

## Article

# The Unique Professional Journey of Female High School Principals in Utah

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study was to increase awareness of the unique professional journey of female high school principals in Utah and to potentially adjust the male-gendered lens through which such leadership positions have traditionally been viewed. A narrative, phenomenological qualitative research approach was used to gather and analyze the career journeys of six female high school principals in Utah. Our findings indicated that female high school principals in Utah have experienced barriers similar to those identified in the relevant literature. Mentored support and examples of inclusive leadership practices assisted these women in moving through and beyond these barriers. Themes included expectations for female high school principals to act more like moms, failure to be recognized as the principal, perceptions of female leadership as unnatural, a woman's voice not being heard, coaching as an effective career move for men, men freely talking down to women, not considering women for advancement, career-limiting stereotypes, women having to work harder, and the impact of mentors. We suggest that the simple sharing of rich narratives like those in this paper can invite administrators and policy makers to develop an awareness of the unique experiences of female high school principals and facilitate a reconceptualization of the high school principalship both in terms of theory as well as policy.

**Keywords:** education leadership; high school principal; inclusive leadership; women in leadership



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## 1. Introduction

The career journey of high school principals differs for men and women, with one study describing this journey for a woman as climbing the career ladder in heels [1]. Histories of women in education and educational leadership reveal enduring challenges they experienced while gaining upward career mobility, frequently without the balancing foundational support more typically available to men [2–10]. Indeed, research and instruction on educational administration has historically been centered in a male view without considering the unique career journeys and experiences of female administrators [10–14].

Additionally, school administration research addressing gender has almost exclusively been research on female educational leadership [11,13,15]. Shakeshaft et al. stated that “The literature of the field is really the study of male administrative behavior. Gender research in school administration, then, is generally thought to be studies of women” [13] (p. 105). While percentages of female high school principals in the United States increased to 36% in 2021, according to data from the National Teacher and Principal Survey [16], high school principalship continues to be male-dominated and defined through a male leadership lens. Increasing the number of female high school principals may be a victory on behalf of women, but only a one-sided victory if the universal ideal of leadership continues to be defined from a male perspective. Equitable leadership exists when men and women look at each other eye to eye with mutual respect while incorporating an inclusive leadership understanding [17].

Those who define the role of the high school principal and influence hiring practices may be positively influenced by an increased awareness and understanding of the female educational leadership experience. This can be provided through gathering and sharing stories that map the career journeys of female educational leaders, including high school principals. Their stories may ignite dialogue and equitable change, which in turn may establish a more inclusive high school principal leadership ideal [13,18,19]. To facilitate this equitable shift, Charol Shakeshaft recommended gathering stories from female high school principals to increase awareness of their underrepresentation and to illustrate that their leadership experiences are not the same as those of men [15]. The purpose of this study is to answer this call in the specific case of female high school principals in the state of Utah.

## 2. Literature

The following literature review begins with a brief history of the barriers women have experienced while entering the teaching profession and advancing into educational leadership, including an early American, male-centric ideology. Next, it parses out and discusses several factors that have impaired and continue to impair the career journeys of female high school principals, namely, role congruity, normative male dominance, and gender bias against women. Finally, it addresses efforts that can be taken to facilitate a more equitable reconceptualization of the high school principalship generally.

### 2.1. Early American, Male-Centric Influence on Women in Educational Professions

Early American ideology about the superiority of men laid the foundation for discriminatory practices against women that would permeate the teaching profession for more than 250 years and eventually spill over into educational leadership opportunities for women [19]. Puritan communities in early 17th-century America established a civil and religious form of government [6,20]. This order dictated that a father's position was superior to all others in the family. He represented the political and religious magistracy in the home [6,21]. The father assigned the duty of teaching children the will of God to a pious mother whose primary responsibility became the home-based instruction of her children through reading [6,22]. Moreover, this dynamic did not interfere with the male and female societal hierarchy due to the established presumptions that a woman's mind was inferior and that teaching children to read was an easy task [21,22].

The strict Puritan social order and the emphasis on learning God's will were foundational in establishing educational systems in the United States [20]. This strict social order significantly contributed to a male hierarchy in education perpetuated in America over the next several centuries [2,4,22]. It was not until after the Revolutionary War that public schools consistently opened to both boys and girls. Women were only granted full opportunity to teach in public schools at the turn of the 19th century [2,6,9,23]. Furthermore, women were frequently denied access to early 20th-century university administration programs based on their sex [2].

The sting of the singular masculine representation of leadership felt by female educators around the turn of the 20th century was reflective of the centuries-old ideology that a man by nature was superior to a woman [24]. Male superiority continues to have a presence in modern educational leadership dynamics not only in numbers but in a common acceptance that the male leadership experience is the universal reality [2,4,11,15,25].

### 2.2. Factors Inhibiting the Career Journey of Female Educational Leaders

Upon being named the first female superintendent of Chicago Public Schools in 1909, Ella Flagg Young described her future outlook for female educational administrators. "I look for a large majority of the big cities to follow the lead of Chicago in choosing a woman for superintendent", she said. "In the near future we shall have more women than men in executive charge of the vast educational system" [24] (p. 265). Neither this female-dominated vision nor even a more equitable representation of women in education leadership have materialized since that time. Indeed, Maranto et al. described

that while women largely dominated both teaching and leadership in 19th-century America, this was at least in part due both to the common perspective that women were “better at nurturing children” and that “local school boards could get away with paying women less” [26] (p. 12). Horace Mann argued that because women possess “a preponderance of affection of intellect”, they would accept teaching positions regardless of pay or notoriety [27]. As educational leadership roles became more professionalized, however, historically fraternal educational organizations and higher educational training programs halted educational leadership experiences for many women [2,15,24]. Rousmaniere wrote that male education reformers at the turn of the 20th century held “undocumented” beliefs regarding female teachers, namely that they were unprepared, too young, “almost entirely ignorant of the great and important fields of science”, and lacking in leadership skills [27] (p. 39). These reformers identified “an easy and cost-effective solution”, Rousmaniere explained, that is, “the appointment of a male supervisor over a group of female teachers” [27] (pp. 20–21). Education programs began to separate advanced administration courses from teaching courses, targeting the administration programs “toward male high school teachers and administrators” [27] (p. 45).

