhaps she became most fully aware of the shift in population when she and her colleague were lining up the kindergarten students on their first day of school as administrators.

They are names you’re used to saying now, but we weren’t used to saying them then. We were stumbling over the names and trying to figure out if they were boys or girls. It wasn't anything that affected the way we worked and treated people. It was just something that you said, ‘Wow. Okay. I gotta learn to pronounce these names.’

Once she had resolved the name issue, Sister Rose recollected that there were not a tremendous number of cultural conflicts with the students themselves. The greater problem was communicating with non-English-speaking parents.

In the very early times, in order to make things clear, we would buzz up into the older grades and ask if there was any student who could speak Haitian Creole could come downstairs to translate if we were trying to communicate something. And, they wouldn't acknowledge that they could speak Creole. They really wanted to be American. So, you ended up going and dragging someone that you knew could speak Creole. They came, but they came under protest...And then, it shifted. I don't know why it shifted. Maybe, it was because of the respect that we offered. We would say, ‘This is your culture, and you should be proud of it,’ which we tried to encourage as you would anybody.

Besides encouraging students to take pride in their heritage, an immersion experience also assisted Rose in gaining a greater understanding of the culture of the students and parents served.

Through a program run by their religious order, Rose and Angela spent six weeks in the country of Jamaica. “So, Angela and I talked about it. We said this would be an important thing for us to do because it would give us an insight into the culture that we're dealing with.” Although they were in what might be considered tropical paradise, they were not on vacation. They visited a multitude of cities, working wherever they went, and their experiences ran the gamut from a prestigious high school to a hospital for lepers.

We saw all manner of things. We literally were part of what they were doing. So, we were in classrooms; we were helping the kids. We were watching the teachers. Education down there was what we were doing probably in the ’50s.
Rose further recollected that it was the poverty she witnessed on the six-week journey that impacted her above all. She carried that dismay with her back to the United States. “After having seen people picking through the garbage heaps looking for any scraps that they could get, I was a maniac. I was screaming at people, ‘Drink your milk! Don't throw it out!’” It was her colleague, Sister Angela, who had to step in and remind her to calm down, take a step back, and help her adjust culturally back to New York City.

Apart from the monetary strife of the people she encountered in Jamaica, Rose also gained a much greater grasp of their religious and spiritual lives. With a student population that was a good part Christian but not Catholic, Sister Rose gained the opportunity to clarify what she had previously interpreted as nonchalance on the part of the parents in terms of their children’s spiritual lives. “Geography of a country affects the religious development of a person.” Before being in Jamaica, Rose stated that when she registered new students in the school, she could not fathom how parents did not know whether their child had been baptized or not.

As you drove around [Jamaica], you could see the lack of transportation. So, a person went to the church they could walk to. It had nothing to do with what a person believed or their faith formation as a child. Whatever it was, it was because it was the only one they could get to…It was totally foreign as to how I was brought up…It was an eye-opening experience.

Poverty and religious insight were not the only two cultural awakenings experienced. However, Rose deemed those incidents to be some of the most vivid.

During Rose’s tenure as an assistant principal, she experienced many state and national efforts to advance education. Although she served in a socio-economically disadvantaged area,
from an academic standpoint, Sister Rose’s school most times fared higher than both its private and public counterparts. Rose attributed this success to two factors:

First of all, the diocese would get on these bandwagons, changing programs, testing programs, and switching publishers left and right. We [she and Sister Angela] would speak up and say, ‘Could we just stick to something for two years and see how it works first?’ Another part of the reason that we met success was because we included our staff. The teachers were always included when we selected materials or picked a new textbook, or some new initiative was introduced. They were always given input…If they were the ones that were using the materials or implementing something, then we needed to include them in the decision, and I think we always did that where it was possible.

Concerning high-stakes testing, she adopted an attitude of “it’s one test. Put it in perspective…We weren’t going to make the kids crazy over it because there was never much riding on it. There still isn’t as far as I can tell.” Rose asserted that she viewed testing as a part of a school’s academic program but most certainly not the most important part.

Like many Catholic schools in New York City, and as the years of her tenure progressed, Rose’s school faced financial hardships spurred by declining enrollment, increasing costs, as well as issues facing the Catholic church as an institution. In contemplating her efforts to thwart these problems, she became pensive.

For so many years, the enrollment was fairly stable. I also think I floundered in that area because it was not in my set of skills. I think we missed opportunities where we could reach out to people. I just don’t think we knew how to do it.

Aside from an absence of wherewithal in terms of marketing, Sister Rose revealed that as a Catholic school with a limited capacity for expenses, she and Sister Angela did not allocate a lot
of funding in this area as they both felt that the money was better spent serving the current
students in the school rather than a hypothetical population.

We were putting more funding into teacher development and technology. Teacher
development for all the obvious reasons, and technology because we needed to be sure
that we were giving the kids the opportunity that they needed because so many of them at
that point didn't have the availability of technology at home.

Both Sister Rose and Sister Angela maintained that their maxim from day one as school
principals had been “Children first, teachers second, and parents third.” As one of Sister Rose’s
duties had been the school’s business manager, she lived this precept financially as well.
Contrary to Rose’s statement regarding marketing the school to expand the student body, former
faculty members viewed their abilities differently. Mr. V’s sentiment was that their actions were
marketing tools. Mr. V conveyed that “Her [Sister Rose] concern was the community and
building the school.” Mrs. S referred to the efforts the sisters made in 2012 when their school
merged with another. This merge meant a significant increase in enrollment, but it also meant
melding two schools, two cultures, and at the time, four principals. “They knew what they
wanted and they were out to get it. They were going to make this [the school merge] work. They
were determined ladies.”

Rose was emphatic that Sister Rose, the nun, and Sister Rose the educator are the same.
“I brought being a Sister of Mercy to my job as an educator. And I never had to make a
conscious decision how to blend the two. It was never outside of me.” For the most part, she
found that having a dual role as a religious sister and being a principal was something positive.

They [parents] expected to be listened to and treated in a way differently than if they
went to a public-school principal or person who was not a religious sister. I think they
just expected, and I responded because I felt I needed to treat them with the utmost respect.

However, she did concede that she felt there is a “public dimension to being a nun” in that there’s a popular misconception or expectation on the part lay-people that “she's a nun she's got to be nice.” Sister Rose countered this mistaken belief with the following notion—“She's a nun, but she's got to be honest, fair, and just. So, that was the approach I took.” And, Rose still stands by this approach today.

When asked if she felt any obstacles to doing her job or to the way she was treated because of her gender, Sister Rose responded instantaneously with the name of one particular priest who at the time was pastor of the church associated with her school, and as such, was effectively in charge of the school.

There was never any acknowledgment that what we were doing was of quality. I don’t think that he ever really supported the school, and, therefore, by association supported us. I think it might have been because we were religious women…I remember when we decided to have a playground put in. It was a production with rubber mulch everywhere and a delivery truck full of equipment that the driver wasn’t so sure the ground could support. We kept our fingers crossed, and it got installed. Who came strolling around the corner as this was happening? Father X. I believe he patted me on the head and said condescendingly, ‘Next time you do something like this, please ask me first.’

Somehow, she controlled her emotions to his demeaning gesture and patronizing words by replying: “We’re good. The sidewalk didn’t break.” She then proceeded to walk away. Although Sister Rose did not convey any other instances of maltreatment as a woman, this one cleric’s
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words, actions, and dealings she had with him left a lasting impression of subjugation due to gender.

In response to the question of whether Sister Rose considered herself a feminist, she offered this reply:

Probably now. Probably if asked earlier on, I wouldn't have had a reaction one way or the other. But now, I probably am…with the state of the [Catholic] church the way it is. We're not moving in any positive direction…and I think we need to speed things up a little bit and get more women leadership involved.

She also expressed that had nuns had the opportunity to do so, she would have been interested in managing or ministering a Catholic parish. “Earlier on, I would have been more than willing to take on a position in helping parish administration or something like that.” Whether changes along those lines will ever take place for women remains to be seen. However, Sister Rose felt that if women were granted a greater leadership role within the running of the Catholic Church, greater strides in modernization could take place at a much faster rate.

The last part of her life that Sister Rose shared was about her educational legacy. She stated:

If I had a student come back and say something to me about their experience here, I hope it would be something like: I'm grateful for the education that you offered me and the humanity that you created in me. I hope that wherever my former students go and whatever they do that they understand that they need to pay it forward.

This legacy was echoed by former parent Mrs. F when she stated “They were as worried about the education as they were worried about the human being, the human condition. Of looking and being aware of the next guy and what the next person needed.” Sister Rose was emphatic about
her wish above all to have created humanity in each one of her students. She expressed concern about prevailing attitudes in today’s world and primary concern for oneself above others, and she hoped to have fostered a sensitivity to the needs of others in all the children whose lives she touched.

When asked to offer any parting words about her educational experiences, Sister Rose displayed mixed emotions.

I don't envy anybody going into the position now…I know what it was. I know what it’s become. And, I would prefer it to be what it was…The last two years of working in the school, I said, 'There's no more joy in what I'm doing.’ With so many requirements coming down, there was so little time to be able to interact with both the students and the staff. I felt there were days when I never left my office. And that's regretful.

Whether a conscious decision on her behalf or not, Sister Rose’s parting words summarized the maxim that sustained her career in education: children first, teachers second, and everything else after that.

**Sister Angela: Professional Experience**

September of 1972 marked the first academic year of many for Sister Angela. That first year of teaching, she requested to be the first-grade teacher. Instead, she was told,

‘No, you're going to be good in fourth.’ And fourth-graders, they scared me because they were bigger! And I had Charles…I will never forget Charles. I put him in my desk drawer and sat him there next to me because it was the only way I could calm him down. When he graduated, he said, ‘Thanks for everything, Sister.’ I still pray for Charles [laughing].

In that same first school, she would then go on to teach sixth grade. From sixth grade, Angela then moved to eighth grade. “And, eighth grade is where I found my love.” She may have loved
teaching eighth grade, but she was not fundamentally happy with her living arrangements associated with her first school.

Sister Angela explained her dissatisfaction with her first convent:

The other nuns living in the convent were older. I and another girl were the same age. The rest of them were maybe in their 40s, and at that point, maybe I was like early twenties. So yes, they were older, but not...There’s no other way to say it—they were old farts. You know, there’s a difference between older and old farts...My mother was in her 40s then, but she was a with-it person.

