

University of Alberta

Building Leadership Capacity Among Women
by

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Abstract

This qualitative study addresses the underrepresentation of women as school principals, despite teaching being perceived as a *feminine* profession. The primary objective was to investigate why women with leadership skills choose to remain in the classroom rather than pursue leadership positions. The study aimed to examine pathways of female teachers to school leadership, specifically the principalship, and to suggest practical solutions to support women's aspirations to enter these roles. The research methodology involved collecting data through interviews, and the analysis entailed identifying emergent themes focused on strategies for building leadership capacity among women in schools. The interview results concluded that there are leadership opportunities accessible for individuals who actively seek them. Participants highlighted both the factors contributing to success and the challenges they encounter. By identifying and addressing them, candidates, school leaders, and organizations can develop a more inclusive and gender-balanced educational leadership landscape.

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Building Leadership Capacity Among Women

Despite teaching being viewed as a traditionally *feminine* occupation (OECD, 2016 as cited in Martinez et al., 2020; ElAtia et al., 2022), women continue to be underrepresented in educational leadership positions. It is promising to see that there is an emerging pattern represented by more and more women choosing to seek leadership positions. However, the proportion of women in the teaching workforce in comparison to those in leadership still reveals an unbalanced ratio. In 2017, the Alberta Teacher Retirement Fund (ATRF) released a report on the demographics of the teaching population in Alberta. According to this report, 74% of teachers in the province were female, while 26% were male. In a separate study, the Teaching and Learning International Study (OECD, 2013, as cited in Coates, 2020) conducted in Alberta, it was found among principals, 43% were female, and 57% were male. While these data are somewhat dated, the proportions of female to male teachers and the corresponding proportions of female to male principals will not have changed radically by the time of my study. These data suggest despite the higher proportion of female teachers in Alberta, there is still a disparity of female representation in educational leadership. The percentage of women holding principalships is lower than their representation in the teaching profession. Given females represent the majority of teachers in Alberta, the expectation would be to see a greater representation of women in leadership roles.

The root of the problem does not lie in the gender of school leaders but rather in the systemic issues persisting in contemporary society. This issue is influenced by a discrimination model highlighting the presence of systematic gender bias (Davis et al., 2017). Moreover, family commitments and lack of confidence hinder women from entering educational leadership positions (Gabaldon et al., 2016). Both individual and organizational factors contribute to the

obstacles women face when striving to access and enter educational leadership roles. However, there has been limited research exploring effective strategies to overcome these barriers.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to analyze pathways of female candidates to attain school leadership positions, to identify challenges and opportunities; and to explore potential strategies to build leadership capacity among women. This research aimed to identify opportunities for women to pursue leadership roles in schools.

The research question guiding this study was: what strategies can contribute to women's success in becoming school principals. The research sub-questions included:

1. What are the diverse pathways and experiences educators follow on their journey to becoming principals?
2. What factors do female school leaders perceive and experience contributing to their success or present challenges in attaining leadership roles in education?
3. How is leadership connected to equity in schools?
4. What are the most effective leadership strategies for fostering the aspirations of female teachers to become school principals?

Literature Review

I conducted a systematic literature review to develop a comprehensive overview of Alberta teachers' pathways to school leadership with a specific focus on female candidates, the interconnectedness of gender and leadership styles, and the collective actions required to promote gender equity. I categorized relevant findings into five subsections: (a) pathways to the principalship in Alberta, (b) women in educational leadership, (c) intersections of gender, (d) leadership style as a response to change, and (e) actions towards gender equity. By investigating these critical dimensions, my objective was to better comprehend the complexities surrounding

gender equity in Alberta and propose actionable strategies to address disparities in school leadership allowing conditions for a more inclusive environment.

Pathways to the Principalship in Alberta

According to the Principal Quality Practice document (Alberta Education, 2008), the principal is “an accomplished teacher who practices quality leadership in the provision of opportunities for optimum learning and development of all students in the school” (p. 4). More recently this document has been superseded by two more recent documents, (a) the Leadership Quality Standard (LQS; Alberta Education, 2023) and (b) Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard (SLQS; Alberta Education, 2023). These standards currently describe the required competencies and indicators for principals and for system superintendents, respectively. Within these inter-related and progressive frameworks, a cohesive foundation is formed for individuals working as principals or as superintendents. The Teaching Quality Standard (TQS), the LQS, and the SLQS collectively address inter-related standards for all teaching professionals working in public, basic-education institutions in Alberta.

For the purpose of this paper, I focused on the LQS document outlining professional expectations educational leaders must demonstrate to create the conditions under which teachers can do their work. The LQS defines a framework for quality school leadership in Alberta for individuals aspiring to school leadership roles in education. Any teacher holding an Alberta permanent teaching certificate and declaring his or her ability to meet LQS, can obtain the permanent leadership certification by completing approved leadership coursework from approved Alberta Universities (Government of Alberta, 2023).