Additionally, requirements for secondary school administrators to possess bachelor’s or advanced degrees became barriers for women who had limited access to university education [27] (p. 50). As a result, the number of female administrators decreased significantly. Those women who did become involved in the administration were often relegated to elementary school positions, as these were seen as less professional. Yet, women were discouraged from even elementary positions, Rousmaniere claimed, both because of the effeminizing effect they might have on male students and that it might cause “too much anxiety” for a woman who, in the view of 20th-century reformers, would prefer to work under the superior leadership of men anyway [27] (p. 52). More recently, while there are fewer explicit barriers prohibiting women from administrative roles in secondary education, there remain collectively tacit assumptions and discriminatory attitudes such as role congruity, normative male dominance, and gender bias, which continue to hamper the professional experience of female educational administrators in the United States [28].

### 2.2.1. Role Congruity

Role congruity describes the tension women experience when they advance into educational administrative positions that continue to reflect male leadership patterns. In the development of social role theory, Eagly explained that gender roles “are normative in the sense that they describe qualities or behavioral tendencies believed to be desirable for each sex” [29] (p. 13). The desired behavioral tendencies of men include being agentic, self-confident, and ambitious, while those of women include being communal, gentle, and nurturing [30]. Accordingly, criticism and rejection can result when men or women step beyond assumed stereotypical behaviors [31]. For example, when a woman in a leadership position is assertive, agenda-driven, and commanding, others, especially male colleagues, may mislabel her as manipulative and cold, which may result in her being isolated from her male colleagues [30,32].

### 2.2.2. Normative Male Dominance

Normative male dominance, that is, the belief that male experience is inherently superior [13,15,17], has stymied female success in education administration [25,31] and has even been used to maintain a male monopoly on opinion [17,33]. During the 19th and 20th centuries, women were told what and how they could teach by their male superiors [2,3]. Tyack quoted the Denver superintendent of schools in the 1870s to illustrate this point: “If teachers have advice to give to their superior, it is to be given as the good daughter talks with the father. . . The dictation must come from the other end” [24] (p. 60). Similar trends continue today. For example, one female high school principal described in 2003 how male colleagues did not seek her advice or suggestions: “I don’t think they intentionally don’t call on me. I just think they don’t think of it” [12] (p. 192). Another woman was critical of

administrative instructional materials: “My thoughts as I read through it, they kept talking about men, men, men and I didn’t fit the style that men used” [12] (p. 191).

### 2.2.3. Gender Bias against Women in Career Advancement

Results of the 2020–2021 National Teacher and Principal Survey indicated that 36% of public high school principals in the United States were female, and 64% were male [16]. Additionally, data reported in the Digest of Educational Statistics report indicated that in 2020, the number of female graduate students receiving an educational administration master’s degree was two times greater than the number of males [34]. These data suggest that equal opportunities for women to advance into high school principal positions are not reflected in actual hiring trends. One explanation for this disparity is gender bias against women [13,25,35]. While both men and women can be victims of gender bias, research indicates that gender bias is more pervasive toward women [36].

The existence of an “Old Boys Network” was reported by female high school principals to halt their career advancement [8]. Janet McGee described the old boys network as an invisible network where older and more experienced male administrators find and groom younger men to assume leadership positions [1]. One man stated, “It’s very difficult for females to get into administration because...all the good ol’ boys didn’t want to let the females in because they were afraid they couldn’t handle the discipline” [37] (p. 197). Referencing Coleman’s research, Sanchez and Thornton stated that while there seems to be an “assumption that problems of equity for women have been solved”, female education leaders remain underrepresented [25] (p. 3). Such implicit bias inhibits their career satisfaction and fair career advancement into upper-level administrative positions, including high school principalship [19]. While the percentage of female high school principals has risen from less than 10% in 1988 to 35% in 2021 [16,38], there is significant progress yet to be made.

## 3. Methods

We conducted a phenomenological, narrative qualitative research study using a sampling of female high school principals in Utah. Narrative inquiry consists of collecting the lived stories of individuals to better understand cultural and social norms that shaped their experiences [39]. Moreover, narrative inquiry provides a rich source of data that “opens a gateway to better understanding of a given research topic” [40] (p. 16). Phenomenological qualitative inquiry further captures the essence or common meaning of lived experiences shared by a group of individuals [39,40]. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to invite participants to share experiences and emotions about their unique professional journey. Each interview was coded separately and compared with the interviews of the other participants to identify common themes. While we acknowledge that such a method is limited in that it presents participants’ stories from their own perspectives, we maintain that our approach gives unique insight into the validity of female education leaders’ stories and experiences as it illustrates these experiences from the emic perspective of those who lived them rather than through the mitigating lens of secondarily descriptive data collection. As such (and in light of the methodological rationale that follows), we present our rich description of these narratives as a valuable and timely contribution to the literature that seeks to elucidate the unique dimensions of female education leaders in American public school contexts.

The demographics of the participants varied in regard to age, religion, and socioeconomic status. These women were at least 40 years of age, although this was not an intentional delimiting factor. Because Utah’s community of female education leaders is predominantly white, we did not include descriptions of participants’ race, as this could have compromised anonymity. Each of the participants was additionally assigned a pseudonym to further preserve anonymity. In keeping with this study’s rich narrative focus “not to generalize the information...but to elucidate the particular” [39] (p. 126) [41], we limited participants to six women so as to be better able to give primary concern to the illustration

of their rich experiential narratives. Furthermore, we based our selection of study participants on the purposive criterion of their having previously worked or currently working as female high school principals in the state of Utah [42].

In order to better situate readers to the unique context of our study, we describe here several key facets of the state of Utah in relation to female education leaders who work there. Generally seen as a highly conservative state that has been heavily influenced by a significant population of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints [43], Utah provides a unique context in which to consider scholarly conversations regarding women in educational leadership roles. “Although its theological underpinnings are quite distinctive, Mormon understandings of male and female roles are not unlike those in many conservative Christian churches that celebrate the primacy of the nuclear family and the complementary roles of men and women” [44–46]. Inasmuch as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has promoted traditional conceptualizations of the family and gender roles (especially in Utah), such conceptualizations have likely played a role in shaping the educational structure within the state. It is probable that the widespread nature of its influence, as well as the conservative values of the state, significantly impacted the experiences of these women regardless of their membership or lack thereof in this particular religion.

Despite Utah’s socio-political conservatism, a recent survey found that female representation in state-level government leadership and employment generally exceeded the national average [47]. While there is some emergent, non-academic speculation regarding the Church’s influence over gender role conceptualizations [48], scholarly discussion regarding this theological and cultural influence is more nuanced, with some feminist scholars going so far as to highlight the empowering dimensions of Latter-day Saint doctrine [44,49]. We hope, by focusing on female principals within the unique context of Utah’s secondary schools in this study, to add insight into the ways in which this religious and conservative framework contributes to the experience of female education leaders. Nevertheless, exploring the potential dynamics of such connections is not among the primary purposes of this study; its focus, again, is on the unique challenges of female educational leaders in their journeys to their respective leadership positions.