This lack of compatibility with her fellow sisters led Sister Angela to doubt her initial beliefs about her vocation as a religious sister.

Given her family’s strong opposition to her choice as a nun, Angela had expected her family to rejoice when she expressed her unhappiness and her possible departure from religious life as a whole. Her parents’ reaction was not what she had anticipated.

I thought they’re gonna have a party since they had such a lousy reaction initially when I entered religious life. I even told that to my superior. Instead, my mom said to me, ‘Just go back a minute. Didn't you tell me the joy it can be?? This is weird because God called you. And, I replied, ‘Yeah.’ So she said, ‘So now he's not calling you?’ So I said, ‘What do you mean, Mom? I thought you would be happy.’ She said, ‘For me to be happy, you need to be happy. So I’m going to say to you that maybe God needs you to try another convent before you make this decision.

Sister Angela then pointed to the floor and stated, “That’s how I ended up here. First living here and commuting to the other school, and then teaching here and becoming principal.” When she first moved into the new convent, she took the tiniest room because, in her mind, she believed
that she was going to leave the Sisters of Mercy. “I thought I’m outta here. And how many years ago was that? Because this is where I belong.” The decision to take the smallest space was well over 40 years ago. She still resides in that second convent.

In September 1980, Sister Angela became a principal. She was 33 years old at the time, and she was the youngest administrator within the diocese. After serving as the eighth-grade teacher in the school for three years, both she and Sister Rose put their names forward to take over the position of principal as the current one was leaving. Angela also revealed that “we knew it meant not only there [the school] but here [the convent].” In addition to maintaining a familiar face at the helm of the school, it was a way to ensure the perpetuity of the convent where she was now happily living. The school principal also became superior of the convent, and this guaranteed the living arrangements for her, Sister Rose, and several other nuns. She had come to the convent where she has lived since the mid-1970s for community, and she was determined to maintain it.

When she found out that it was between both she and Sister Rose, that’s when they decided to join forces with Angela as the titular principal.

When we knew that I was principal and Rose was going to be assistant principal, school closed Wednesday, June 23rd. Thursday, the 24th, we tore the entire school apart. We rearranged to our organizational needs. We planned out the year. We planned out faculty meetings and agendas, and what we aim to study and improve. We worked the entire summer to get the new academic year just right. And, the first week of school went perfectly, but that Friday, I went into the secretary, and she said, ‘You did a good job. And when do you intend to get the calendar out to the parents?’ Calendar?? We [she and
Sister Rose] ran back into my office and screamed at each other, ‘Oh my God, we forgot the academic calendar!’

The calendar was the first of quite a few hurdles she faced as a first-year principal.

**Culture Clashes**

Despite having youth on her side, Sister Angela characterized that first year as an educational administrator as a trying one. First, she had a school secretary who was not fond of working with someone significantly younger than she and made this known to all. Angela relayed that the situation became so contentious that she told the secretary, “I am the principal, and you are not. Either my decisions are followed, or you need to find a place where you feel more comfortable because I’m not going anywhere.” The secretary heeded Sister Angela’s words and resigned after the first year of Angela and Rose’s leadership.

Within the very first week of Sister Angela beginning her tenure as principal, she made her educational philosophy clear, concise, and deviating from what had been the norm for quite some time.

The principal before me, her first response was to parents. Her second response was to children. Her third response was to faculty. When I came on, the very first back-to-school night in September, I made clear the first response was to the children. The second was to faculty. I told the parents I wanted to please them, but that I would fight them for what the child needs. Make no mistake.

These words represent the maxim that both she and Sister Rose lived by for nearly 40 years, with neither one of them deviating very far from this motto throughout their careers as educational administrators.
Angela explained that this message was not initially very well received. “Every morning out on the corner of the school, there would be a group of parents moaning and complaining.” After witnessing this for about a month, Angela decided to confront the parents in a non-threatening way.

I finally went outside, and I was scared. I was 33. I was so scared. But I went out there, and I said to them, ‘I know that you really are against me, but let's go out and have a cup of coffee and talk about what you think I'm doing wrong. They took me up on it…And the next day, they were out there. They called me over to talk, and I knew I had reached them, and I was in.

When asked how she summoned the courage to speak to the discontented parents, Sister Angela drew a complete blank and said that she had no idea.

Contrary to Sister Rose, who had determined that the first graduation ceremony she celebrated as principal was one of her fondest memories, Sister Angela deemed it one of her worst. And it was due to a power struggle between her authority as principal and that of the pastor in charge of the school. Angela reminded me that while she and Sister Rose were in charge of the day-to-day administration of the school, it was still a parish school. As such, the pastor was ultimately in charge of it.

I would not allow two of the boys in the eighth-grade class to participate in the graduation ceremonies. There was a break-in and some vandalizing, and these two boys had done it. The pastor told me that he would pay for the boys. I told him that if I let them participate, this will set a precedent that I’m weak and not in charge. I also told him that if he was going to allow them to be part of the festivities that I would respect his decision but that I would resign as principal. It was a hard thing to do. It was hard, and it
was scary. I went to bed at night thinking to myself, ‘Am I going to lose my job?’ And, I had to take a tough stance because everyone knew what happened and what these boys did.

The boys responsible for these infractions did not graduate with the rest of their classmates, and Sister Angela remained for 36 subsequent graduation ceremonies.

As an administrator, Sister Angela bore witness to a multitude of changes. These modifications ran the gamut from student demographics, to students’ family issues, to various pastors. In considering how she dealt with all these various alterations, she explained her navigational strategy.

One of the things that I often said to people is, "Being an administrator in a school, you can go in with an agenda of what you want to do, and by 8:01 am...the agenda was blown out of the water. You have to follow the rhythm of a place. As administrator, literally, there are consecutive days that you are making a major decision for individuals, whether it be a parent, child, or a faculty member. You're making major decisions and in minutes.

Sister Angela admitted that it took years of practice to find the right balance in how to handle these situations; she also felt that toward the end of her years as an educational administrator, it became increasingly difficult to manage all the various demands. However, communication and respect played key roles in her success.

You knew the stories. I still know the stories now. I still get messages from people on my phone. There was a trust level that went both ways. I think, because of that, there was a respect level. I also had a wonderful assistant principal.

Sister Angela cited her collaboration with Sister Rose as a major factor in being able to maintain relationships and open communication with her various stakeholders. She stated that both their
strengths and weaknesses were complementary, allowing each of them to focus on the areas where they excelled. Sister Rose concentrated more on the financial and administrative aspects, while Angela preferred the more interpersonal dimensions of educational administration.

Sister Angela pointed out that in her last year as an eighth-grade teacher, she had one student of color in the entire class. By the September that she became principal of the school, much of the pupil population was no longer from Irish and Italian backgrounds but first-generation Haitian. Within three months, the ethnic composition of the school had changed dramatically. A few months into the school year, the parish pastor decided to remark on this shift to Angela. “In November, he asked if I noticed there were a lot of Caribbean students in the school. I told him, ‘Wow. I’m going to clap for you. I’m going to let you go to Harvard right now. Right now.’ To Sister Angela, she took a religious vow of dedication to the sick, the poor, and the uneducated. This vow was and is not contingent upon race but on circumstances.

Sister Angela recalled with great fondness those days of a culture shift in her school community.

One of my best memories was having kindergarten line up and me calling the names of the children. We had a boys' list and a girls' list, and we called the girls’ names, and then we called all the boys' names. There was this one little girl all dressed up. I was calling ‘Gilbert’ and nobody came. ‘Gilbert, raise your hand!’ I was looking for a boy. I found out Gilbert is a girl’s name too. It was something we had to learn. She also chuckled at the memory of a child who had never seen a rotary dial phone before.

It was a really heavy snowstorm, so we were closing school earlier and having parents come. So this one third-grade child who was standing at my door said, ‘I know my mom's number.’ I said, ‘All right, go inside and use that phone and come back and tell me what
mom says.’ And he goes in and two seconds later, he is back. And I said, ‘Good did you get mom?’ He says, ‘No, the phone's broken.’ I said, ‘The phone's broken? No, I know it works.’ So he says, ‘Come.’ And we're looking at the wires. He says and points, ‘you see all those holes?’

Stifling a smile, Sister Angela then proceeded to show the child how to use a rotary phone.

Naturally, at times, there were culture clashes as well, and these differences in views were often with the parents. Sister Angela had one particularly upsetting experience in which she was compelled to call protective services because a child had been severely corporally punished by his mother. The parent in question was Afro-Caribbean and questioned Sister Angela’s cultural understanding as a white woman serving a school with an almost entirely black population.

She was angry, very angry. She asked who the hell I thought I was. Then she proceeded to shout some rhetoric about ‘you white people.’ I interrupted as soon as she started. I said, ‘Don't do the Haitian thing. I'm not impressed with it. I'm not going to be scared by it.’ Then I told her, ‘Look around, lady. Every kid here is black, and I love every single one.’

In a twist of fate, Sister Angela saw this particular parent recently at a community gathering. The mother kissed her hello and then proceeded to tell Sister Angela to look around and told her that after all these years, “they’re still your children.” What had been an extremely unpleasant experience at the time became a learning experience for both parent and administrator.

Sister Angela was hard-pressed for words when asked for a possible answer as to why both she and Sister Rose were considered among the best administrators in the diocese they served. At first, her reply was a quick “I have no idea why,” and with that she began to laugh.
However, after giving it some deeper thought, she believed it stemmed from speaking up for stakeholders.

I contributed to conversations at principal's meetings. I wasn't afraid to say, ‘What you're suggesting right now is wrong for my kids. It's not going to work for the whole diocese. It may work in a more affluent area, but it's not going to work for my students.