TQS, LQS, and SLQS represent the hierarchical nature of accountability between teachers, principals, and superintendents. Alberta Education informally suggests there is an

instructional relationship and leadership path to the top educational leadership role (Coates, 2020). Currently, the Government of Alberta does not provide specific qualifications for school principals. According to the Education Act (2022), the requirements for permanent leadership certificate are to hold “a permanent professional certificate” (i.e., permanent teaching certificate) and to “complete educational requirements approved by the Minister at an institution approved by the Minister” or to hold “the equivalent of a leadership certificate [...] from another jurisdiction that is acceptable to the Minister” (p. 11). However, in Alberta, it is common practice for teachers to meet the following criteria: (a) a minimum of five years of teaching experience with a continuous contract, (b) possession of a Master’s degree or a plan to obtain one soon, and (c) completion of approved educational requirements from an Alberta University as recognized by Alberta Education or a plan to fulfill these requirements in the near future. Based on the hierarchy of a school system in Alberta, teachers typically aim to acquire leadership experience at the school level, such as a department head or a learning coach, or at the district level, as a consultant. Most individuals serving as principals gained prior experience as assistant principals or vice-principals.

Women in Educational Leadership

In the 21st century, women have experienced career growth and advancement in leadership positions across all sectors of education (Kairys, 2017). However, there is a reason why *women in leadership* still deserves the attention of so many researchers. Several authors (e.g. Corsi & Everitt, 2021; ElAtia et al., 2022; Gabaldon et al., 2016; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2010; Martinez et al., 2021; The Alberta Teachers Association, 2020) investigated the experiences and obstacles affecting female teachers ascending or not ascending professional

ladder. Despite teaching being a female-dominated profession, they are underrepresented in the leadership roles in the same proportions.

The Alberta Teachers' Association (2020) highlighted the importance and urgency of understanding how women in education experience their career progression. The study outlined and analyzed the barriers to advancement, and suggested practices for creating a more inclusive and diverse teaching profession at all levels. By addressing this imbalance, one can bring diverse perspectives, experiences, and ideas. The survey conducted among 714 participants, both male and female, drawing on qualitative and quantitative data, confirmed the presence of gender-based discrimination in school jurisdictions and the Alberta Teachers' Association. Based on the survey results, women were more likely to recognize and experience instances of discrimination based on their gender compared to men; and women and men did not experience the same opportunities to advance into leadership positions. In addition to the survey results, two open-ended questions were included to help understand how teacher participants described gender-based discrimination in schools and the Alberta Teachers' Association. The participants' answers emerged into three main categories: (a) normative gatekeeping, (b) gender stereotyping, and (c) work and family balance.

Smith (2011) examined the career decisions of 40 female secondary teachers in England. He found the narratives of women indicated the presence of various barriers and limitations they faced, and it was evident that women were not passive individuals solely shaped by external factors such as socialization, societal notions of femininity, or workplace discrimination. Interestingly, Smith (2011) expanded the understanding of women's career choices beyond examining barriers to advancement, including some women choosing to stay in the classroom and prioritizing students' wellbeing and achievement. While some had consciously planned to

advance in a career following a traditional path, some individuals have made career choices within a constrained range of options, frequently balancing motherhood and other caregiving responsibilities alongside their professional pursuits.

It is worth noting there are both male and female teachers who enter the profession with a genuine passion for teaching desired to continue in a classroom teaching role. While some educators may aspire to take on leadership roles, others find deep satisfaction in their continued contributions as teachers, playing a pivotal role in the lives of their students and shaping the future generation (Doucet, 2019). This dedication to teaching is not limited by gender, as both men and women can find immense fulfillment in their roles as educators. Recognizing and respecting these individual preferences is crucial for understanding the diverse motivations and aspirations within the teaching profession. Both paths are equally valuable and contribute to the overall strength and effectiveness of the educational system. An education system is “a constant balancing act at all levels, especially when trying to deliver a holistic education that pivots to developing all students” (Doucet, 2019, p. 29).

Despite being overqualified for certain positions, some women hesitate to apply due to self-doubt about their qualifications. In contrast, men often perceive themselves as suitable candidates for the same roles and apply even if they lack the required skill set or level of education (Cherkavska, 2023). This phenomenon is supported by Hoff and Mitchell's study (2008, as cited in Martinez et al., 2021) on educational leaders, which found 61.14% of women compared to 5.21% of men waited until meeting all educational requirements. Thus, women are more likely than men to self-exclude from leadership positions due to their aspiration to be fully prepared before submitting an application.

Corsi and Everitt (2021) discussed career progression and family, when examining women in educational leadership. They illustrated how a masculine version of the ideal worker may affect the career aspirations of female candidates. A perception exists women in their childbearing years are not seen as potential candidates for leadership positions (Corsi & Everitt, 2021). Gabaldon et al. (2016) confirmed individual attitudes as the supply side of a market in the process of appointment of school heads. They also proposed the demand side represented by an organizational model based on discrimination in recruitment and hiring practices, meaning the employer prefers to assign a man a leadership position rather than a woman.