Using purposive criterion sampling [39], we gathered participants based on the professional connections of some of the authors—both personal relationships from prior professional experience and through chain sampling participant recruitment through the Utah Association of Secondary School Principals [42]. Upon recommendation by various members of this sampling network, one of the authors extended an invitation by email to these female principals using a standardized script. After they agreed to participate, the same author contacted each principal using a phone script to schedule interview times. We implemented a semi-structured interview protocol aligned with the study’s primary research question, completing multiple cycles of data analysis and coding [50] to document accurate representations of the lived experiences of participants. These data were used to identify unique themes and commonalities in their stories and were also compared to research findings established in the literature concerning female high school principals in the United States. Following established procedures for verification and reliability [51,52], we recorded and transcribed each interview, member-checked these transcripts with each participant [42,53,54], completed an extensive analysis of data through multiple cycles of coding [39], conducted peer review and debriefing [55,56], followed established standards of reliability through accurate recording and transcription techniques [57], and reviewed findings to protect against confirmation bias [58].

#### 4. Findings

First, we will explore each participant’s professional journey by summarizing her response to the following question: “What is your professional journey into the role of high school principal?” Consistent with the principles of narrative qualitative inquiry, these stories facilitate an understanding of the cultural and social norms that shaped their

professional journeys [39]. We also provide the table below, which outlines pertinent demographic details relating to the professional journeys of these women (see Figure 1). Next, we will illustrate how the challenges of role congruity, normative male dominance, and gender bias against women were interwoven into their career journeys. Consistent with the principles of phenomenological qualitative inquiry, these responses purposively capture the essence and common meaning of their lived professional experiences [39,40].

Participant	Participant's Mentors	Approximate Size of School (# of Students Enrolled)	Prior Experiences
Charlotte	Male and Female	1800	Elementary, Middle, and High School Teacher; Instructional Coach; Middle School Principal
Nancy	Male and Female	1800	Special Education Paraprofessional; Bus Driver; Elementary Assistant Principal; Elementary Principal; Curriculum Development
Sydney	Male and Female	1250	High School Teacher; High School Athletic Director; State Athletic Director; Middle School Principal; High School Assistant Principal
Sarah	Only Female	1000	Middle School Secretary; Middle School Teacher; High School Assistant Principal
Hanna	Only Female	2000	High School Teacher and Cheer Coach; Elementary Assistant Principal; High School Assistant Principal
McKenna	Only Female	3000	Middle School Principal; High School Assistant Principal; Curriculum Development

**Figure 1.** Outlines the genders of the participant's mentors, the approximate size of their high school, and the various professional experiences each participant had in the field of education prior to becoming a high school principal.

#### 4.1. Personal and Professional Stories from Six Female High School Principals in Utah

Of the stories gathered from this study's six participants, we chose to share McKenna's story as a starting point because she eloquently described the doubts and fears that accompany female high school principals in their career journeys. She also articulated the hope and opportunities that arrive when they do good within their sphere of influence despite the limitations to female education leadership we have discussed heretofore. In short, McKenna's narrative sets the stage for those that follow.

##### 4.1.1. McKenna: Opportunities Have Been Placed in My Way

McKenna grew up in an urban community along the Wasatch Front in Utah. Her family life was centered around the religious principles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, including serving others, living a moral life, and strengthening home and family. She shared, "The only thing I wanted to do was to be a teacher, a mom, and maybe a high school teacher". Her career journey, however, has taken her in a direction she did not anticipate in her formative years. She has not married and has become a well-respected educational leader in the very community where she was raised. She summarized that opportunities were placed in her way as a result of being willing to try new things, taking counsel from parents and trusted colleagues, and doing her best within her sphere of influence.

During her interview, McKenna presented herself as a leader with integrity, grace, and good humor. Without pretense, she explained how the opportunity for appointment as a district curriculum director presented itself unexpectedly through a call from the assistant director of the district. This perspective of recognizing how opportunities have been placed in her way is something McKenna described herself as having gained in hindsight rather than something she envisioned at the beginning of her university training. McKenna shared a journal entry she had put into an app on her cell phone in February 2022 in which she "remembered one day [in college]... looking at a rather large crack between blocks of the sidewalk and thinking, 'I'm falling through the cracks'". Reflecting on her career

path since that day, she wrote to her college-age self, “You will be amazed how all this turns out. . .you’ll go on to teach and coach, lead a whole school, and be the director of curriculum for a large district”. The serendipitous sharing of this journal entry, as well as McKenna’s willingness to personally talk about her career journey, revealed how trust in others, personal values, and perseverance have shaped her career.

#### 4.1.2. Charlotte: More a Progression Than a Pursuit

Charlotte explained that life experiences, hard work, and taking advantage of opportunities contributed to her success as an educational leader. As a result of difficult circumstances in her young life, she promised herself that she would “never be in a position where [she] had to depend on a man to take care of [her]”. Charlotte earned her secondary science teaching credentials and taught for a short time but decided to stay home to raise her children rather than teach. When her husband was injured in a serious car accident, she returned to teaching. Describing the moment when he came home from the hospital in a wheelchair, she recalled, “I decided I would go back to school because I didn’t know [if] his earning capacity was diminished”. Wanting to be more hireable, she completed her elementary certification in order to increase her career versatility. Following her elementary licensure, Charlotte began teaching first grade, then fourth grade, before moving to seventh and ninth grades. “It was easy to move through the ranks”, she explained, “because I had all my certifications and licenses”.

Charlotte moved on to become an instructional coach, a middle school principal, and then a high school principal. “I didn’t pursue it”, she said, describing her career. “I wasn’t looking for a change. I loved what I did. I absolutely loved teaching. . . .So [my administrative journey] has been more of a progression than a pursuit”. Her story reveals that she has a keen ability to bounce back from hardship. Furthermore, taking advantage of opportunities and putting into practice attitudes she developed in her youth are core values that Charlotte utilized to help her progress in a career that she loves.