In considering how she was able to be so bold and speak up to central administration, Sister Angela retorted, “Because I knew my kids. I knew their stories. I knew their family lives, and I knew their circumstances.” Angela ended this part of the conversation with a sobering thought that there is no requiring students or families to do things online, for there is no online for a family of four who shares a one-room apartment. Nevertheless, triangulation interviews revealed other motives for their lofty status. From a faculty perspective, when I discussed the sisters’ reputation as being highly regarded school administrators, Mr. V offered a very interesting anecdote. “I knew one of the superintendents, and when he came to the school to do a professional development session, he told me that Rose and Angela always wanted the best for the school, so they were always researching what was needed: where we could do better, what would benefit us…” Former student, Mr. L.F., associated their success in their ability “to raise students.” He further explained that the sisters raised the students as their children “to lead them further in life.” And like a typical parent, there were also challenging moments in raising a child. Ms. B recalled getting into trouble with Sister Angela for the way she behaved toward another classmate. She laughingly added “I went home that afternoon, and I wrote in my diary how much I couldn't stand her!” One former faculty member remembered, “They knew each child. They knew the character of each child. [As the school librarian], they even made me memorize every name of every kid in every grade.” There was a deeper connection beyond being administrators.
Standards, Choice, and Accountability

When Sister Angela became principal, there were no state or national standards, nor was there the concept of adequate yearly progress. Catholic schools were still fairly stable and riding the wave of the positive outcomes associated with them found in Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore’s 1982 longitudinal study that sparked what some coined the *Catholic school advantage* in that outcomes for students who attended these schools were quite favorable. The Common Core Learning Standards did not appear on her administrative radar until her third decade as a principal. However, many sweeping educational initiatives did take place during her tenure. She accounted for her ability to adapt to these changes.

There were a lot of changes, but the goal was the kids and their development...You need to get the teachers on board to value that same thing. But it's so much better if they can come to that themselves. I think we were successful because the teachers had a say in how we were going to approach each of those changes. They had to own it. I could stand there and say whatever I wanted to say, but that wasn’t going to put the love of learning in a child. The teachers did that, and they wouldn’t do it unless they bought into it themselves.

Sister Angela felt that collaboration and teacher buy-in were what enabled all these transitions and new policy implementations to take place. She also gave credence to the idea that teacher feedback also assisted her as an administrator in deciding what would work best for the students and teachers.

Sister Angela had a unique take on testing and accountability. First of all, she did not view it as the definitive answer to students’ academic abilities. Nor did she see it as the sole
reflection of teacher capabilities. “You do the whole child thing, and you do the whole teacher one as well.” She also added that

we [both she and Sister Rose] took part in scoring the test because we felt it's one way of knowing where our children really stood. I think we were more concerned with if a child could increase; we didn’t care if it was by three points. That was still progress.

Although scoring was an annual occurrence and did not involve every grade, Sister Angela felt that this was another way of understanding her students and their stories.

As for school choice and the pressure to maintain enrollment, Sister Angela stayed true to her decision of students first. While she was happy to meet with any parent interested in attending the school, it was “always the child first. It had to be.” Enrollment did decrease during her time as principal; however, for Sister Angela, it was not about accepting any child to sustain student numbers. “If we could not service the child to meet his or her needs, then we would have been doing a great disservice to the child.” Sister Angela readily admitted that she certainly worried about enrollment numbers; nonetheless, she would not compromise the educational needs of a child to augment enrollment.

**Oppression and Identity**

Similar to Sister Rose, Sister Angela was quite clear about her dual role as a member of a religious order and as an educator. “It was never an issue because nun is who I am, and I hope that was what was expressed as educator, as administrator, as both. First, to the kids and faculty, and to the parents as well.” She expressed that being a principal who was also a nun had its privileges. “I saw lots of advantages because people would come to you and tell you, ‘Sister, this is what's going on...’ And it was like you didn't search that out. People would come and say that to you. So that was a gift.” For Angela, being a member of a religious order allowed her to gain
the trust of her students’ families, and this confidence granted her the ability to understand the lives and circumstances of her students and their families.

Upon considering whether anyone had ever challenged her or her decisions because she was a woman, Sister Angela stated “If they did the woman thing, I was oblivious to it. They would use the nun thing because that was the perception that a nun always had to be nice and make everyone happy.” However, as Sister Angela pointed out on several occasions, doing God’s work does not always ensure that others are granted the outcome they wish, especially when it would come at the expense of a child.

Just as habits were, and in some cases still are, a visual identity marker for religious sisters, whether Catholic or not, the white collars worn by clergy members also denote a religious affiliation. Sister Angela had a very unsettling incident involving a priest and one of her female students.

I was an eighth-grade teacher then. The students were lining up, coming back from lunch. At that time, they used to be able to go home for lunch. Anyway, I saw this priest put his hand on the chest of one of my girls. There I was in habit, and I grabbed him by the neck and said, ‘Don’t you ever do that again.’ I ran upstairs and told the principal. We alerted the bishop’s office. I wrote a letter. Nothing was done, but it shocked the hell out of me. Probably him too because he wasn’t expecting me to do that.

As Sister Angela explained, the mindset was very different in the 1970s as opposed to what it is today. However, her actions were quite bold, considering the frame of mind in Catholic educational institutions was still that the sisters who serviced a school always answered to the pastors and priests of the host parish.
Sister Angela also admitted that there was one particular pastor who did not look favorably upon nuns or many others for that matter. Just as Sister Rose had named Father X as an oppressor, so did Sister Angela. However, Angela took exception not so much to his uncivil behavior toward her and Sister Rose as much as she did to how he treated others in her school community. “It was not a nice experience. I don't think he liked kids. I really don't think he did. I also found him disrespectful to the teachers.” This statement certainly paralleled her idea of her great emphasis on the importance of the welfare and well-being of children and teachers.

Sister Angela firmly stated that she did not consider herself a feminist. When reminded that she was expected to make supper, babies, coffee, Angela explained that she did not like labels. “Sometimes, I see that word or connect that word with a hardness.” Nevertheless, she did qualify who she was by describing herself as “…a woman of determination and I will not hesitate to tell you what I think.” She then proceeded to laugh heartily.

In debating the term feminist in a joint interview with her colleague Sister Rose, Sister Angela held fast to the idea that she did not consider herself a feminist because she also associated the term with a lot of anger. Rose reminded her that there still exists a lot to be angry about, particularly as it pertains to the Catholic Church. Angela agreed with her; however, she made it clear that the message will not be received if it is relayed laden with ire. Both she and Sister Rose agreed to disagree on this point.

Legacy

In the final portion of her narrative, Sister Angela discussed what she wished her educational legacy to be. Since she had spent eight years as a classroom teacher, she divided her legacy into two parts— one as a teacher and one as a principal.

As a teacher, Sister Angela expressed the following:
I taught them to read. Those that couldn't read, I made them read comic books. I would sit for hours in the classroom, reading novels because on Wednesday, I didn't teach, I read… I met a former student in a restaurant. She was with her children, and this is how I was introduced. ‘She's the one that told me that I was going to love books.’ That's my legacy.

Angela had tears in her eyes as she recounted this incident in her life. For her, it was extremely important to open new worlds to her students through a love of books.

Reflecting on her legacy as a principal, Sister Angela became thoughtful. On one hand, she admitted that she was able to be in touch with many former students and former faculty members and hear their positive memories of what they received while being a pupil or a teacher in the community. On the other hand, she felt a strong sense of empowerment.

When I came to this community [the school where she taught, was principal, and the same convent where she still lives today], I felt empowered. I really don't know how to explain this. All of this was ours. Faculty was ours. Families were ours. The children were ours.

She then gave thought to the amount of responsibility this type of ownership entailed and surmised that “When you fall in love, you fall in love. That doesn't go away.” For Sister Angela’s legacy, love is love—be it for reading or students, faculty members, or parents.

Both sisters’ careers as educators directly answered how their professional experiences relate to the feminist concepts of oppression and identity. As well, their stories reflected how they made sense of their 40-year commitment to the Catholic educational mission, even as student demographics, educational policy, and leadership shifted. Finally, Sister Rose and Sister Angela’s tales provide clear insight into their philosophies of education and leadership style.
They also express lessons that can be derived and applied to our current system of education. Once again, the themes of social justice leadership and its ensuing Sisters of Mercy charisms, and social-emotional learning along with knowing thyself to know others are evident in this part of the subjects’ lives; however, it is members of the clergy that materialized thematically in greater detail than the influence of other religious sisters.

**Born and formed social justice leadership.** With regard to professional experiences and the sisters displaying social justice leadership, I discovered these actions were most often expressed in their advocacy of the poor. When I analyzed the sisters’ interviews, there was a total of 35 direct references to the topic of socio-economic difficulty, be it in their own lives or the lives of their students and their families or their faculty members. As is stated previously, both sisters grew up in homes where finances were strained. As well, their order takes a fourth special vow of service, with the poor being one of their target communities. So, these factors might have rendered them more sensitive to poverty.

As well, utilizing the census tract information from socialexplorer.com (2019) for the area where the sisters’ former school and current home are located revealed the subjects’ descriptions of the shifts in population and socio-economic status as accurate, with the ethnicity of the residents in 1970 as 99.5% white and less than 1% reported as other. However, within 10 years, the ethnic composition changed in quite a pronounced manner, with 52.4% white, 44.6% black, and almost 3% other. By 1990, the area had become almost 90% black and has remained at this percentage throughout census data for 2000 and 2010.

Another item that might have contributed attention to this particular group might have been the six weeks they spent in the West Indies. According to Sister Rose, “the poverty was just overwhelming, and I think that was the thing that probably stayed with me the longest.” Then
again, their devotion to those with limited means might very well have stemmed from their
student population and their respective families. Sister Angela described home visits with
refrigerator boxes for closets and several family members living in a one-room rental.

*Economic justice.* The sisters’ attendance to the needs of the financially less fortunate
was substantiated in interviews with all three former parents. Mrs. F (personal communication,
June 21, 2009) stated that “they helped me with tuition, sometimes rent…And, their families
even donated to me. That will never be forgotten.” Mrs. T recalled the time she received what
she believed was a mistake in her tuition balance. I said, ‘Sister Rose, there's something wrong
here.’ She told me, ‘I had a little bit of extra money, so I paid off the rest of your kid's
tuition’…” Mrs. N’s recollection began with a bit of annoyance at receiving a past due notice for
tuition. Although the sisters knew she and her husband would pay the bill, they still sent her a
letter. However, when she considered this situation and many of the other families’ economic
struggles, she reflected, “Maybe in another sense though, that might have prompted them to then
look for other ways to help, like financial aid.” Yet, assistance to students and their families was
not the only way in which the sisters’ social justice leadership manifested itself.

*Teacher and staff justice.* All faculty members shared a distinct sense of development in
some manner and could each recall specific times in which both of the subjects assisted in
finding and encouraging many opportunities for growth as teachers and as people with personal
lives. All faculty members also felt supported as teachers and as people. Mr. V replied, “If I had
a situation or problem, I would sit with them. They would comfort me and almost like…guide
me to the right direction. If I was falling down, they had the words to inspire me to move up.”