There is a need to mention women spend twice the number of years as teachers before moving into leadership positions as compared to men (Glass, 2000). The scholars (Loder & Spillane, 2006, as cited in Corsi & Everitt, 2021) proposed the need to balance work and family responsibilities which presents a significant barrier to women's career progression. This is primarily because women often take maternity leave and have the primary responsibility for domestic tasks at home. Based on data from the Labour Force Survey (Government of Canada, 2023), the percentage of employed fathers taking parental leave has consistently stayed below 9% since 2007. Meanwhile, the proportion of new working mothers on maternity leave has remained in the 75% to 78% trend since 2006. It offered some insights into how women's decisions and choices are framed (Smith, 2011). The OECD (2018) study reported a crucial factor contributing to the wage gap between men and women to be female under-representation in top-earning management and leadership positions, to some extent due to challenges faced by mothers in balancing work commitments and childcare responsibilities (OECD, 2018). The study (2018) suggested to provide better access to high-quality childhood education and to encourage

fathers to increase their take-up of parental leave as further steps with the aim to address the large gender wage gap and boost female labour participation.

It is promising to learn that education organizations acknowledge the significance of gender balance in leadership positions. They actively invest in leadership programs and encourage both men and women to participate, demonstrating their commitment to fostering gender equality in these roles (Kairys, 2017). The situation in Alberta and other provinces is not static, and there is potential for improvement, as women continue to make advancements in traditionally male-dominated roles.

Intersections of Gender

Exploring gender issues via an intersectional perspective allows to identify factors affecting the experiences of women in educational leadership. According to ElAtia et al. (2021), the unique experiences of women must be at the heart of finding ways to achieve equity, diversity and inclusion. Harding (1993) claimed experiences and lives of marginalized people, as they understand them, provide opportunities to explain these problems or propose research agenda.

Intersectionality exists within human relationships and society (Cho et al., 2013, as cited in Agosto & Roland, 2018). Crenshaw (1989) examined how overlapping structures of subordination, interactive oppressions, erasure of experiences, and negative cultural stereotypes contribute to the complex and challenging realities faced by marginalized individuals. The factors affecting an individual's experiences include gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, disability, and more. In the context of women, intersectionality recognizes that their experiences of discrimination are not solely based on gender but can be compounded by other factors (Crenshaw, 1989). For example, women may face gender discrimination, but if they also belong

to marginalized racial or ethnic groups, they may encounter additional barriers and biases. Similarly, women from low-income backgrounds may experience further challenges compared to those from higher socioeconomic status.

The intersecting layers of discrimination can make it even more difficult for women to overcome obstacles in various aspects of life, such as education, employment, healthcare, and representation in leadership positions. The cumulative impact of these intersecting oppressions can create a more complex and challenging environment for women. Martinez et al. (2020) explained the gender gap in school principalship by describing different expectations set by the hiring committees. They said women must be more highly qualified than men to get a position in leadership. As a result, women demonstrate better performance than men (Spencer & Kochan, 2000, as cited in Martinez et al., 2020).

In Olson's (1997) analysis of Audre Lorde's (1984) work *Transforming Silence into Language and Action*, she explored how people have been conditioned to create distance between each other based on their differences. She highlighted the historical suppression of women's voices across the narrative they have been told within society, religion, education, and government which has led to their silence for centuries (Olson, 1997).

Intersectionality's core ideas can enhance educational leadership by strengthening transformative leadership as an oppositional knowledge project. Agosto and Roland (2018) suggested engaging in criticism, reflection, and action toward social transformation. It challenges individual-focused analysis, encouraging exploration of group experiences and social structures. Additionally, it fosters critical reflection on education's transformative impact on relationships, knowledge, being, and leadership in both research and practice (Agosto & Roland, 2018).

Harris et al. (2018) proposed to move away from a reliance on external accountability and towards an investment in the professional capital of teachers and school leaders. They can break the link between discrimination and gender by taking an ethical approach, working together, and ensuring personal and social circumstances are not obstacles to one's achievement. These objectives should exist within the entire school community and be modelled to students who can take on the same mission of fairness starting at a young age.

Leadership Style as a Response to Change

Principals' decisions, sense-making, and actions underpinning local context shape the ways followers engage with learning experiences and each other. The more principals foster effective relationships creating a positive learning environment, the more successful the school is (Pollock, 2013). Leadership is about establishing a set of directions for the organization and empowering its members to follow that path. Since leadership is grounded in values (Bush & Glover, 2014), they will inform one's actions and serve as a moral compass for leadership style.

Bush and Glover (2014) explored (a) managerial, (b) instructional, (c) distributed, (d) system, (e) teacher, (f) moral, (g) contingent, and (h) transformational leadership styles. The transformational leadership style responds to the challenge of promoting gender equity because its "central focus [is] commitments and capacities of organizational members" (Bush & Glover, 2014, p. 557). It aims to inspire and motivate individuals within the educational setting to make significant positive changes. This type of leadership goes beyond routine management and administrative tasks. It focuses on creating a shared vision, fostering innovation, and empowering both educators and students to reach their full potential (Bush & Glover, 2014). Since the transformational model emphasizes values, it is up to a leader to lead by example of prioritizing equity and fairness. Murphy and Louis (2018) said the excellent leader is first *a*

teacher of followers who needs to be able to recognize a talent. It is a principal's responsibility to empower his or her followers, so they can find their voice. It enables people to act, while also encouraging innovation. Murphy and Louis (2018) also proposed creating strong bonds that inspire every member of the school community to be a committed high performer. The transformational approach calls for making a difference in the school community. The ethical approach to school leadership requires principals to ensure personal and social circumstances are not obstacles to educational achievement and to work with all members of the school community in efforts to improve educational outcomes for all students (Harris et al., 2018). Equity in education starts with values *the teacher of followers* has, and it projects on students. It is important all students experience fairness and inclusion and witness what it looks like in the school administration.