#### 4.1.3. Nancy: Bus Driver to State Educational Leader

Nancy shared that the possibility of facing financial insecurity is what initially motivated her to pursue a career in public education. She graduated from college with a bachelor’s degree in journalism and a minor in political science with the intent of finding a job in journalism. As she described, however, her career trajectory quickly took an about-face and steered her into the profession she grew to love. Realizing that journalists “were being paid nothing everywhere, unless [you were] the Walter Cronkites of the world”, she determined to return to school for a teaching certificate. Experiences in a special education classroom and as a bus driver during this process helped her develop a love for “special education and helping kids that struggled”. Nancy explained, “A lot of people love to know that I started as a bus driver and ended up as a [state educational leader]. . . .[I] fell in love with teaching and decided, ‘Oh, this is my heart,’ but it was not my initial thrust at all”.

As Nancy shared her career journey, she repeatedly expressed a feeling of joy and a love for the people she worked with. “I just loved it. . . .The kids were fun and funny. The faculty was so astute. I mean, these were, the way I feel about it, legendary names in our district”. Nancy explained that moving from journalism to education helped her find a career that filled her with joy and purpose. Her tenderness toward others was at the heart of her drive to positively influence those around her, even while driving a school bus.

#### 4.1.4. Sarah: A Drive for Success

With two quarters to complete before graduating with a degree in social work at Utah State University, Sarah was in a car accident that facilitated her career journey into educational administration. “I was engaged. . .and my teeth were knocked out and I had a broken arm”, she explained. “I tried to go back in January, but just couldn’t do it. So, I checked out and got married in March. I never went back [to school] until I was 38”. Sarah

decided she wanted to become a secondary school teacher while she was working as a middle school secretary.

To obtain her teaching credentials, Sarah described driving 170 miles round trip to and from Utah State University to complete her coursework four days a week, often staying up until 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning to do homework. "And then I'd go back to work. . .at 7:30", she said. "I did that for two and a half years, Monday through Thursday". After working as an assistant high school principal for two years, Sarah was appointed as the first female high school principal in her district. She repeatedly stated during her interview that love for her teachers and students was the driving force during her career.

#### 4.1.5. Hanna: Inspired by Her Mother's Perseverance

Hanna explained how her mother's perseverance through hardship inspired her to do the same in her career journey and in life. Hanna's mother experienced some of the most tragic discrimination reported in the United States during World War II. Despite being two years behind in school by the end of the war, Hanna's mother graduated from high school at the top of her class, earned two doctoral degrees, and became a university English professor. Hanna talked about her mother's inspiring influence, stating, "I persevere because I come from a background [of endurance]".

Hanna continued, "I often tell myself, 'I have no right to complain about what happens to me after watching what they did.' And that drives me to persevere. . . .No one can take away your integrity. No one can take away your drive. . . .you get to control that". During Hanna's interview, she described persevering through heartache and disappointment as she pursued a high school principalship. She reiterated that the perseverance she learned as a child from her mother helped her through this difficult time.

#### 4.1.6. Sydney: I Call It Fortune

Sydney explained that her career journey has taken her to many different places. Most importantly, it has taken her to a community with friends and family. She explained that her introduction to education as a profession began in high school with an English teacher she "adored". Sydney recalled, "sitting in class one day and thinking, whatever this lady is doing, that's what I want to do. . . .So, I call it a fortune". Sydney further explained, however, that good fortune did not fall on her in the years immediately following high school. By the time she was 22, she was widowed with a small baby. She did not have the financial means to provide for her child, so she went to school to become an English teacher. Sydney stated, "I could not have done this without the help of family and friends".

Sydney shared that over the past 20 years, she has tried to exemplify the kindness that was shown to her. She explained, "When people said, 'Hey, do you want to?' I would say, 'I'll do it.'" She has worked as an English teacher, a high school athletic director, a state athletic director, a middle school principal, and a high school principal, in addition to serving as a state secondary principal association leader. As Sydney reflected on her career experiences, her family support, and the administrative opportunities that have opened up for her, she called it "fortune". Acknowledging the support received during her career journey and paying it forward is a cornerstone in the foundation of Sydney's leadership paradigm.

Maranto et al. and Rousmaniere outlined the treatment of secondary administration as more prestigious than elementary administrative roles and, relatedly, the most common route to higher positions within public education, such as superintendency. As such, they argue, secondary administrative roles have historically been dominated by men [26,27]. In this sense, a traditional path for a woman might begin with elementary leadership before progressing to secondary administration. Interestingly, however, many of the women in this study described their professional journey along a less traditional path. Sarah, Sydney, and McKenna, for example, had no experience in elementary schools prior to their appointment as high school principals. Charlotte's experience with elementary was only as a teacher, not an education leader. Her journey is especially

unique as she gained experience teaching in elementary, middle, and high schools before becoming a middle school principal and was the only woman in this study who had no experience in an assistant principalship before becoming a high school principal. The unique aspects of these principals' career journeys offer additional insight into the various experiences and difficulties that women might face as they approach what has historically been a male-dominated role of high school principalship.

#### *4.2. Career Barriers for Female High School Principals in Utah*

The career commentary provided by these women revealed individual personalities and traits as well as a common professional culture. This culture is based on love and appreciation for others, satisfaction in professional accomplishments, and strong self-efficacy as a result of persevering through hardships. These stories also provided commentary on barriers that hampered their career experience. Intertwined in their experiences is repeated evidence of gender-based barriers that are consistent with those experienced by other female educational administrators in the United States: role congruity, normative male dominance, and gender bias against women.

##### *4.2.1. Role Congruity and Female High School Principals in Utah*

According to role congruity theory, criticism, rejection, and tension can be experienced when men and women step beyond prescribed gendered stereotypical behaviors. The following interview excerpts illustrate leadership role congruity challenges. These include having to function within the presumed ideal of being motherly, failing to receive recognition for effective administrative skills, and working within a perennial social norm that it is not natural to be led by a woman.

**More Like a Mom.** Each woman, at some point in her interview, discussed the pervasive effects of being expected to perform leadership responsibilities according to a traditional female role, that is, being submissive, nurturing, and kind. McKenna and Sarah specifically explained that people readily assumed that they could only lead through a motherly lens, resulting in them spending excessive professional time at sporting events and activities to counteract negative assumptions of this stereotype. McKenna explained the stereotypes she has encountered working with athletic coaches and other extracurricular activities. "These people thought that I would maybe be more like a mom", she described. "I was always questioned, 'Do you care about coaching? Are you really going to have our best interests at heart?'" McKenna recalled spending more than half of her time managing extracurricular affairs, yet her effort did not free her from this questioning by male colleagues due to their perception of her motherly leadership style.