Moreover, Miss S described them as “very supportive and supportive of any situation
involving a teacher…they would always take a teacher’s side.” The issue of teacher subjugation
caused by external pressures, as well as by excessive parental aggressiveness, was raised in the literature review of this study. The faculty member’s comments supported not only the sisters’ upholding of the rights of their teachers but also the welfare of their students by encouraging teacher satisfaction.

**Sisters of Mercy charisms.** Another way in which I derived the theme of social justice leadership in this study is through the subjects’ actions regarding the physical and emotional well-being of their students. Whether cognizant of this fact or not, the Sisters of Mercy in this study and their actions reflect Maslow’s (1943) Hierarchy of Needs. Neither of the sisters ever made direct reference to Maslow, but their stories reflect strides at fulfilling the needs of the whole child and defending them from oppressors— even if the oppressors were parents.

Sister Angela recalled the time in which she had a very heated argument in her office regarding the physical endangerment of one of her students, with her reporting the mother to the proper authorities. The incident took place at the beginning of her career as an administrator. It would not be her last. The faculty member with the longest tenure described similar events and how they were handled:

> They tried to understand. They didn't want to strip the parent of what their cultural upbringing was. However, they did enforce that, ‘Here we're a team. And it takes a whole village to raise a child. Not just the way you've done it in the past at home. But now that you've come to a new culture, you have to be open to it, understanding how things work here. And not to say that what you did back home was wrong, but...’

Just as their Mercy Sister predecessors had done, the subjects were acutely aware that they, too, were serving a fragile immigrant population that required advocacy.
Members of the clergy. Even though neither Sister Rose nor Sister Angela dwelled heavily on negative experiences as women whose dual roles as nuns and educators placed them in highly patriarchal systems, instances of oppression did occur with those of the opposite sex. All those occasions involved members of the clergy. Neither sister attributed this oppression to their gender, but to be religious sisters, a requisite is being a female. Thus, I attributed this oppression to gender.

Both nuns explicitly stated that they were not treated well by Father X. When interviewing faculty members and asking if they could recall a time when the subjects were mistreated in some way because of their gender or occupation, four out of the five stated yes and named Father X specifically as the perpetrator. The only faculty member who did not name him specifically was not an employee at the school during the time this priest served as pastor. Whether it was belittling them in front of staff, rolling his eyes at them in front of parents and the rest of the congregation, humiliating them for the way they dressed or a decision they made, all of the faculty members present during this time noted actions such as these in their interviews.

Furthermore, in discussing their observed reactions, all stated that the sisters did their best not to react in front of him. As Mr. V. explained, “They seemed like they just did what they were told…the man was like a plague around our school.” This idea of as little reaction as possible corroborated with both sisters’ stories in that when patted on the head, Sister Rose walked away, and Sister Angela stated that she had told the faculty that she “didn’t care what their personal feelings were. Never ever be rude or disrespectful to him.” As much as the sisters did not care for Father X, they did not want their students, faculty, or parents involved in what they perceived as his issue with them as women religious.
Although some of the faculty expressed surprise by the lack of public reaction, in considering it from a social justice point of view, I equated it similar to the peaceful aspects of the Gandhian brand of social justice. There might also be the idea of self-sacrifice in that if they allowed Father X to mistreat them, he would spare spewing his wrath upon others. In any case, the decision to follow the path of peace worked as both former faculty members, and the sisters themselves discovered that Father X continually praised both Sisters Rose and Angela for leadership skills and abilities to others within the diocese.

One other aspect of clergy oppression is of a physically invasive nature. There are two incidents in particular, and each involved Sister Angela solely. During our interview, she relayed the story of her grabbing a priest and threatening him in front of the school community in response to him touching a female student inappropriately. She also relayed a story of a school and parish pastor whose manner of looking at her made her feel uncomfortable. “He was harmless. I think…no, I know he was afraid of me.” She did not deem the way her boss at the time looked at her inappropriately that important; nevertheless, a former student of Sister Angela’s during her early years as an administrator questioned “…through the years, she sort of disrobed…In my eyes, she was just gorgeous. So, I’m wondering how she was perceived by men?” Though she never pursued any type of discussion or even confrontation regarding unwanted glances toward herself, Sister Angela was willing, as a teacher in the 1970s when the patriarchal and hierarchical systems of the Catholic Church were very much pronounced, to defend the rights of her student in a highly demonstrative manner.

**Social-emotional learning.** On paper, the subjects’ priority to the students was their learning. However, learning will not take place when there are emotional obstacles. “They were always working with the family, having a conversation with the family,” said former student Ms.
J when describing an incident whereby Sister Rose and Sister Angela became involved because of a classmate’s excessive corporal punishment inflicted by a parent.

Although probably not completely cognizant that they were using social-emotional learning practices, the sisters recognized the importance of social-emotional health and wellness. Counseling and ministering to families experiencing emotional hardships were also a part of their principalship. Within their narratives, both sisters referred to the loss of one their second graders within the first few years as principals. They comforted the parent, and they also took on a high degree of emotional responsibility in ministering to the entire family. While no faculty members interviewed were present when the first loss occurred, there were subsequent unfortunate deaths of other children. All emphasized the amount of support shown to the families, such as counseling, attending all wake and funeral services, and visiting with the families of the bereaved months afterward. At the end of her interview, Sister Angela stated, “The families were ours.” Therefore, the families became members of their extended families and the subjects treated them as such.

Knowing thyself and knowing others. During the interviews with Sister Rose and Sister Angela, the terms of knowing the stories, knowing my kids, or knowing who I am were used quite often, particularly when describing their professional experiences. There were three triangulating interviews that best illustrated the sisters’ self-understanding and how it influenced others in the same manner.

The first account came from a former faculty member who was struggling with his sexuality.

When I first met Sister Angela, she was so modern. She didn’t look like a nun. So, I asked her, ‘You’re Sister Angela?’ She looked at me, smiled, and then said, ‘Yeah. You
got a problem with that, Jack?’ We both laughed, and since that moment, I felt comfortable with her…I was with her and Sister Rose for five years, and they made me feel comfortable with who I am as a person because, for many years, I was hiding. I walked into Sister Angela’s office. They both then sat down, and I told them I was gay. They told me that they understood, then they both got out of their seat and both hugged me. I told them it was a very difficult situation because I still hadn’t come out to my parents. They then offered to speak to my parents, either alone or with me. Both sisters then told me their own stories. I started talking to them at about three o’clock and didn't leave until about five-thirty.

The faculty member then told me that the sisters were the first two people in his life to whom he had admitted his sexual orientation. When asked why he chose Sister Rose and Sister Angela to be the first two, he stated that “it was the comfort level. They made me feel comfortable.” He also added that hearing their stories also gave him a sense of encouragement that he was not the only one in this world whose life did not take the path that others expected. He was not the only person for whom self-identity and awareness grew through knowing the subjects.

Former student, Ms. M, first met Sister Angela in the late 1970s as her reading teacher. As well, Ms. M was also Sister Angela’s first student of color and the only child of color in her entire grade. Yet, it was her remarks and observations about Sister Angela that informed her view of herself. “I had Sister Angela as my reading teacher for sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. In sixth and seventh, she wore the habit. In eighth grade, things started to change. She still went by her religious name, though.” Then, Angela was in her late twenties/early thirties, and the former student recollected that for her, Sister Angela represented “a working woman, a woman who commanded that classroom, a woman who could dress like a woman and still exude
respect.” Although she admitted that it took her quite some time to establish her own identity, Ms. M considered Sister Angela a role model in helping her in the process.

The last interview I conducted was with former parent, Mrs. N, whose daughter attended the subjects’ school in the first decade of the 2000s. Her comment was very pivotal in that she described the sisters at that point in their careers as “I think they reached the point where they didn't have to make any apologies anymore for what they did or why they did it because they were now knowledgeable, experienced, and they've seen it all.” She added that this level of comfort with who they were as women and as professionals had somewhat of a trickle-down effect.

Their legacy for me is all about identity. For my daughter, as a parent, her identity was formed at that school by having Sister Rose, Sister Angela, and I have to say the teachers that she had, she formed herself as a black woman of color…her identity was embraced. Whether it was simply the sisters’ understanding of who they were as individuals or a conflation of factors, this parent’s comments link back to the very core of this study's theoretical framework of identity.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I presented the findings of my qualitative study of religious sister educators. I divided the chapter into four major sections. In the first part, I provided a figure and brief explanation of how I determined my data codes into the themes of social justice leadership, with the sub-theme of Sisters of Mercy charisms, social-emotional learning, with the sub-theme of knowing thyself to know others, and the influence of other religious sisters and clergy oppression. I further explained how I defined and interpreted these major themes and sub-themes. Last, within this part, I included a summary of the research questions posed in this
dissertation, along with each question’s respective findings. In the second section of this chapter, I discussed Sister Rose and Sister Angela’s childhood and teen years and how the themes derived from this part of their lives answer the research questions. In part three, I focused on the religious formation experiences of the nuns of this study, the corresponding research questions, and the themes determined from this facet of their lives. In part four, I reviewed the sisters’ professional experiences, the research questions answered from these encounters, and the themes that explained these queries. In the next chapter of this dissertation, I conduct an in-depth discussion of the findings revealed in this chapter.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

In this chapter, I present a summary of the study, a discussion of the findings of this study related to the literature, unexpected outcomes that emanated from the findings, as well as my conclusions. The summary of the study provides an overview of the previous four chapters; it also reiterates the problem, purpose statement, the methodology utilized, the research questions, and the major findings. Concerning the discussion of findings section of this study as related to the literature, I review them not only as they pertain to the extant literature but also to the theoretical framework. As implied, in the unanticipated outcomes section of this chapter, I discuss the surprises of this study. Finally, in the conclusions portion, I elaborate on the implications for action, professional practice and the study’s limitations, as well as provide recommendations for further research and present concluding remarks.

Summary of the Study

In this dissertation, I examined the problem of the highly diminished educational resource of religious sister educators in Catholic schools currently within the United States. Once considered the backbone of parochial schools, nuns represent a minimal percentage of the labor force of this country’s largest private education system. Depicted by De Fiore (2011) as “the infrastructure for the schools” (p. 16), teaching sisters in this nation have almost 300 collective years of successful experience both in the classroom and as educational administrators. Therefore, in this dissertation, I sought to make sense of the stories of two such women. Not only did I aim to understand how they viewed their decades-long commitment to Catholic education during years of socio-political and demographic shifts, standards implementation, and the arrival of the age of accountability, but I also strove to highlight and disseminate lessons that can be derived from the sisters’ experiences for the benefit of education as a whole.
While in Chapter One, I provided an overview of the entire study and relevant historical background, in Chapter Two, I developed a theoretical framework based on feminist theory and the concepts of oppression and identity. Additionally, within Chapter Two, I presented a comprehensive analysis of the literature related to religious sister educators. In Chapter Three, I outlined in detail the qualitative study I conducted using a narrative design to capture the stories, philosophies, and leadership tenets of the subjects. In the preceding chapter, I relayed extensive narrative data, the major findings, and the relevant themes that came forth during the data-analysis process.