When developing leadership capacity, there is a need to implement an ethical approach to school leadership. It requires school leaders to work with all members of the school community in efforts to improve educational outcomes for all students (Harris et al., 2018). The approach requires a readiness to recognize and respect people's right to be their true selves, an openness to genuinely connect with them in their authentic individuality, and a commitment to building relationships within the school community. The practices include engagement with the voices of all stakeholders; collaboration and networking; improving practice; and the development of local capacity for sustaining change (Harris et al., 2018).

A transformational approach provides leaders with opportunities to respond to the contextualized needs identified via dialogue with people who hold specific understanding of the contexts in which they work. Harris et al. (2018) invited researchers to stop undervaluing the knowledge teachers acquire in their own classrooms. Personal knowledge translates into the

public world. Since the transformational approach values collaboration, its efforts should focus on “creating circumstances within schools that enable school leaders and teachers to work collaboratively in building new knowledge informed by a wide variety of evidence, sharing expertise, and generating new ways of responding to all [needs]” (Harris et al., 2018, p. 28).

The transformational leadership model is driven by change. Since there is a need to break the *glass ceiling* (Alberta Teachers’ Association, 2020), school leaders need to encourage trust, mutual understanding and shared values and behaviours to create a web of connections and make cooperation action possible (Harris et al., 2018). Educational institutions should optimize their ability to learn and network within the organization by finding a balance between stability and change, encouraging both individual autonomy and collective cooperation, embracing strategic leadership along with bottom-up entrepreneurship, and effectively managing both steering and facilitation processes (Hautala et al, 2018).

Howard et al. (2017, as cited in ElAtia et al., 2022) suggested superintendent preparation programs that align with the four components of transformational leadership: “individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation (charismatic leadership), and idealized influence” (p. 68). The components ensure the leadership approach is not merely symbolic but is accompanied by practical steps facilitating the effective implementation of change (Bush et al., 2009, as cited in Bush & Glover, 2014).

Actions Towards Gender Equity

Support for principals, with a particular emphasis on female leaders, is crucial for creating more equitable opportunities for women in educational leadership. Currently, the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) has a Women in Leadership (WIL) subcommittee with the purpose of promoting gender equality and fair employment practices (Corsi & Everitt, 2021).

The subcommittee's mandate includes formulating a research strategy to explore the challenges and experiences that impact women in educational leadership roles (Everitt, 2020).

In the literature (e.g., Coates, 2020; Corsi & Everitt, 2021; ElAtia et al., 2022; Sanchez & Thornton, 2010), various types of strategies are identified to help principals become effective leaders. They aim to provide assistance and resources that specifically target the challenges faced by women in their journey toward leadership roles, such as principalship. These can be categorized into different areas: (a) formal and informal mentorship, (b) work and family balance, (c) higher education (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010), (d) intersectionality (ElAtia et al., 2022), and (e) network of professional connections (Coates, 2020).

Formal and Informal Mentorship

Mentorship programs offer a platform for mutual learning and growth. Various studies (e.g., Coates, 2020; ElAtia et al., 2022; Everitt, 2020; Sanchez & Thornton, 2010) emphasize the importance of mentors in leadership development. They can guide aspiring leaders to gain experience, take risks, build networks, and seek effective mentors. Gender matching in mentor relationships can be beneficial in addressing personal experiences with gender barriers but it is not imperative to be effective (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010). Collaboration among educational institutions, including schools, universities, and the Ministry of Education, can be instrumental in creating structured initiatives focused on empowering women in leadership (Cherkavska, 2023). Leadership development programs can help identify potential mentors and facilitating mentoring opportunities. However, to make an impactful change, mentorship programs must be integrated into K-12 systems, implementing strategies for recruiting women, offering formal induction processes for new administrators, and providing ongoing training after placement (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010).

Effective mentorship is a multi-faceted process, as emphasized by Tran (2014, as cited in Moodly & Toni, 2017). It involves creating a diverse *portfolio of mentors* extending beyond one's immediate organization, encompassing mentors and networks from various sources. Early access to relevant support and mentoring, even during postgraduate studies, plays a pivotal role in shaping the career trajectories of female professionals (Moodly & Toni, 2017). Gamble and Turner (2015, as cited in Moodly & Toni, 2017) proposed “diversity driven mentoring and leadership programs” (p. 144). The programs will help leaders recognize the significance of diverse environments and foster an appreciation for diversity within organizations.