Sarah provided a similar example. "I just think there was a different expectation. . . maybe it's a motherly part of us, I don't know, to be available", she said. "There was an expectation for women to be at everything. I didn't see that same expectation of [my counterpart male principals]. . . to be there. They sent an assistant". Like McKenna, Sarah felt there was a different expectation for her. To receive the same validation as her male principal counterparts, she was expected to allocate extra time and effort for her job. Pidgeon-holing McKenna, Sarah, and the other participants into a motherly stereotype did not prevent them from retaining leadership positions, but as other female high school principals noted in the research, exerting extra effort to obtain professional validation resulted in frustration. Failure to adjust long-established gender stereotypes in high school principalship runs the risk of placing unnecessary burdens on female leaders and restricting their ability to demonstrate their full leadership capacity.

**Failure to Be Recognized as the Principal.** All of these women had obtained a high school principalship as a result of graduate-level training, professional development, and demonstrated expertise, yet each of them described having their accomplishments minimized or overlooked simply because they were female. "Are you serious? I thought you were some PTA lady looking for a Tupperware party" is a comment Hanna heard when she presided over a construction meeting for a football stadium at her high school

and introduced herself as the principal. Hanna described feeling her accomplishments diminished by a group of men when they failed to recognize her leadership. Nancy related a similar experience at a district meeting with lunch ladies in which she was the consulting principal. During the meeting, a man from the district repeatedly referred to the rest of the group as “little ladies”. Nancy finally “marched right down” to the office of the superintendent. “Correct me if I’m wrong. I don’t think anyone should be called ‘the little ladies’”, she expressed. “I don’t expect to be treated that way”.

Eagly and Karau explained that prejudice, intentional or otherwise, can be apparent in a professional situation when one person in a group reduces another member’s status based on a perceived stereotype, regardless of their acquired social or professional rank [31]. The man who referred to Hanna as a PTA lady and the man who called Nancy a little lady may have had little awareness of the caustic nature of their comments; however, these comments reflect a long-established gender norm granting a man the privilege of being outspoken and assertive while expecting a woman to be accepting and submissive. Acknowledging and moving through the tension that arises when a woman steps into a traditionally male-dominated role is necessary for recalibrating equitable leadership dynamics [15]. As the number of women continues to outrank the number of men completing graduate-level educational administrative training programs, it is simply unacceptable for any female administrator to have her status diminished or unrecognized by an unchecked comment.

**It is Not Natural to Be Led by a Woman.** Although women obtain professional leadership status, they are oftentimes criticized for succeeding at what is considered a male task. This criticism is most likely rooted in the discomfort people experience when they perceive a female educational leader to be abandoning the nurturing or communal traits associated with her social role [30]. Each female participant described facing this mindset and established gender role dichotomy as part of her administrative reality. Charlotte explained regarding the prospect of women being hired as educational leaders, “If you’re a woman, if you’re young, and if you’re short, good luck”. She continued, “it’s not natural for people to want to be led by women”. Charlotte additionally described a “weird” tendency for people to gravitate toward strong, male leaders. Accepting this reality is a burden identified in the research literature shared among many female high school principals.

Furthermore, research suggests that male educational leaders may not even have an awareness that this burden exists for their female colleagues. Sydney illustrated this perspective, stating that although she “worked with some great [men]”, there were times when she “would be donning an apron and walking around professional development activities giving people food”. While they were conversing with colleagues, she was handing out food. These scenarios, along with others provided by each participant, illustrate that female high school principals meet or even exceed the expectations of their position while at the same time experiencing internal agitation as a result of working under a popular assumption that men are the natural leaders. Assuming that natural leadership is defined by stereotypical male traits halts the development of all educational leaders, not just women. Effective educational leadership encourages both men and women to be assertive, kind, resolute, compassionate, agentic, and nurturing in their leadership roles. Enacting this leadership dynamic reduces and possibly eliminates role congruity challenges, such as the inclination for people to assume it is not natural to be led by a woman.

#### 4.2.2. Normative Male Dominance and Female High School Principals in Utah

Simply put, normative male dominance is the common acceptance that the male experience is considered superior and should be the universal, accepted reality [15,17]. The following interview excerpts illustrate normative male dominance in educational leadership when male leaders do not acknowledge a woman’s voice, when male involvement in sports or coaching becomes a positive career move, and when men unhesitatingly dominate a conversation and assume a woman’s opinion is secondary.

**A Woman’s Voice Is not Heard.** In colonial America, women were prevented from speaking out; in fact, some were literally muzzled for doing so [33]. Participants in this

study related experiences where they felt ignored or even figurately muzzled. McKenna described going to Utah High School Athletic Association (UHSAA) executive committee meetings where all but two committee members were male. “One time”, she recalled, “one of the staff members said, ‘Gentlemen, we have got to make a decision here’”. While her regional counterpart, a sympathetic male colleague, supported her and apologized for this misstep, McKenna voiced that his sympathy did not prevent her appearance or voice from being drowned in a sea of “gentlemen”. Likewise, Sydney spoke about reaching a position where she had “more athletic administrative leadership experience” than everyone she was working with, yet still encountered “many times where [she] felt like [she] was not involved in decisions”, “conversations”, “ideas or brainstorming”. She recalled, “There were moments of frustration where I was like, ‘I’m not just saying that because I want to hear myself talk’”. Despite having a strong administrative background in athletic leadership, her voice was frequently ignored to the point where sometimes she felt as if she was talking to herself. Repeated scenarios of these and other women feeling dominated by a louder male voice need to be rewritten through a common acceptance that the male voice does not represent a universal view and that each voice, male or female, is worth being considered.

**Coaching: An Effective Career Move for Men.** Twenty years ago, Ellen Eckman explained that the route into high school principal positions is made easier for men when they are linked to sports and coaching [37]. All but Hanna described this dynamic in their career journeys. Charlotte’s perspective is that because “so many men are in secondary education because of sports, . . . they’re all connected through coaching”. She continued, “When [you] go to the Utah conference for the secondary principals, watch how the men are. Watch how there’s a camaraderie. . . . It’s not around instructional learning, I can tell you that. It’s around sports”. Charlotte expressed that the sports connection to leadership among her male colleagues continues to persist in a way that seems to dominate the leadership culture.