**Problem**

Within the two major Roman Catholic Dioceses of New York City—the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York, and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn and Queens—there are currently 10 religious sisters serving as principals within 165 Catholic elementary schools. Statistically, these women constitute 6% of a labor force that was once the sole domain of nuns. As of 2009, only 9% of religious sisters in the United States were under retirement age (Berrellezza, Gautier & Gray, 2014). Moreover, with the expansion of the missions of nuns beyond the parameters of teaching and nursing, this statistic is even further reduced in terms of the number of available nun-educators. As this resource of educational professionals narrows almost to the point of extinction, it also puts an end to a 200-year legacy of pedagogical expertise within Catholic schools in the five boroughs that comprise New York City. Thus, before this established instructional source no longer exists, we need to capture their stories and skills, not only for the benefit of Catholic education but for education as a whole.

One of the religious orders that contributed to this almost two-century legacy is the Religious Sisters of Mercy, who arrived to serve the Archdiocese of New York in Manhattan in
1846 and began their careers as educators in 1849. Within five years of being in the field of education in New York, the sisters had “received and trained” over 2,000 individuals (Herron, 1922, p. 237). Furthermore, commencing in 1855, these sisters expanded their services and played an integral role as teachers and administrators of both elementary and high schools of what was to become the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn and Queens.

As of September 2019, there is currently one Religious Sister of Mercy remaining in the capacity of principal of a Catholic elementary school in New York City. August 2017 marked the retirement of the last two sisters from this order to lead a school within one of these dioceses. These nuns served the elementary school of St. Martin of the Rose since the 1970s, first as teachers, and then as principals, for 37 years. During their tenure, they witnessed a multitude of transformations, ranging from the ethnic and socio-economic makeup of the area in which the school and convent were located, to numerous national and state educational initiatives, trends, and shifts. These religious sisters spent over 40 years serving a school, its community, and environs, and they represent the close of a rich educational heritage.

Purpose

The purpose of this narrative study was not only to examine the stories of two religious sister educators that remained dedicated to the Catholic educational mission for over 40 years, even as student demographics, educational policy, and leadership shifted, but also to disseminate their stories of educational leadership for the benefit of all those involved in education, be it private or public.
Methodology and Research Questions

Employing a social constructivist worldview, I used narrative inquiry methods to conduct my research on religious sister educators, and the design was inspired heavily by Connelly and Clandinin’s (1990) article titled *Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry*, which advocated for the use of narratives in educational research. As suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2018), narrative inquiry does not involve a multitude of participants, and my number of subjects was limited to two. Nevertheless, given the breadth of these individuals’ experiences, there was no dearth of data.

I collected data from April 2019 to July 2019 through a series of six face-to-face interviews with the subjects. To validate the study, I conducted member checks with a third sister who has lived and worked with the subjects since their religious formation and teaching days, kept a researcher journal, and carried out triangulation interviews with five former employees, four former students, and three former parents. I also analyzed photographs and archival documents and coded data within this time frame. From July 2019 through September 2019, I reviewed data and codes in an iterative process to derive common themes to answer the following research questions:

1. In what ways do the childhoods, school experiences, religious order formation processes, educational backgrounds, and professional experiences of two religious sisters relate to the feminist concepts of identity and oppression?

2. How do religious sister educators make sense of their 40-year commitment to the Catholic religion’s educational mission, even as student demographics, educational policy, and leadership have shifted?
3. What lessons can we learn from these religious sisters’ stories that can be applied to our current system of education today, be it private or public?

3a. How do they describe their philosophy of education and leadership style?

**Major Findings**

Within parts two, three, and four of chapter four, I presented lengthy explanations to the research questions stated above. Below, I present a summary of the findings as they relate to each research question.

With regard to the first research question: (a) both sisters’ experiences with inequities as children conflated with their continuous exposure to the principles of social justice through their families’ religious beliefs, their own religious formation experiences, and their actions and experiences with their constituents. These experiences rendered their identities to be that of social justice leaders; (b) their childhood experiences with Religious Sisters of Mercy not only fostered their desire to become nuns in the same order but also sowed the seeds of their identities as practitioners of social-emotional learning. Teenage and adult years put the subjects into contact with other religious orders and instilled an identity of high academic standards; (c) while there was economic oppression present during their childhood, teenage years, and as religious sisters, the sisters experienced oppression by members of the clergy.

In terms of the second research question, the subjects made sense of their four-decade commitment to Catholic education during times of change in demographics, leadership, and policies (a) through social justice leadership in the form of student and teacher-centered advocacy and (b) through practices that resembled CASEL’s framework of social-emotional learning competencies.
Last, the sisters explicitly described their philosophy of education throughout their stories as above all *child first, teacher second*, meaning that their ultimate and first responsibility was always to the children they served; however, they also valued and respected their teachers and staff. They saw to the needs of all those served through practicing what I have termed as *social-emotional justice*—a combination of the elements of social justice leadership and social-emotional learning. Moreover, perhaps the comments of one faculty member summed up this conflating notion most accurately by comparing the characters of both sisters. Ms. G coined Sister Rose as “the backbone of the school,” and within the same interview, she also described Sister Angela as having an innate ability to “read people.” When asked to elaborate on these comments, she determined that Sister Rose was all about helping people, meeting their needs, and being of service, while she found that Sister Angela “gives out this vibe of kindness. She attracts people.”

**Discussion of Findings**

In this section, I discuss the findings of this dissertation in terms of existing literature. I examine it concerning this study’s theoretical framework of feminist theory and the related concepts of *oppression* and *identity*. Within these sections, I elaborate on how these findings add to extant research. I also propose unique considerations for Catholic school leadership practices and programs, the leadership practices and programs of all schools, both public and private, and a call for the Catholic church as an institution to review their policies and traditions regarding women religious.

**Social Justice Leadership**

During the interview process, the subjects had expressed that they had never received any formal leadership training of any type either upon becoming principals or even after that. This
notion is supported by O’Donoghue and Harford (2013) in their study of Irish teaching sisters and their ability to take up leadership positions successfully even before the more liberal policies of Vatican II had come into existence. Nonetheless, through their families’ religious beliefs and their educational experiences both before and while becoming religious sisters, the participants were highly exposed to what is known as Catholic Social Teaching. Steeped in the principles of social justice, Catholic Social Teaching reflects a life parallel to that of Jesus “who identified with the poor and marginalized and who lived a life of service and justice” (Donaldson & Belanger, 2012, p. 120). Therefore, via life circumstances, possessing a dual role as religious sister educators, and having had direct instruction in social justice principles through the charisms of their congregation, the participants of this dissertation study had a unique advantage over their lay counterparts in administering leadership practices associated with alleviating the burdens of the oppressed.

Muth (2018) posited that although social justice is most likely not a separate course onto itself in Catholic elementary, middle, and high schools, it is imbued in the culture of the school given the explicit instruction in Catholic Social Teaching and the various service learning projects assigned to reinforce this concept. Nevertheless, the impact of all school leaders’ behaviors, both public and private, on a multitude of facets within their institutions should not be underscored, specifically as it relates to demonstrating and modeling social justice practices and children.

In their systematic review and meta-analysis, Liebowitz and Porter (2019) found “direct evidence of the relationship between principal behaviors and student achievement, teacher well-being and instructional practice, and school organizational health” (p. 817). This notion is supported and substantiated by many authors (Baptiste, 2019; Sebastian, Allensworth, & Huang,
2016; Tatlah, Iqbal, Amin, & Quraishi, 2014) and leads to the question of whether or not there should be explicit social justice leadership courses provided to all those in principal preparation programs—most especially those intending to become Catholic school leaders since promoting and ensuring equity and fair treatment of all is the backbone of the system.

Catholic school principals are tasked not only with the quotidian administrative tasks of all school building leaders but are also accountable for the spiritual formation and development of their students and faculty members. Nonetheless, nearly 25 years ago, Wallace’s (1995) study of Catholic high school principals found that only 30% of those interviewed felt that they had adequate training and preparedness to act as leaders of the faith. A few years later, when writing about the plight of urban Catholic school principals, O’Keefe (1999) suggested that given the dwindling number of women and men religious in Catholic school leadership, those lay women and men who assumed the role needed preparation programs that addressed the administrative aspects of the job and the spiritual dimensions as well. Fifteen years after O’Keefe’s research, Rieckhoff (2014) stated that neither a standardized model of leadership to “support and apprentice a [Catholic school] principal” nor “a set of guidelines for how they should be mentored” (p. 27) existed. Furthermore, Boyle, Haller, and Hunt (2016) found that Catholic school leadership preparation programs in this current era of standards and accountability have promoted a shift in focus from maintaining and perpetuating a culture that embodies the tenets of the faith to be more focused on secular and legal issues. These facts present a concerning issue regarding lay leadership taking on a two-prong leadership role.

Although there is a myriad of graduate and preparation programs geared specifically for Catholic school leadership, very few have a concentration or even a course dedicated solely to social justice. Espousing the works of Pope Leo XIII and his advocacy for social justice, Davis
(2015) suggested that Catholic schools build leadership frameworks based on the former pontiff’s writings. Valadez and Mirci (2015) offered a paradigm for a “socially just model of schooling” (p. 171) based on Catholic Social Teaching. However, employing these types of frameworks is not easily carried out if those in leadership positions in Catholic schools lack a comprehensive exposure to the concept and practices (O’Keefe, 1999). Thus, the findings of this dissertation study highlight the need for more explicit training in social justice leadership practices for all those involved in the field of education. More programs with a social justice focus should be geared specially toward aspiring Catholic school principals.

**Influence of Other Religious Sisters and Clergy Oppression**

For the subjects of this dissertation study, Sister Rose and Sister Angela, the influence of other religious sisters, played a definite role in the subjects’ decision to become nuns, how they would minister as educators and educational leaders, and their attitudes toward academic standards.