Work And Family Balance

To positively impact the success of an organization, it is essential to take into account the happiness and well-being of teachers, superintendents, and other school administrators. Therefore, achieving an appropriate balance between one's career and personal life is considered crucial (EIAtia et al, 2022). Society places significant pressure on women to balance two equally important roles: being a working professional and a mother. Both responsibilities demand considerable time and dedication, leading to situations where family time is often sacrificed to achieve success in either career or parenting, as described by Moddly and Toni (2017). The ways one can balance home and work responsibilities depend on individual circumstances, such as marital status, spouse's characteristics, and family structure (Moodly & Toni, 2017).

Moodly and Toni (2017) indicated effective leadership by women can be achieved through life course strategies, where careful planning of life-changing events, such as marriage and parenthood, facilitates a suitable balance between work and family obligations. Women's dedication to integrating these aspects of their lives enables them to contribute effectively as leaders while managing their familial responsibilities.

Higher Education

Acquiring advanced degrees is a prerequisite for leadership roles, but making such a decision requires careful planning and adjustments in various aspects of life. Educational leadership programs have seen a shift in enrollment numbers, with the majority of students being women (Moodly & Toni, 2017). This increase in qualified female candidates has the potential to foster greater gender equity in educational leadership positions and promote the emergence of more female leaders in schools. It is interesting to note the Alberta Teachers' Association (2020) survey found 32.5% of women believed women had to exert more effort to achieve a leadership position, whereas none of the men surveyed shared the same perception. The question is whether the spike in enrollment numbers in educational leadership programs is related to the perception that women must work harder to attain leadership positions.

Intersectionality

Research exploring the intersection of various factors and gender in the field of educational leadership offers valuable analysis and insights into women's career trajectories and advancements. Therefore, any attempt to take an action towards gender equity without considering intersectionality, will at best solve only one problem, while underlying issues, including sexism, racism, and xenophobia compound (Macias & Stephens, 2019). It is imperative for educational leadership programs to incorporate social justice topics, with a historical and global perspective. These programs will give school principals an opportunity to address pertinent social justice issues prevalent in K-12 schools, including microaggressions, macroaggressions, and structural racism (Osanloo et al., 2016, as cited in Macias & Stephens, 2019). Furthermore, the normative assumptions underlying policies must be critically challenged (Moodly, 2021).

To ensure greater representation of women in leadership positions in education, both male and female leaders must engage in stimulating re-thinking of policy planning and implementation, disrupting traditionally accepted processes (Moodly, 2021). Men in leadership roles can play an essential part in challenging institutional cultures hindering women's advancement toward leadership (Moodly, 2021).

To achieve more equitable work environments for teachers and future school leaders, a thorough examination of various aspects such as recruitment, hiring, training, pay, promotion, and ongoing mentoring and support is essential. However, this evaluation must be approached with an intersectional perspective recognizing and considering all types of oppression, both overt and covert (Macias & Stephens, 2019). By actively exercising their agency and disrupting inequalities, leaders can collectively work towards fostering a more equitable and inclusive educational leadership landscape.

Network of Professional Connections

Networking programs offer significant advantages to prospective leaders, enabling them to acquire knowledge, experience, skills, and valuable contacts. People play a central role in the web of connections formed through networking programs. Coates (2020) mentioned men will often achieve higher positions because of friendships, social or professional connections which allow them to be informed about opportunities. Hill and Ragland (1995, as cited in Coates, 2020) stated that because of demanding work and private responsibilities, many women do not have an equal chance to participate in *after work* activities potentially creating or maximizing the advantages of strong networks.

School districts are encouraged to offer opportunities for their employees to connect and learn from one another. By providing a suitable venue and scheduling events during work hours,

employees can participate without having to choose between family commitments and work (Cherkavska, 2023). Engaging in networking practices can significantly enhance self-confidence, as personal knowledge is transformed into professional expertise.

The effective practices cited above emphasize the importance of women not feeling compelled to adhere to patriarchal norms to succeed. Women's practices of inclusion, collaboration, valuing others, and balancing work and family play a vital role in breaking barriers to gender equity in educational leadership (Cherkavska, 2023).

My research aimed to address the research question related to strategies contributing to women's success in becoming a school principal. To investigate female educators' pathways and experiences to become a school principal and leadership strategies related to gender equity promotion, I conducted semi-structured interviews to gather helpful insights into four research sub-questions.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach with a phenomenological research design to explore the experiences of women's pathways in becoming educational leaders. The primary method of data collection for this qualitative approach involved conducting interviews with individuals using pseudonyms Sharon, Merriam, and Lily. They shared their experiences for the purpose of my pilot study: *Leadership does not have a gender* (Cherkavska, 2023). The research sample included three female school leaders from one separate school district in an urban setting. They had diverse years of experience, held different leadership job titles, and encompassed various employment statuses, including both currently employed and retired individuals. I reached out to female assistant principals and principals known to me or my colleagues. Variation sampling helps better understand context and adds a historical layer to the issue,

capturing its' linear periodization. The sampling was purposeful and enabled the investigation of common patterns within the phenomenon.