Sarah described a similar dynamic. “Don’t give her the gym keys because what does she know about that? What does she know about sports? What does she know about the football games?” She continued to explain that her opinions were often overlooked in meetings in favor of male opinions. In this sense, Sarah compared educational leadership to being the keeper of the gym keys. She suggested that men perceive that female high school principals do not know enough about sports and, therefore, cannot lead. To conflate experience coaching football or other male-dominated sports with a strong high school principal skillset runs the danger of suppressing not only the voice of experienced and qualified female administrators but the development of a kind and compassionate skillset in male administrators, as well.

**Men Freely Talk Down to Women.** McKenna stated the following during her interview: “When I would go to state UHSAA meetings, I couldn’t get a word in edgewise”. Being somewhat agitated, she explained that quite often, men (almost without thinking) consider their opinion to be primary and a woman’s to be secondary. Nancy shared her experience with this reality when she had to dismiss a football coach. “I made sure he knew who I was and said, ‘You’re hereby dismissed as of this very minute. I want you to go into your office, clear it out right now, and be gone by the end of the day.’” Sharing the coach’s response, however, Nancy recollected, “He said, ‘No. You can’t do that’. And I said, ‘I just did. You’re done’”. Nancy expressed being dismayed when this coach genuinely assumed his “No” answer would dominate her female position. Hanna described having a similar reaction when she was surrounded by overly talkative, confident men in a meeting:

I came into [the meeting] and I sat down. [The men] had already begun to talk about the big project of remodeling and renovation of the school. They had this conversation for about 15 min and then the district person [turned to me and] said, “Do you have anything to say? Do you have any questions?” And I said, “Yes, I would like to know who’s in the room and which company they represent. I’m the principal”.

Hanna described being awestruck as she watched the men, who would be working under her leadership, unassumingly and freely discussing their opinions without acknowledging her presence or position. Having to patiently interact with men who confidently explained details, expressed opinions, and freely determined outcomes without her input was a common frustration and potential insult shared by each study participant. Helterbran and Rieg described these types of interactions as a modern muzzling of the female voice [33]. While literal muzzling would be unheard of in today's administrative climate, women still experience a subtle form of muzzling when their male counterparts openly discuss matters of importance and move away from their contribution. Whether this behavior is intentional or not, expanding an awareness of this common culture and practice is needed to fully integrate the female voice into educational administrative practice.

#### 4.2.3. Gender Bias against Female High School Principals in Utah

Gender bias is apparent when individuals from one gender determine what individuals from another gender can do and what roles they can fill based on preconceived gender norms. The following interview excerpts illustrate the gender bias challenges these women experienced. These included not being considered for career advancement, working under career-limiting stereotypes, and having to work harder than a man to obtain career advancement.

**Not Considered for Advancement.** All but Charlotte and Nancy described situations in which men were considered for career advancement before women. McKenna described openly expressing her agitation when a female high school principal applicant was brushed aside during a hiring committee meeting:

We had a conversation [about] a woman who was being considered for a role as high school principal, [but] her name kind of got pushed to the side. . . . I just said, "Why is she being reduced in terms of being looked at? Is it because she's a woman and because she's outspoken?" [I asked these questions] because I think there are male principals right now, which are very outspoken. If a woman did that, . . . I don't think she'd be considered on a serious plane because it almost seems like she's disruptive, but men do it all the time.

As McKenna shared this story, she described the sense of injustice she felt in that situation when a woman's administrative career was being professionally halted for demonstrating a behavior that might actually work in favor of the career advancement of a man.

Sydney described another subjective hiring scenario. "A lot of [men] got promoted to higher positions based on their coaching successes. I thought if I was a football coach or a basketball coach, I would have been considered a little more", she explained. Instead, Sydney felt that she was frequently being told to "stay in [her] lane and do this over here even though [she] had been a high school athletic director for four years". Despite having sufficient athletic administration credentials and experience, Sydney described watching male colleagues with less experience advance in their administrative careers and feeling all the while that she was unfairly being told by this brotherhood to stay on a more traditional female path rather than attempt to merge with them. Situations like this are more than male administrators having sports-related conversations and failing to include their female colleagues. They reflect intentional acts that prevent female leaders from advancing in their careers. Reinforcing gender bias against women in administrative culture not only slows the pace of career advancement for women but may perpetuate gender-based stereotypes in the students who witness this dynamic in their school leadership [13]. Old boy networks, as the name suggests, need to be accurately identified as outdated and should thereby remain in the past.

**Career-Limiting Stereotypes.** For generations, the high school principalship has been aligned with a male leadership perspective [8]. Several female participants described feeling a sense of unfairness, career regression, or a double leadership standard when they were initially pegged by male supervisors into what was considered appro-

priate female administrative responsibilities and appearance. Hanna openly expressed her opinion on this:

It appears there's a natural assumption that elementary school is good for a woman. . .to be an administrator. . .because she's still going to have more kids. That shouldn't be any part of it. . .I've had conversations with people in the district office that have alluded to that. I know that's their mindset.

Hanna identified experiencing a sense of unfairness when she was directed to an elementary school position when she began her work as an administrator, while her entry-level colleagues were not. Charlotte also felt a strong sense of unfairness:

Traditionally, men throughout history have worn a suit as a uniform, right? As soon as they [walk into a room the] uniform says, "I'm communicating professionalism". And then a woman comes in. What is she supposed to wear? I think women have these challenges as we come in as [high school principals]. Women are way more judged by their appearance than men: what we wear, how we carry ourselves, how we wear our hair, right? That's something men don't have to worry about.

Charlotte expressed her view that women, including herself, are judged by their appearance way more than men and have a greater appearance expectation. While failure to maintain a chic, professional appearance may not be a decisive, career-halting blow for a female administrator, free talk and criticism of stereotypical female attributes and dress in male-centered, professional circles may unfairly reduce a woman's credibility and impact fair hiring practices. There should be no space in a professional workplace where women are evaluated on their acceptance of an objective dress code; however, commentary from these women provides a snapshot that this reality continues to creep into the corners of their workplaces.

**Women Have to Work Harder.** Men typically enter the educational administrative profession earlier than women; in fact, at times, some are unassumingly escorted into the profession early in their careers through an "old boy network" [1,8,12]. None of these women described experiencing a pull into their administrative profession from this type of network. Instead, each described working in numerous positions over a minimum of ten years that eventually led to a high school principalship. Sarah recounted feeling a sense of personal success and fulfillment when she was appointed as the first female high school principal in her district. She also described feeling a sense of unfairness when the community held her to a higher standard of performance than her male predecessors:

I was hired as principal and I did that for six years. [When I started], the school account was in the hole \$1400 at the bank and by time I left, we had over \$300,000 in savings. . . .Whatever I was trying to do, I had to get data, . . .facts, and costs. . . .[Parents] would question the judgment of my decisions, where they might not have questioned [the previous male principals].