In his book on American girls becoming nuns between 1945 and 1965, Titley (2017) described the active recruitment of new sisters by already professed nuns as “conscious propaganda,” (p. 23) to serve an ever-swelling Catholic population. Whether it was a marketing endeavor to provide teaching and nursing staff to Catholic institutions, or a genuine effort to offer a career option to a developing young woman, other researchers agree that many women who would become nuns had formed relationships with those who had already taken religious vows (McGuinness, 2013; Sullivan, 2005).

In addition to inspiring religious vocations, there was another sphere of religious sister influence that this study’s findings touched upon: dedication to the power of education, especially during their religious formation years. As cited by Stringer (2018), according to the
Boston Globe, “Catholic sisters established 150 religious colleges for women in the United States...Before coeducation of men and women became the norm, more women were earning degrees from Catholic colleges than those run by any other religious group” (para. 18). Nonetheless, Stringer also described the opposition nuns received from the male hierarchy of the Catholic church in seeking higher education for themselves and others. Even though the subjects of this study did not experience educational oppression as perpetrated by bishops and priests, they did encounter unjust treatment by clergy members, specifically priests.

Although they did not dwell on this fact for long when relaying their narratives, both sisters discussed oppression specifically at the hands of members of the clergy. This pattern of the subjugation of religious sisters is not a novel concept with the nun’s main leadership group in the United States under investigation in 2012 for being radical and straying from Catholic doctrine. Moreover, Murphy (2014) contended that “religious sisters are stakeholders in a hierarchical organization that has largely marginalized them...for the past two thousand years” (p. 596). In 2015, Pope Francis I ended this investigation, praised the nuns for their work, and commented on expanding the roles of religious sisters within the Church as an institution (Goodstein, 2015). The findings of this dissertation study demonstrated that there remains a distinct power imbalance between genders of those who are in dedicated service of the Catholic church and pointed out that this issue of inequality prevents the church from modernizing and putting capable women in leadership positions. This limit on women’s functions also precludes the Catholic Church from practicing its ultimate tenet of love and respect for others, all others.

Social-Emotional Learning Practices

Unlike social justice leadership, the subjects did receive explicit training and instruction regarding social-emotional learning; however, this training did not occur until some time within
the last decade of their career as administrators. Before that, they relied on what they had come into contact with during their years as elementary students spent with their Religious Sisters of Mercy teachers.

Albeit their study was not related directly to Catholic schools, Sammons, Lindorff, Ortega, and Kingston’s (2015) investigation of what they termed inspiring teachers in the United Kingdom, or those deemed as highly effective in the United States, revealed that over half of the participants were directly inspired by teachers they had during their time as students. What is more, diametrically connected to social-emotional learning, the authors noted that “creating positive relationships seemed central to these teachers’ self-efficacy, and was also something that they recognized in examples of teachers who had inspired them in the past and influenced their decision to enter the profession” (p. 129). Thus, this concept of the sisters utilizing social-emotional learning as they had experienced is not a far-reaching notion.

In terms of Catholic schools and social-emotional learning, the sisters noted that their school and the whole diocese in which St. Martin’s was a part of had collaborated with Yale University and had implemented the RULER approach. The acronym RULER stands for “recognizing emotions, understanding their causes and consequences, labeling these emotions, expressing them appropriately, and regulating emotions through the use of strategies” (Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, 2013, RULER skills section). While both subjects praised this program and had felt that there was great faculty buy-in, they lamented that it was short-lived in that the diocese had abandoned social-emotional learning for a completely different initiative related to improving students’ language skills. Therefore, there was no longer funding or professional development on program implementation.
Various researchers and research organizations (CASEL, 2019; Darling-Hammond, 2019; Goleman, 2004; Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, 2013) have substantiated the positive impacts of well-implemented social-emotional learning programs such as improved student academic performance, improved student behavior, and sustained positive lifetime effects to name a few. Nonetheless, in perusing the website of the National Catholic Education Association, or NCEA, “the largest, private, professional education association in the world. NCEA works with Catholic educators to support ongoing faith formation and the teaching mission of the Catholic Church...” (NCEA, 2018, About Us section), there is one link dedicated to students with learning disabilities available when conducting a general search on the association’s website using the keywords social-emotional learning. A search within the resources section using the same keywords produced no matches at all.

In reviewing The National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools, or NSBECS, of the prescribed 13 standards and 70 benchmarks, one makes casual reference to social-emotional learning in the classroom, while the other stated “Co-curricular and extra-curricular activities provide opportunities outside the classroom for students to further identify and develop...social/emotional capabilities” (Center for Catholic School Effectiveness, 2012, p. 12). The benchmarks are not specifically telling Catholic schools which program to use; however, they are stating that there should be a social-emotional component in their programs.

The struggle for the survival of Catholic schools, particularly in urban areas that have seen numerous schools close or merge, is very real and well publicized in the media. Given the positive outcomes of social-emotional learning and the findings in this dissertation, a prudent decision for both Catholic schools and their respective dioceses would be to invest in, adopt, and
maintain social-emotional learning programs, not only for the benefit of the students but also for the continued existence of Catholic schools, particularly in urban and lower-income areas.

**Contributions to Theory**

The findings of this research contribute to the feminist theoretical framework of oppression and identity as derived from the seminal works of Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (2013) and hook’s *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (2015) in quite a few ways. The sisters experienced oppression by both their religious male counterparts and by society vis-à-vis their gender and economic circumstances. Moreover, although as youths, Rose and Angela’s identities took form at different paces and with different levels of family acceptance, through their shared experiences of poverty, they were able to utilize these marginalizing situations to promote the identities of their students, the students’ families, and their faculty members.

**Oppression**

Within the data, both Sister Rose and Sister Angela expressed oppression in two major ways—one at the hands of members of the clergy and another through people’s perceptions and misconceptions of nuns. However, triangulation interviews, particularly those with former faculty members, reinforced experiences of clerical oppression; so in the findings, I focused on clerical oppression as a major theme in terms of how the sisters’ stories reflected this feminist concept. Nonetheless, the subjects’ narratives also revealed other forms of oppression.

As the subjects reflected a bit of both the feminist works of Friedan and hooks, I viewed oppression from both of their vantage points. Within the first chapter of *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (2015), while criticizing Friedan’s (2013) explicit statement in *The Feminist Mystique* of women wanting “something more than my husband and my children and my house” (p. 22), hooks poignantly drew attention to the fact that this desire of what she deemed as
privileged women would only be realized at the expense of less fortunate women. Additionally, she pointed out the fact that it was a luxury that many women, both of color and the economically disadvantaged, could ill afford. Furthermore, the data of this study somewhat resembled both these dilemmas. Sister Angela stated very plainly her family’s opposition to her becoming a nun because, in their view, she was supposed to get married and have a family. Sister Rose received a lot more encouragement in her choice of a religious vocation; still, there was an element of the cultural expectation of marriage in the shower she was given. Nonetheless, both nuns persisted with their choices.

Another form of oppression expressed by both Friedan and hooks was poverty. While Friedan’s notion was poverty of fulfillment, hooks’ conception embodied the lack of choices brought about by race, gender, and the absence of economic sustainment. Once again, both of these ideas intersect with the findings of this dissertation. Both Sister Angela and Sister Rose grew up in homes in which finances were extremely tight, and both had mothers who worked—albeit in the home, but out of financial necessity. As well, each of the sisters worked a year before entering religious life. Although there were several motives for working before becoming sisters, two reasons were particularly pertinent. From an economic standpoint, both sisters were working to have enough money to pay for the donations that the order expected upon joining. From a fulfillment standpoint, this year of work did not present either of them with the temptation of straying from their intended vocations.

Despite the differences between Friedan and hooks, there was a definite point that both authors agreed upon: oppression by males, white males to be precise. Friedan (2013) did not explicitly utilize the terms white male or white male supremacy, but when she discussed sexist curricula or manipulation by advertising companies or even her chapter on Freud, those writing
the curricula, heading the ad campaigns, or being Freud were overwhelmingly white males. Hooks (2015) took a much more direct approach within the beginning of the second chapter and referred to a “white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal class structure” (p. 19). As religious sisters, the subjects of this study were also oppressed by a similar structure hooks depicted. Follow-up conversations revealed that Father X was not particularly happy to serve the community of St. Martin’s, was interested in closing the school and making it a nursing home to generate funds, and was quite belittling to the sisters in discussions with them. Father X was a white male. As well, the perpetrator of the incident involving Sister Angela’s student being touched inappropriately was also a white male.

**Identity**

Within the major findings, I included social-emotional learning practices; furthermore, when I elaborated on how I interpreted this notion and its associated framework in chapter four, I incorporated the sub-theme of *knowing thyself to know others*. Identity played a key role in the data and findings, just as this concept intersected in the works of Friedan and hooks.

Within the findings, identity revealed itself at the very beginning of Sister Rose’s story during her childhood and her teens in her career/vocation decision. For Sister Angela, although she had a happy childhood, identity in terms of career and vocation became more lucid during her later teens. In their choice of wanting to become religious sisters in the 1960s, their stories reflected Friedan’s (2013) notion of fulfillment not dependent on a house, husband, and children. On the other hand, hooks (2015) contended that Friedan’s ideas on the plight of women had been blindly accepted as speaking for females as a whole without truly taking into consideration the realities of all women. Through their own lives and the subjects’ choice of religious order, their religious formation experiences, and the dedication of their order to women, children, the sick,
and the impoverished, Sister Rose and Sister Angela were trained to recognize and uplift the identities of those they served. The sisters’ embracing of the identity of others was strongly supported by triangulation interviews in terms of culture, sexuality, and gender, to name a few.

Another facet of identity and its intersection with the findings of this study was the sisters’ recognition of the nature of their families’ monetary struggles and their practices as religious sister educators. Describing white, middle and upper-class women of the early 1960s, Friedan (2013) stated “…an American woman no longer has a private image to tell her who she is, or can be, or wants to be” (p. 70). Conversely, hooks (2015) compelled her readers to consider the voiceless women of color and those who are impoverished as their identities are almost non-existent, given that so many are at the very bottom of racial, social, and economic hierarchies. In contrast to both authors, the subjects recognized and exercised their identities at fairly young ages. They were also able to leverage their experiences with economic marginalization and give voice and identity to the students, teachers, and parents in their school through social justice leadership and social-emotional learning practices.