The interviews lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The objective of *Leadership does not have a gender* (Cherkavska, 2023) was to understand what equity-oriented leadership looks like; to determine one's choice to pursue a leadership role; to learn what facilitative processes are available; to understand what obstacles female candidates faced; to inquire about gender inequality perceptions; and to ask what is important when building leadership capacity. In this study, I focused on findings related to participants' pathways to school leadership, its successes and challenges, promoting equity in schools, and potential remedies to build women's leadership capacity. The interview schedule (Appendix A) provides questions used to guide interviews with respondents. The conversations were digitally recorded and transcribed using an automated transcription software called Otter.ai.

I reviewed the data to reexamine the themes of interest. Analyzing the text gave me another opportunity to generate insights about what was being said during the conversation. It was helpful to have notes, numbered transcripts and color-coded themes that helped me quickly find necessary information.

The experiences shared by female school leaders about their journeys revealed both internal and external factors within the education system which either hinder or support women in their pursuit of becoming and serving as principals. The results helped identify strategies to establish environments acknowledging and nurturing the leadership potential of female educators in school administration.

Findings and Discussion

The journey towards principalship includes diverse career pathways. As educators aspire to become school leaders, they experience various factors that influence their route, from personal motivations to external opportunities and challenges. This section sheds light on female career pathways to principalship, exploring successful approaches and disruptive obstacles. These findings have translated into practices and behaviours school leaders can cultivate to build leadership capacity among staff, women in particular.

Career Pathways to Principalship

To determine a career path to school principalship, I asked my participants to share some significant events, which led them to attaining a leadership position. The respondents described site-based and district-level leadership opportunities in which they could participate. While there is a common understanding of hierarchy in education, it was interesting to note each pathway can be what you want it to be.

Site-based leadership opportunities include: teacher, learning coach, department head, assistant principal, new curriculum lead, chaplain (Catholic setting), truth and reconciliation lead, mental health champion, and student leadership facilitator. There are many ways to implement leadership skills. Some examples are taking a leading role in activities within the classroom and helping out with various Alberta Teachers' Association committees. Sharon suggested, "Any opportunity you get for that skill preparation is very beneficial" (Sharon, line 190).

Lily demonstrated with her career path, "progressive opportunities are for anybody who is aspiring to a leadership role" (Lily, line 146). There are district-level positions allowing

teachers to work beyond one school setting and build a professional network, such as a consultant, resource facilitator, and liaison.

While every path described by the participants was unique, leading roles were progressive in nature. Lily stressed each position has its *shelf-life*, meaning it is necessary to keep a growth mindset and remember to challenge yourself. “I never liked to do any more than five years [in the same position]” (Lily, line 150).

Sharon emphasized the multifaceted nature of leadership responsibilities and stressed the significance of seizing opportunities to enhance one's skills, as job descriptions often do not convey the true versatility of a leadership position. “[School leadership position] is very broad, and it is site-based, and it is a big unknown” (Sharon, lines 38-39).

Factors Affecting the Journey

All interviewees have successfully secured school leadership positions. They shared the many factors contributing to their success. As with any other journey, their stories included both achievements and obstacles. The study aimed to define and analyze opportunities and challenges women face when aspiring to become a school leader.

Effective Practices

Understanding the opportunities and practices contributing to the progression of aspiring female leaders is crucial for identifying strategies to build leadership capacity among women. I looked into approaches that proved to be successful for the participants. These include individual motivators and aspirations, mentorship, professional development, and school culture.

Baby steps. There is no need to rush into a new role without fully comprehending the expectations. It can lead to burnout and self-esteem hit. Individuals seeking to exercise their leadership skills should be encouraged to start with smaller, more manageable opportunities,

such as school-site leadership, and ensure that their assignments are progressively challenging. Embracing smaller steps is the key to long-term success and self-confidence in their leadership journey.

Staying focused. Lily mentioned that self-confidence and risk-taking helped her advance her career while she was actively engaging in life-long learning. According to Sharon, the journey can be lonely because it is hard to know who you can trust, so she recommended not to take things personally, as women tend to do. “It is part of the path” (Sharon, line 180).

Know your why. In this study, respondents expressed their deep passion for their work, despite facing challenges. Knowing what drives you should provide guidance during challenging times. “Money doesn’t matter and nothing else matters because you are doing it for the right reasons” (Sharon, lines 73-74).

Another suggestion came from Lily, who advised practicing self-reflection to discover one's meaning and purpose. Taking the time to understand what truly drives you can lead to greater fulfillment and direction in your professional and personal life. Merriam said: “My purpose is to serve (Merriam, line 52) [and] [t]he title is not what is important. It is what you are doing” (Merriam, Line 346). When you have a clear understanding of your *why*, it becomes a source of strength and resilience, guiding you even in difficult times.

Balancing work and family. Literature (e.g., Corsi & Everitt, 2021; ElAtia et al., 2022; Gabaldon et al., 2016) identified family and work balance to be one of the major barriers among women to receiving a promotion. Often women feel guilty for not spending time with their children. Sharon explained “[thinking of] family as an excuse [is] part of the problem. They should be part of who you are and cherished, not held” (Lines 98-99). In other words, it is important to let them be one’s support and driver.