Nancy described being unfairly treated by a male constituent and actually feeling bullied by him when he questioned her legislative work during a caucus meeting without taking the time to review what she had previously put into action:

I was pulled into one of the caucuses and reamed over something [by a man]. . . .This man didn't even invite me to sit down or. . .anything. He just started going after me. And I don't recall whether he said anything of the gender notion, but I'm quite sure he would not have done that to a man. [He] had the strong arm and he just let me have it.

Nancy commented that being a hard-working, successful, and highly regarded female state educational leader did not protect her from a male constituent's verbal aggression. She described being figuratively up against a strong arm that attempted to undo the hard work and effort she had expended over the course of many years.

Each woman, at some point in her interview, described the extensive amount of time and persistence she was required to exert before being appointed to a high school principalship. Additionally, four specifically described facing the reality of witnessing men advancing into this position while they stood on the sidelines. Furthermore, these four experienced career-halting moments when they were figuratively told to stay in what might be considered a “female” lane. In other words, experiences where men overlooked these women despite their qualifications or treated them negatively suggested to the study’s participants that these men saw them as incapable simply because they were women. By instead appointing men to high school principalship, they were encouraging these women to remain in positions that better fit a traditional view of female roles. These career-limiting experiences align with examples of gender bias against female high school principals described in the peer-reviewed literature. Failure to expose and eliminate these practices allows the continuation of gender bias against women to impair career satisfaction and fair career advancement [8,19,25].

#### 4.2.4. Barrier Congruency for Female High School Principals in Utah with National Trends

Female high school principals in Utah are underrepresented. The Utah Women and Leadership Project at Utah State University in 2022 found that only 29% of high school principals were female [58], while *Deseret News* reported that 77% of Utah’s teachers are women [59]. This trend is similar to others identified in the United States, which showed that 35% of principals in the nation were female [16] in comparison to 74.3% of the national teacher population constituted by women [59]. Prior to this study, however, a comparison of barriers faced by female high school principals in Utah to national trends of such barriers remained underexplored. The findings of this study illustrate that female high school principals in Utah experience barriers in their career journeys that are congruent with national trends identified in the research literature.

The six female high school principals in Utah who participated in this study are only a sampling of female high school principals in Utah, and some may question if their commentaries can justifiably represent the whole. However, the independent willingness of these women to participate in this study, along with the quick saturation of data, suggests that gendered career barrier commonality exists in the general experiences of female high school principals in Utah. Furthermore, the shared excerpts from their interviews are reflective of career journey barriers other female high school principals in the United States have experienced, as noted in the literature: role congruity, normative male dominance, and gender bias against women. This congruity offers another affirmative layer to the findings of this study.

#### 4.3. Additional Findings

The commentary up to this point has focused on the congruence of career journey barriers experienced by female high school principals in Utah to those identified in the literature. While this is a key finding of this study, the findings also revealed more inspiring commonalities in the experiences of the participants that illustrated how they successfully navigated career barriers. These include receiving support from trusted mentors who discussed opportunities for leadership and being provided examples of inclusive leadership practice. Furthermore, several women specifically explained how responding to spiritual nudges and reassurances positively impacted their career outcomes. The following excerpts are a sampling of the inspiring insights shared by these women.

##### 4.3.1. The Career Found Me/The Impact of Mentors

All participants in this study stated at some point that, despite challenges, career opportunities seemed to open up. Participants also expressed appreciation for the inspiration and support of mentors, both male and female, who steered them toward administration as a career. McKenna provided one example:

Opportunities have been placed in my way; I honestly did not seek them out. And it [was a] woman who interestingly affected what I ended up doing. . . . My very first principal [who] was a female principal said, “Have you ever thought about administration?”

McKenna noted she did not initially seek out or consider a career in administration, but because of a kind female mentor, she did. Sydney provided another example of being steered in an administrative direction when she was not hired for a Career and Technical Education (CTE) leadership position:

A CTE coordinator position opened up in our school [and I interviewed for this job]. Later in that day the CTE guy for the district, who I knew very well, came [to me] and he said, “Hey, I just want to tell you that you’re not gonna get the position, but you need to be a high school administrator”. A couple of years later, I was graduating with my masters [in administration] at Southern Utah University.

Sydney illustrated that her move toward administration was influenced by a kind friend and mentor after not getting a position she thought she wanted. Sydney also shared that during her career, she had been discouraged at times when she was not assigned to a certain position, but she has learned that if she is patient and works hard, the right opportunities open up.

#### 4.3.2. Inclusive High School Leadership Practice

Lois Tyson explained that when men are shackled by the dichotomous boundaries of a traditional male gender role, they are prevented from expanded emotional experiences that offer connection and wisdom to the surrounding world [17]. When they are offered and allowed the privilege to explore the full human experience, they become better individuals and more capable of making an impact on those they lead and serve. Shakeshaft concluded that when all educational leaders understand that the male view of leadership is not universal, the educational administration experience expands and becomes more meaningful for both men and women [15].

Nancy celebrated this type of meaningful leadership in the example set by the male superintendent who hired her as a high school principal. She explained, “He was so confident in who he was that he never seemed to be threatened by who I was. I was resolute [and kind] because he was always that way. He was a great role model for me”. Nancy’s experience with equitable leadership was the result of a man being comfortable with who he was and offering kindness to those he led, including Nancy. Because of his leadership example, she felt empowered to offer the same in her leadership capacity.

Sydney described another example of inclusive leadership in the interaction between her as an assistant high school principal and the male principal:

I went from being a staff developer and talking about curriculum to being [a high school athletic director and assistant principal]. That was an awesome experience and my principal there is really one of my favorite people ever because he never treated me [as an inferior person]. Never. I was competent. . . . He trusted me.

These scenarios are representative of the inspiring components of educational leadership experienced by these female high school principals in Utah. While these women offered examples of gender-based career frustrations, they also offered inspiring sentiments that highlighted the potential for an inclusive reconceptualization of the high school principalship. These inspiring examples illustrated that high school leadership is most effective when all leaders, both men and women, grant each other the privilege of embracing the full range of human emotions and perspectives as they lead. In this manner, the high school principalship can be effectively and equitably reconceptualized.