One final consideration regarding the concept of identity and this study’s findings was the idea of the power of collective effort to raise the identities of others. Although in different ways, to combat sexist oppression among other issues, both Friedan (2013) and hooks (2015) called for a deliberate alliance between women and men. This notion of the power in numbers to support and uphold the identities of others manifested itself within the findings in several ways. First, the sisters’ religious order is based on the notion of carrying out works as a group, not as individuals, for the benefit and comfort of all others. This congregation’s upholding of the dignity of all affirms the value and identity of those to whom they tend. Additionally, in terms of leadership, the sisters made deliberate efforts to involve and consider faculty, staff, and parents in important
decision making. This type of engagement allowed stakeholders to view themselves as a respected and essential part of a larger group. Last, the sisters’ use of social-emotional learning practices similar to CASEL’s framework allowed for others’ growth in understanding their own identities. It also provided for opportunities, collaborations, and interactions on the school, building, home, and community level and raised awareness of the roles each person played.

Unanticipated Outcomes

Within this section, I discuss the surprises that emanated from the findings of this study. There are four particular unexpected revelations that I noted. The first two involved leadership types and practices. The third had to do with the concept of the label *feminist*, and the last deals with clergy oppression.

Servant Leadership vs. Social Justice Leadership

In reviewing literature for Catholic school leadership, I came across the concept of 
*servant leadership* several times; and although I did not have a specific brand of leadership in mind when analyzing the data, I was quite surprised to find more traits of social justice leaders than that of servant leaders.

Greenleaf’s (1977) notion of servant leadership is one who actively chooses to serve and puts the needs and desires of constituents above their own by nurturing and taking care of them. This idea did somewhat appear within the findings through the subjects’ religious vocations and their placement of the needs of their students above all. Nevertheless, it was their active advocacy that appeared in many different facets of their professional lives, coupled with their personal and religious formation encounters that rendered them as social justice leaders.
Feminist Ethic of Care vs. Social-Emotional Learning Practices

Within the literature review section of this dissertation study, I discussed the concept of the feminist ethic of care within the motivation section. There were several instances in which the subjects’ stories revealed nurturing and care, either for students, teachers, or parents. Therefore, I was anticipating that a feminist ethic of care would be a possible recurring theme. In her seminal work, *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan (2003) stated that “women’s place in man’s lifecycle has been that of nurturer, caretaker, and helpmate…” and that male psychological theorists “tended to assume or devalue that care” (p. 16). Moreover, in an interview with Gilligan in 2011, the author and theorist further explained that feminist care ethics was also about combating patriarchal hierarchies. It was at this point in the data analysis that I shifted my focus.

Social-emotional learning also involved care. Furthermore, CASEL’s Framework of Core Competencies revealed it involved care at an individual and interpersonal level, at a classroom and school building level, and at a community level. Except clergy oppression experienced by the nuns, the sisters’ narratives revealed, above all, struggles against poverty and institutional racism as well as assistance in cultural mediation. Furthermore, through social-emotional learning practices, the sisters provided their constituents with loving and caring practices and with social-emotional survival tools that created greater awareness of self and others to combat various types of oppression.

The Label of Feminist

Although I have outlined how the findings of this study reflected the feminist theoretical framework based on the concepts of oppression and identity in the previous section of this
chapter as well as in chapter four, I was quite surprised in my interviews with both sisters regarding the question of whether or not they considered themselves feminists.

While Sister Rose stated that as a younger woman she did not necessarily believe she was a feminist, she did consider herself one now. She particularly viewed this as a woman religious and felt that if women had a greater say and were able to do more in the Catholic Church, the institution itself would be more progressive and make greater strides. Self-described as “… a woman of determination and I will not hesitate to tell you what I think,” Sister Angela conversely stated that when hearing the term *feminist* she imagined “that word or connected that word with a hardness.” Having known both sisters for over a decade, I was quite surprised by these answers. Sister Rose’s character is shy and more reserved, while Sister Angela is the more outspoken of the two. I was expecting the data to reflect responses in reverse.

**Clergy Oppression**

Similar to my discussion on feminist theory, I also highlighted in detail the oppression experienced by women religious in the Catholic church. Therefore, given the time frame of the sisters’ professional experiences, I was surprised by the fact that there were incidents with only two priests in their four-decade careers. Their experiences both as teachers and as school administrators would have put them in contact with numerous members of the clergy, yet subjugating encounters, although significant in and of themselves, were minimal.

**Implications for Action and Practice**

In this section, I discuss the implications for action and for practice. I also propose further research recommendations. Last, I provide concluding remarks. Based on the findings of this dissertation study, I put forth several recommendations for both Catholic schools and all other
school types. I indicate which suggestions pertain specifically to Catholic schools and which apply to both public and private institutions.

**Social Justice Leadership, School Building, and District Leader Programs**

In terms of Catholic school leadership programs, there needs to be a concentration in social justice leadership practices. As was pointed out both through research and statistics, the number of women and men religious who receive a high degree of exposure to Catholic Social Teaching has dwindled with no new members of congregations to take over. Thus, as administrators and spiritual leaders are mostly lay members, there must be greater attention to Catholic Social Teaching and its principles of social justice infused in programs preparing these types of leaders. The ultimate lesson and message of loving one another and lifting the downtrodden cannot be imparted properly or fully because those lay members in Catholic school leadership positions do not fully understand or have had limited exposure to the notion and what it entails.

While those in secular schools would not adhere to the religious dimensions of social justice leadership, exposure to this brand of leadership and its guiding principles would be of equal value to them. The Education Writer’s Association (n.d.) noted that “demographic changes have amplified challenges that U.S. schools have grappled with for decades—challenges such as preschool access, racial disparities in student discipline, and stark achievement gaps that show black and Hispanic students far behind their white and Asian peers” (para. 4). One way to mitigate these persistent issues could be through exposure to social justice leadership practices through courses that are automatically part of the curriculum of all educational leadership programs.
Social-justice leadership practices and the valuing of teachers. One final suggestion for social-justice leadership is in extending advocacy beyond students and to teachers as well. Bruno (2018) maintained that teachers have ceased to be viewed as professionals and have made do with less and less since the 1980s. Within the findings of this narrative study, the subjects placed great importance on protecting and promoting the well-being and welfare of their teachers. In turn, they experienced long periods of teacher tenure as well as teacher buy-in as school stakeholders.

Implementation of Social-Emotional Learning Programs in All Schools

Although this suggestion may seem a bit radical, the return on this investment seems to be greater than the actual cost. According to CASEL (2019) and the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence (2013), social-emotional learning programs are proven to improve academic outcomes and student behavior. Additionally, the effects of these programs are long-lasting, meaning a healthier and more productive society. Social-emotional learning programs and practices assist in raising socio-economic status. Thus, in this age of Common Core Learning Standards, social-emotional learning programs and practices would assist greatly in rendering all students college and career ready.

A child-first educational philosophy. Closely related to social justice leadership and social-emotional leadership practices is the true adoption of a child-first educational philosophy. Within the findings of this study, the subjects communicated this philosophy from the very beginning of their tenure as principals. Furthermore, they maintained this view throughout their career, repeated it regularly both in actions and words, and made determinations based on the best interest of the students—even as they faced economic and enrollment challenges. In terms of education, there is so very much at stake, but the ultimate obligation is to the best interest of
the students they serve. This philosophy needs to be demonstrated by school districts and building leaders, even if it comes at their own expense such as being perceived as difficult by speaking up or even refusal to perpetuate policies and practices that are detrimental to students.

Greater use of narrative design in educational studies. Taking a Deweyan approach of life experiences as education, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) advocated for the use of narrative inquiry in educational research. In reviewing the findings of this dissertation, I, too, concur. The data from my interviews generated a wealth of information from two veterans of the field of education. Additionally, through their stories, I was able to determine their success as a hybrid leadership of social-emotional justice. I extracted valuable lessons related to their success through their narratives and the multitude of experiences contained within them. Furthermore, most of these lessons can be applied in a multitude of educational settings and contexts.

Limitations

One limitation to this study was the educational context in which the participants found themselves—an urban school setting as opposed to a suburban one. Nonetheless, the findings that rendered social-emotional justice are not contingent upon an urban or suburban context, nor a religious or secular setting.

Another limitation is that some maintain that the data in narrative research—literally the stories told—are somewhat jaded in that participants relay stories possibly, not as they were but how the narrator perceives them (Mitchell & Egudo, 2003). I countered this notion from the ontological perspective that reality is not a singular entity but exists manifold and has a variety of perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I also discussed interpretations of their narratives, the themes that emanated, as well as my findings with the subjects.
Another factor I considered was that narrative inquiry involves a smaller scope of subjects (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I had anticipated thought-provoking findings given the richness of the subjects’ life encounters, and data from their stories rendered nearly 200 pages in transcripts. Thus, I focused on the substance of their stories rather than on the number of persons relaying narratives.

Last, regarding the religious aspect of this study, there were two specific points I took under consideration: religious affiliation and gender. Both subjects were from the same religious order, the Religious Sisters of Mercy, and there are numerous congregations that had or still have teaching sisters within their communities. In terms of gender, this study focused solely on women religious and did not investigate in any way the male perspective of teaching priests and brothers. Nonetheless, I address this last constraint within the next section of this chapter.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on the data I collected and analyzed, the thematic elements and findings of this study, I propose the following recommendations for future research as well as other possible avenues to explore.

**Social-Emotional Justice.**

Regarding the finding of what I have termed as *social-emotional justice*, I recommend future studies to understand whether it is a phenomenon singular to the subjects or to the religious order to which they belong, to those belonging to religious orders that work in Catholic schools, or a Catholic school phenomenon unto itself. Furthermore, if it is singular to the order and not solely the subjects, another research direction could be a comparison of how Mercy educators in this country make sense of their dual role as opposed to their sisters in other parts of the world in which they ministered to a greater extent, such as Ireland and Australia.
Beyond the scope of Catholic schools, there is also the possibility of exploring this concept in schools in which leaders have had exposure to both social-justice and social-emotional practices and the implications it has or has had on their leadership philosophies, the impact on students, and effects on students’ academic and social outcomes.

Social-Emotional Learning

Depending on the program, social-emotional learning programs can be quite costly. Nevertheless, given its research-based positive effects, there is the opportunity to conduct a study forecasting future outcomes to persuade federal government assistance in providing funds for all schools to implement social-emotional learning as part of the curriculum. Additionally, longitudinal studies of schools that have these programs would also be beneficial.