Support. Network is valued in the workplace, mainly because it builds a strong web of connections that are necessary for community building and productive work. When someone is new to the role, it is beneficial to have a mentor or a champion to help with things one is trying to navigate. Merriam shared “Build[ing] a network of different people who can support me in my role. [They are not] just other principals. I have what I call assets" (Merriam, lines 17-18). Support at work and at home is a key contributor to success.

Describing Challenges

As outlined in the literature review, women face various barriers in their career leading to underrepresentation in educational leadership. In response to the following question: *In your opinion, what roadblocks do people, aspiring educational roles, encounter? Do they affect women and men differently?* The participants identified burnout, finance, family commitment, lack of support and fear as the main factors they or their colleagues experienced.

Burnout. The recurring experience of exhaustion among teachers, particularly female educators who juggle the demands of motherhood, raises concerns about burnout. The caring and nurturing approach of female teachers (“Feeling of needing to be everything for everybody” (Sharon, line 85), coupled with the lack of support and high demands of the profession, can lead to significant stress and challenges. “I see too many people burn out too early in their careers” (Sharon, lines 10-11), which does not allow them to progress in their career. Merriam addressed: “Biggest barrier for women is the mental load both at school and at home. Women tend to be the backbone in both arenas; and emotional load, making sure everyone is okay” (Merriam, line 16-17).

Finances. Educational leadership positions require higher education. As it is important to seek professional development opportunities and programs, teachers may apply for masters

programs. It allows them to engage in a career-long learning, obtain a raise and increases their chances of getting a leadership position in the future. “It is a financial burden and the payback is not there financially to make up for that” (Sharon, lines 53-54). The Alberta Teachers Association offers some financial support, however it only covers the partial cost of one course in a year. Many school divisions also offer support through leaves and tuition remission as embodied in benefits embedding in collective agreements.

Family. Working mothers often feel the need to choose between family and career advancement. “A female feels that she has to prioritize and compromise all these other parts of her life, and she is not going to want to” (Sharon, lines 260-261). Lily discussed “Balancing parenthood, with career aspirations, can cause a bit of trepidation and uncertainty” (Lily, lines 93-94). Because “Time taken away from family affects women more than men” (Merriam, line 160), it is often the former who misses out on moving into leadership roles. Having said this, Lily mentioned: “there [have] been great strides in society as far as shared parenting responsibility” (Lily, lines 94-95).

Lack of Support. One of the most important school leadership behaviors is to support one’s staff, recognize staff members’ efforts and appreciate what they do. If a staff member does not feel valued, it is hard to find one’s voice. Merriam said a challenge is “having leaders who cannot be objective in their observations of a teacher wanting to enter leadership” (Line 163). Some teachers have bad experiences in the role of an assistant principal, which prevents them from moving forward with their career. “We should be building capacity within our assistant principals to be prepared to become principals, and that means including them in everything (Merriam, lines 361-362).

Self-doubt. As discussed in the literature review, a lack of confidence can become a roadblock for women. Self-doubt creates fear of taking risks and takes away learning and career opportunities. “If you are not going to take a risk, and just do the same thing that the person before you did, and the person after you is going to do, there is no growth.” (Merriam, lines 97-98). “There is probably an overgeneralization but I think there would be a little more fear associated as far as women go” (Lily, line 131).

Leading Towards Equity

The literature review described transformational and ethical approaches in relation to building leadership capacity among women. None of the participants mentioned these terms. However, they did refer to the concept of servant leadership when responding to the question about facilitative processes they have experienced when aspiring for a leadership role. Sharon referred to one of her responsibilities as “encouraging the next generation as opposed to having power and daunting that power over people” (Sharon, lines 221-222).

Merriam's perspective on effective leadership for promoting equity is influenced by servant leadership principles, as highlighted in an interview. Her recommendations include fostering collaboration, and professional growth; creating a safe space for risk-taking; promoting appreciation and motivation by acknowledging colleagues' achievements; recognizing the significance of emotional language for women; embracing a servant leadership approach; acknowledging teachers as leaders beyond formal roles; and emphasizing the power of sharing knowledge for empowerment.

Lily stressed how important it is to take a collaborative approach when leading. The most frequent verb in her suggestions is “to build”. “I have always been a great believer in collaborative work involving many people, getting lots of opinions, lots of diverse opinions.

Building trust and mutual respect” (Lily, lines 81-82). “Building a work environment is foundational to collaboration, trust, care and compassion for others (Lily, lines 185-186). She also recommended breaking down the classroom walls and working with people outside the school. “Building a strong connection with the larger community, not just outside your immediate area” (Lily, line 192).

Effective Leadership Strategies

These practices include suggestions for the organizational level, such as schools and districts. They include mentorship and training programs, new knowledge, and flexibility options for working mothers.

Mentorship Programs. Mentorship programs offer a valuable platform for mutual learning and growth. A collaborative effort of schools, universities, the Alberta Teachers’ Association, and the Ministry of Education (i.e., Alberta Education), can establish formal programs specifically aimed at empowering women aspiring leadership positions.

By offering mentorship opportunities, experienced leaders can share their knowledge, expertise, and guidance with women aspiring to leadership positions. The respondents suggested mentors have the capacity to recognize one’s leadership skills and to help one believe in oneself.