#### 4.3.3. Spirituality in the Journey

In the body of research on female educational leadership, spirituality has been identified as a means used by women to inspire others and to manage personal and professional difficulties [13]. Utah was colonized by religious pioneers—frequently identified as “Mormon Pioneers”—and much of the culture in the state retains a strong connection to this religious past. While religious background was not identified or pursued as part of this study, the sustaining influence of spirituality was a theme shared by several of the participants. One woman related what to her was a sacred experience prior to being appointed as the first female high school principal in her district:

All summer long I kept having these premonitions: something’s going to happen at [the high school] and you’re going to be there. I felt full of myself for even feeling that feeling. I thought this is crazy. But in August the superintendent and personnel director came over [to my school]. They said, “Something happened at [the high school] and we need you to drop what you’re doing here and to be the principal”. I just teared up.

Another shared that when she took a leadership position that separated her from her family for an extended period of time, she felt what she described as a heavenly reassurance that “everything would be okay”. Additionally, another woman explained she felt confident accepting difficult professional responsibilities because, as a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, she felt these positions were “like a calling”.

These few examples do not represent a dominant religious view of educational leaders in Utah, nor do they suggest that male educators are excluded from relying on spirituality in their practice. They do indicate, however, that for several women, discussing spirituality in their professional journey without any prompting was a common and comfortable topic during a voluntary interview. This dynamic may raise questions for additional research, including an examination of the impact of spirituality on both male and female educational administrators in Utah and elsewhere.

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this study indicated that the barriers experienced in the career journeys of six female high school principals in Utah were congruent to those identified in the broader literature, including the areas of role congruity, normative male dominance, and gender bias against women. These results also solidified a view that a male leadership lens continues to permeate the female high school principal experience in Utah. Furthermore, female leaders experience tension in their career journeys consistent with role congruity as a result.

Role congruity theory seemed a logical overarching theoretical framework for this study. Role congruity theory simply states that men and women experience tension in the workplace, criticism, and rejection when they move beyond prescribed gender roles in their leadership capacity [31]. During the literature review process, we discovered multiple qualitative studies centered on the unique experiences of female high school principals in different parts of the United States that revealed frustrations associated with tension in the workplace, criticism, and rejection [33,35,37]. Women described having to work harder to obtain a principalship and be validated once in this position. Common phrases emerged, including “I’m not readily acknowledged as the principal”, “I have to repeat myself to be heard”, “I’m not included in activities with the men”, the “old boys network”, and “women can’t effectively discipline students”.

The results of this study confirmed the value of utilizing role congruity theory as the overarching theory for this study. Themes and comments found in the literature emerged during their interviews. Some mentioned the impact of an “old boys network” delaying their career advancement. All described having to work longer and harder to achieve validation readily given to their male counterparts. On a more positive note, however, each participant also mentioned being influenced by kind mentors, both male and female,

when making the decision to pursue a career in educational administration. Each expressed gratitude for the validation, inclusion, and encouragement that was extended to them from both male and female colleagues. Each emphasized that inclusive practices were a primary source of career satisfaction.

However, the purpose and scope of this paper were not only to provide further evidence in support of existing thematic frameworks regarding the experiences of female educational leadership generally. It also elucidated specific themes pertaining to the experience of female high school principals in Utah. These included expectations for female high school principals to act more like a mom, failure to be recognized as the principal, the perception of female leadership as unnatural, a woman's voice not being heard, coaching as an effective career move for men, men freely talking down to women, women not being considered for advancement, career-limiting stereotypes, women having to work harder, and the impact of mentors. These themes further enrich the field's understanding of the nature and dynamics of the lived experience of the career journey of female high school principals in Utah. These narrative themes, in turn, have the potential to inform policy and practice geared toward the more equitable conceptualization of the principalship more broadly conceived.

### 5.1. *The Importance of This Research*

When Ella Flagg Young declared in 1909, "Women are destined to rule the schools of every city" [2] (pp. 1, 265) she also expressed that women were better qualified for administrative work than men. Her prediction was framed under the arch of women's suffrage and her seminal appointment as the first female superintendent of the Chicago Schools. Although her work on behalf of female administrators is well documented and revered, it seemingly conflicts with the equitable purposes of modern gender and education researchers. A more contemporary perspective indicates that equity between men and women exists when each is granted the privilege of embracing and utilizing the full extent of what has been considered male and female stereotypical traits [17]. No one is excluded.

The results of this study are important for the equitable reconceptualization of the high school principalship in Utah and elsewhere. This study captured the stories of six female high school principals in Utah and illustrated that gender-based barriers were evident in their career journeys. As noted in research, increasing an awareness of gender barriers for women in high school principalships among policy makers and those who influence hiring practices is an effective first step in reconceptualizing high school principalship [15,25]. These findings, which call for an increased awareness of gender barriers in educative contexts, are especially noteworthy in that they come from a state whose connections to socio-political conservatism have long influenced its educative dynamic.

### 5.2. *Recommendations for Future Research*

Gathering stories to better understand the experiences of female high school principals in Utah has been a primary focus of this study. Another purpose of this study is to ultimately provide a catalyst for the equitable reconceptualization of high school principalship in Utah. Based on information obtained from the research literature and the results of this study, we put forth recommendations for additional research that may further accomplish these goals:

1. Research is needed to address the lack of the female leadership perspective in graduate-level administrative leadership training programs and materials [12,13,35];
2. An evaluation and revision of intentional mentoring of female high school principals, especially women of color, is needed to bring about equitable training and leadership practice [1,12,13,25,33];
3. A better understanding and tracking of the effectiveness of inclusive leadership training is warranted to ensure equitable leadership practices continue to advance [8,13];

4. An increased understanding of exclusive and inclusive male and female high school principal social interactions may provide opportunities for equitable and meaningful administrative experiences [1,35];
5. Research more closely focused on the specific relationship and dynamics between female educational leadership and principles and cultural manifestations of socio-political conservatism.

## 6. Conclusions

The female high school principal experience throughout the United States has been studied for several decades. Through these studies, the voices of some female educational leaders have been recognized. Some female administrators have openly spoken about the difficulties of operating and advancing within a system that was designed through a male leadership lens. Others have described navigating the challenges of discrimination. The voices of female high school principals in Utah can be added to the voices of other female high school principals in the United States. The narratives and themes presented here not only support findings illustrated elsewhere in the literature but introduce additional themes that add richness and insight into the lived experience of becoming a female high school education leader. It is our hope that these stories expand awareness of the unique experiences of female high school principals and facilitate a reconceptualization of the high school principalship that is more inclusive and rewarding for both women and men.

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