Religious Orders

Within a good portion of this dissertation study, I have referenced the Religious Sisters of Mercy charisms to situate theory and interpret findings. However, this order is not the only religious congregation of nuns that dedicates itself to offering mercy and justice to the marginalized. Therefore, there is an opportunity to investigate and compare teaching sisters of similar orders to explore the roles an order’s charisms play in education.

This study focused on religious sister educators; thus, this leaves several future research opportunities. For one, there could be a sole focus on religious brother and priest educators; there is also the chance for a comparative case study between how nuns and their male counterparts who teach make sense of their experiences. Last, just as I had recommended in the previous paragraph comparing similar female orders’ charisms, this notion could be expanded to orders of both genders, whose founders held similar core tenets.
Concluding Remarks

Once the mainstay of Catholic schools, religious sisters and their presence in these institutions is increasingly rare (Caruso, 2012). As DeFiore (2011) noted, these women were “the infrastructure for the schools” (p. 16). Yet, in so very many of the institutions that they established through their work both in and out of the classroom, their labors are, in many cases, unknown. The nuns who shared their stories for this dissertation study represent a minimal fraction of the scores of women who built this nation’s largest private school system (United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, 2019).

According to the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops in 2016, more than half of the United States’ Supreme Court Justices were products of Catholic schools, 99% of those who attended Catholic high school graduated, with 86% percent of these students going on to four-year colleges, and at-risk students who attend Catholic schools are more likely to graduate from high school and college. These types of achievements are not born overnight but by an instructional legacy. Thus, this study was an attempt to capture some of the praxes that led to such accomplishments.

Social justice leadership practices are needed just as much now as they were during the times of the Religious Sisters of Mercy’s establishment. McCray and Beachum (2014) found that there was “no discernible increase in the academic achievement gap between African-American students and their white counterparts” (p. 20). What is more, these authors also found that there is a pervading sense of what they coined as heteronormativity whereby students who identify as lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, or trans-gender are experiencing extremely high levels of bullying, depression, suicide, and drop-out rates throughout the United States. These are just some of the many students who need advocates; moreover, they need social justice leaders who are about
actions for improvement and not empty words (Marshall & Oliva, 2010). Sister Rose and Sister Angela’s measures as school building leaders mirrored practices that truly advocated for the oppressed and recognized their identities. Thus, it is incumbent on those designing programs that prepare future school building and district leaders not simply to impart administrative knowledge but leadership principles and practices that truly give voice to all students. It cannot be an assumption that they are equipped to do so without guidance.

While the sisters unknowingly utilized social-emotional learning practices gained through their own experiences as students, they did also receive formal training that enhanced their skills. The multi-fold benefits of implementing these practices speak for themselves, and perhaps if school and district leaders made this a priority, there might not exist the biases in curriculum, instruction, and testing that lead to achievement gaps between white and minority students, nor might we have students grappling with deep emotional issues that could lead to very dire consequences.

The influence of religious sisters was partially what compelled the subjects of this study to join the order to which they have belonged for over 50 years. It was also this influence that served as a major catalyst to the participants’ use of social-emotional justice. Moreover, their experiences with another order during their formation years inspired them to have strong academic expectations of all students as well.

The patriarchal hierarchy of the Catholic Church and its residual effects, as displayed by some priests in the sisters’ stories, demonstrated that there is still much ground to be covered in terms of Catholic clergy members’ treatment of women religious and the expansion of roles that nuns could assume. However, the recent discussions led by Catholic bishops with Pope Francis I on ordaining women as deacons is a promising step (Rocco, 2019).
While Sister Rose declared herself outright as a feminist, Sr. Angela rejected the label. Nonetheless, her self-description as “a woman of determination who will not hesitate to tell you what I think” clearly echoes feminist ideology. What is more, both nuns joined the ranks of scores of women who determined that a traditional life path of marriage and motherhood was not their idea of self-actualization. Whether cognizant of it or not, like their religious sister predecessors, the subjects’ choice to become nuns was not only the embodiment of Friedan’s idea of fulfillment but also hooks’ notion of “defining their own terms” (p. 47). Moreover, through their stories, the options they chose led them to become educational administrators with a distinct category of leadership that involved infusing the principles of social justice leadership along with social-emotional learning, or social-emotional justice.
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Appendix A

Interview Protocol for the Religious Sisters

For all respondents: This study will be explained to the subjects by the Principal Investigator. The consent will be read, and the subjects’ questions answered. The subjects will sign individual consent forms. A dated and signed copy will be given to each subject.

Brief Project Description: Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. The purpose of this narrative study to understand how you, as religious sisters, make sense of your former educational leadership roles in a highly secular world, particularly within an ever-evolving educational context of standards, accountability, and choice.

Phase 1

I. Introduction

I: First of all, could you please state your name, occupation, and experience in education?

I: Before we begin talking about your current position and your life as a religious sister, I would like to go back to your childhood and formative/teenage years. Could you tell me about them?

I: How old were you when you applied to join the Religious Sisters of Mercy?

A. Did you go to school or have a job before entering the order?

B. Were there any influences either a person or maybe your family’s practices, or anything else you can remember that inspired you to become a religious sister?

C. How did your family and friends react when you said you were joining the clergy?

D. Why the Religious Sisters of Mercy as opposed to Dominicans or Josephites, etc.?

E. Could you describe the processes/schooling you underwent to become a nun and an educator?

F. What were the years in the postulancy and novitiate like? What memories do you have from those years?

II. Choosing your Profession

I: How did you end up being in education? Did you choose it, or was it assigned to you? Tell me about the process.

A. Did you/do you have the ability to change ministries if you wanted to?
B. If yes, would you? Why or why not?

I: What do you think about the dual role you had as both a nun and a school principal?

A. Do you think it made it easier or more difficult as a nun?

B. How about easier or more difficult as a principal?

III. Teacher and Leadership Experiences- Phase 2

I: Can you tell me about your memorable experiences or students you had as a teacher? What or maybe who stands out in your mind?

I: How did you come to work in this school? How would you describe the school to someone who is not familiar with the Catholic school options in the city?

I: How about as a principal? Tell me about what stands out in your mind?

I: Do you remember your first day or year as a principal?

I: Can you talk about your best memories as a principal?

I: How about your worst ones?

IV. Educational Changes

I: Your career spanned 40 years; tell me about the educational changes you experienced.

A. How did you deal with them?

B. Anything particularly difficult or easy?

I: As you continued in your role as a teacher and as a principal, the number of colleagues who were also religious sisters dwindled. What are your thoughts about that?

A: Did it affect you in any way?
I: You encountered a lot of teachers and support staff in your lifetimes, once again who or what stands out? Why?

I: What were your interactions like with the pastors? Who or what stands out in your mind?

I: How about with the parents? Same question- who or what stands out?

Probe: Demographic changes, culture/race/ethnicity/language?

V. Your Legacy- Phase 3

I: You were considered one of the most effective principals in the diocese. Why do you think that was? How did this happen? Would you say that you evolved as a school administrator? If yes, can you describe how?

Probe: How did you respond to the educational changes over the years in terms of standards and accountability/testing?

Probe: What about school choice? Did you find yourself having to market your school to certain families in order to maintain enrollment?

Probe: Did anyone ever challenge you because of your gender or occupation as a nun (oppression)?

I: If someone called you, personally, a feminist, how would you react to that statement? Would you agree or disagree? How do you define feminism?

I: What do you want your educational legacy to be? Explain.

Probe: What would you consider to be your lasting effect on the school, and in your student’s lives? What would you like to see continue in the school after you’re gone?

I: Would you like to share anything else about your life or experiences as a nun and educational leader?
Appendix B

Interview Protocol for Participants’ Former Employees, Students, and Parents of Students

For all respondents: This study will be explained to the subjects by the Principal Investigator. The consent will be read, and the subjects’ questions answered. The subjects will sign individual consent forms. A dated and signed copy will be given to each subject.

Brief Project Description: Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. The purpose of this narrative study to understand how religious sisters, make sense of their former educational leadership roles in a highly secular world, particularly within an ever-evolving educational context of standards, accountability, and choice.

I. Introduction

I: First of all, could you please state your name, occupation, and how you know Sister Angela and Sister Rose?

I: Could you tell me how long you’ve known them?

I: Tell me about your most memorable experiences with them as bosses/teachers/principals?

I: What can you tell me about them as religious sisters? How would you describe them as “nuns”?

I: What were your dealings with them? What stands out?

I: What memories stand out in terms of working with the teachers, students, pastors, or parents?

I: Can you recall a time or times when you feel they faced challenges because they were women?

What do you think about that?

Probe: Do you ever remember them in instances of oppression- either they were being oppressed or someone else was? How did they deal with it? Could you tell me the story behind it?

I: How might they evolved as leaders?
What do you think their legacy is for the school and the community? What did you learn from them?

I: I: Would you like to share anything else about your experiences with these women as educators or educational leaders?
Appendix C

Institutional Review Board Approval

Study Title: Religious Sister Educators: A Narrative Study through a Feminist Lens
Approved: April 9, 2019– April 9, 2020
Approval No: 12160512-0409

Dear Dr. Roda and Ms. Peluso:

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Molloy College has reviewed the above-mentioned research proposal and determined that this proposal is approved by the committee.

It is considered an EXPEDITED review per the requirements of Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) regulations for the protection of human 45 CFR 46.110 (6) and (7) categories.

Please note that as Principal Investigator (PI), it is your responsibility to be CITI Certified in both the Responsible Conduct of Research and Human Subjects Research and to submit the evidence in order to conduct your research.

Remember, all consents and recruitment flyers for any research protocol need to have Molloy IRB dated stamps of approval. To obtain the official stamp, please contact Ms. Gina Nedelka (g nedelka@molloy.edu ) to arrange a time to meet with her in her office in Kellenberg Room 009. You will bring one clean consent (of each consent and/or assent) and any recruitment flyers to the meeting with Ms. Nedelka for IRB dated stamp of approval. You then make copies of stamped materials and use those copies for recruiting and consenting.

You may proceed with your research. Please submit a report to the committee at the conclusion of your project. Your project is approved for ONE YEAR.

Changes to the Research: It is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to inform the Molloy College IRB of any changes to this research.

A change in the research may change the project from EXPEDITED status that would require communication with the IRB.

Sincerely

Patricia A. Eckardt, PhD, RN, FAAN
Chair, Molloy College Institutional Review Board
Professor, Barbara H. Hagan School of Nursing
peckardt@molloy.edu