“Getting the right mentors that help you form confidence to think that you can still make a difference” (Sharon, lines 60-61). *The right mentors’* behaviours include: motivation, mental readiness promotion, opportunities for autonomy, and complementing. Simultaneously, mentees can learn from their mentors' experiences and gain insights into navigating the challenges and opportunities of leadership roles. “I was mentored by some incredible leaders, the school-based principals I worked with” (Lily, lines 69-70). Leaders are encouraged to make themselves available for informal chats, so staff have opportunities to learn what their role is.

Mentors can also share how they balance work and family commitments and not to feel guilty about compensating one or another. Sharon said that she had strong male leaders who helped her normalize that balance because they were very vocal about prioritizing their young family in their lives and still pursuing a career (Line 111). Mentorship and collaborative efforts will contribute to a more inclusive and empowering environment, ultimately benefiting the entire educational community (Connell et al., 2015, as cited in EIAtia et al., 2022).

Break patriarchy. “We are still in the society where there are pink jobs and blue jobs” (Merriam, line 161). Sharon also shared, “I have had a lot of females who have made me feel like I needed to compartmentalize. [...] I think it comes from them having been taught that by other males in their lives (Sharon, lines 112-113). I believe it is important to educate women about equal chances and get rid of stereotypes as “the biggest hindrance is what society portrays and how women internalize that” (Sharon, lines 278-279).

Toolbox. In the pursuit of leadership roles, education plays a critical role. Beyond informal knowledge, seeking formal learning opportunities from various sources, such as universities, districts, colleagues, training programs and new experiences is highly beneficial. Acquiring formal education provides a structured and comprehensive understanding of leadership principles, strategies, and best practices. It equips aspiring leaders with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate the complexities of leadership roles effectively. The pursuit of adding new skills to one's toolbox is a rewarding practice. By constantly expanding their skillset, aspiring leaders demonstrate their dedication to personal and professional growth.

Flexibility. One effective approach to support women returning to work after maternity leave is by providing them with alternative assignments. “Flexibility to working mothers needs to be addressed” (Line 167). This practice can be instrumental in helping women strike a balance

between their work responsibilities and personal life. Lily's experience exemplifies the benefits of such an arrangement. "Sharing a role with another consultant is a great way for women to be successful in both roles" (Lily, line 176-177).

By offering alternative assignments, women are given the opportunity to take on roles that accommodate their specific needs and circumstances. This may include part-time work, flexible schedules, job-sharing, or temporary projects. Such arrangements allow women to ease back into the workforce while also fulfilling their parental responsibilities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Educators follow various pathways and experiences on their journey to becoming principals, including traditional routes, such as exercising leadership skills at school, and non-traditional routes, like transitioning from different roles within the district. Leadership opportunities are available for those who are looking for them. They must be progressive in nature, and it is recommended one takes on new responsibilities gradually. In other words, leadership opportunities are not limited by gender. Each pathway can be what one wants it to be.

The key factor driving the success of female school leaders is a profound understanding of their own purpose and meaning of their work. While challenges may arise from lack of support, financial limitations, burnout, self-doubt, work-life balance concerns, it is one's aspiration to make a difference that gives strength and motivation to pursue leadership. Work-life balance continues to be the major roadblock when it comes to advancing in the career.

Educational leaders are required to build leadership capacity among all teachers. They need to create a culture to encourage this. While effective leadership strategies include mentorship programs, flexibility, and leadership training, it is role modeling and support that can inspire one to become a leader. Providing opportunities for teachers to engage in meaningful

leadership experiences and offering support networks can empower them to pursue leadership roles. The essential piece is to recognize the value of every individual's talents and embrace it by working together to build a growth-promoting, collective, inclusive, collaborative and reflective learning community.

At the organizational level, it is recommended the divisions continue to offer leadership training programs and promote leadership opportunities. It is also necessary to inform school staff of these opportunities and offer diversity and inclusion courses. Principals should lead with an intersectional and ethical approach, when considering recruitment and promotion.

At the individual level, women should be encouraged to exercise leadership at their school, to reflect on their experiences, and continue to gain new skills. To respond to the challenge of balancing work and family commitments, the organizations are encouraged to offer flexibility programs, so women do not have to choose between career advancement and motherhood.

Through collaborative efforts and formal programs, women in educational institutions can feel supported, encouraged, and empowered to break barriers and excel in leadership positions. These initiatives foster an inclusive culture and gender equality, promoting a diverse and well-represented leadership landscape in education that benefits students, educators, and the community at large.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

1. What is your ideal leadership role? Where do you see yourself in 10 years?
2. Can you please share some significant events in your journey to be where you are? How have these events affected you on this journey?
3. What facilitative processes have you experienced when aspiring for a leadership role?
4. In your opinion, what roadblocks do people, aspiring an educational leadership role, encounter? Do they affect men and women differently?
5. What kinds of experiences have you or your colleagues had, which enabled them to move into school or system leadership positions?
6. Many people say, large systematic change needs to occur to balance the gender gap. How would you respond to that?
7. What is important to you in building leadership capacity among women?