Voices of resilience: Female school principals, leadership skills, and decision-making techniques

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In this article we report on a qualitative study which explored the life narratives and career trajectories of female school principals, to determine resilience factors in the principalship position. The female principals' voices and lived experiences were principle focus areas, not barriers or challenges they faced. In-depth insights were provided by narrative analysis as research methodology. Fifteen in-service female principals were selected from one school circuit in the Mpumalanga province of South Africa. An interdisciplinary theoretical framework was used to guide the interpretation of the participants' perspectives, using change theory, the ethics of care, and resilience psychology. Findings of the study reveal, among others, that female principals had to be prepared theoretically, practically, and psychologically for the principalship, and that mentoring and learning leadership skills were profoundly valued. These key factors lead to both career and life resilience, and can be imparted to prospective principals.

Keywords: decision-making; female school leadership; female school principals; leadership skills; narrative analysis; resilience

Introduction and Background to the Problem

Every morning during school terms in South Africa, over 12 million children stream through the gates of approximately 24,000 ordinary public sector schools (Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa, 2018), carrying the hopes and expectations that their formal schooling will improve their life trajectories. These twelve years of education, where children are served by 400,000 teachers remain one of the best options for South African children to break out of the poverty trap and change the "current patterns of poverty and privilege" (Van der Berg, Burger, Burger, De Vos, Du Rand, Gustafsson, Moses, Shepherd, Spaull, Taylor, Von Broekhuizen & Von Fintel, 2011:1). A poverty trap is any self-reinforcing mechanism that causes poverty to persist, including dysfunctional schooling brought about by "institutional failure" (Azariadis & Stachurski, 2005:2).

Characterised by poverty and inequality, South Africa's contemporary schooling system also contends with an asymmetrically-gendered culture of principalship. These two contextual factors set the stage for this research study. The enduring legacy of systemic apartheid continues to play out in the current realities and bifurcation of the education system between affluent and poorer communities, with tremendous socio-economic challenges affecting schools (Bush & Oduro, 2006; Christie, 2010; Ngcobo & Tikly, 2010; Spaull, 2011; Van der Berg, Spaull, Wills, Gustafsson & Kotzé, 2016). The correlation between education and wealth in South Africa has meant that, on the whole, poorer learners continue to struggle academically with "low educational outcomes" (Spaull, 2012; Van der Berg et al., 2016).

The narratives of selected South African female principals from impoverished backgrounds bring to life, through examples and profiles, the challenging conditions that existed for them. This study captures how women leaders in schools have successfully managed to navigate their careers despite the many hurdles they faced. Female principals and policy-makers in emerging economies in developing countries will apply the antidotes for the obdurate barriers to female school leadership in South Africa. The new knowledge includes the identification of discrete resilience mechanisms within the promotional journey, such as women mobilising other women, and the self-reported use of spirituality as a coping mechanism in the face of severe adversity. Resilience in this paper is defined as optimism in the face of adversity, to appraise situations without distorting them, and that "resilience arises from ordinary resources and processes" (Masten, 2015:3). Some have used resilience specifically to refer to children who come from adverse contexts, who nevertheless thrive and even excel. To be successful in the education environment, women must understand the prevailing and entrenched culture and values to offset the gender-based attitudes of their male counterparts.

The enduring characteristics of education data are a critical component of this study, as the research participants (female school principals) were born, raised, educated, and worked in a former homeland area in Mpumalanga, South Africa. Persistent problems at multiple levels have thwarted progress in South Africa's education system. The Gordian's knot of challenges in the education arena includes the highly gendered culture of school governance, management and leadership, which often precludes many talented women, through socially-constructed phenomena, from participating and succeeding at school leadership level (Diko, 2014; Moorosi, 2014; Schmidt & Mestry, 2015). Underperformance of schools is exacerbated by stereotypical attitudes to gender and diversity, among other factors, resulting in gender asymmetries and under-representation (Moloi & Bush, 2006; Naidoo & Perumal, 2014). While these two factors (a poverty-stricken historical school

system, and a gendered culture of principalship) form the backdrop of this research, they were not the primary research aim. Neither were the barriers to female school leadership. Instead, the voices and lived experience of female school principals were the principle focus areas of the study. The statement of the research problem question was: What can be learned about resilience from an exploration of the first-hand perspectives and reflections of in-service female school principals in South Africa, as they recount their career trajectories and life narratives? The sub-questions were the following:

- How do the participants define and frame their leadership skills, both practically and psychologically?
- Which decision-making techniques did the participants utilise during their promotion journeys?
- How can resilience factors in the principalship journey be strengthened and imparted to prospective principals?

This research emanates from the inverse gender ratio of school principals, given that 69% of the teaching cadre is female, it remains perplexing that only 36.4% of school principals are women (Makatu, 2013). South Africa has some of the most progressive legislation on gender equity in the world, yet there is a lack of de facto equality in this country. Despite the de jure policy, equity at a national level and equity at a local level in school principalships remains elusive. In addition, unlocking leadership talent, especially for female teachers, is a priority for the education system, given the bimodal age distribution of teachers (Hofmeyr & Draper, 2015) and the possibility of a shrinking pool of leadership in the future (in the traditional age group of 40 to 49, from which principals are drawn). To explicate the asymmetry and analyse the problem, this study draws on the lived experience of in-service and aspiring female principals, using their voices and life stories to reflect on success factors (notably, the acquisition and assimilation of decision-making tools and problem-solving techniques) on their, often arduous journey to, and experience of, principalship.

The rationale for conducting this study was to critically examine the pathways leading to female principalships to illuminate how they acquired and assimilated leadership skills and decision-making tools. The formative development and professional experience of successful female school principals, in their own words, is therefore central to this study. By exploring and analysing the formative experience of female principals, we discerned and gave voice to patterns of development. There is a need to widen the research lens to incorporate these first-person reflections, illuminating the complicated (and mostly unwritten) journey to principalships. Through this process, we explored how management skills are acquired and utilised, and how resilience, and other coping mechanisms of women, are cultivated in principalship positions.

Theoretical Framework
An interdisciplinary theoretical framework was used to guide the interpretation of the participants' perspectives, using change theory, the ethics of care, and resilience psychology.

The first theoretical context utilised Lewin's (1951) enduring field theory and change model, along with Argyris and Schön's (1974) theories of action, with reflection, and single and double loop learning. These theories share the underlying model that change is a process, and analysis of the whole must start with the entire context. Lewin's change model, known as Unfreeze–Change–Refreeze was particularly useful as a theoretical framework when examining the acquisition and assimilation of leadership techniques. Argyris and Schön's (1974) model dealt with reflections that centre on the difference between how one behaves, and how one thinks one behaves.

The second theoretical framework was the ethics of care and Gilligan's (1982) theory of women's moral development, which postulates that women tend to think, deliberate and articulate their positions in a different manner when they confront moral dilemmas. According to Gilligan (1982), the feminine voice places more emphasis on protecting interconnected relationships and care for the other, whereas the masculine moral voice places more emphasis on individual rights and individual freedom and justice. Separation and connection are at the heart of this theoretical stance. Gilligan's (1982) stages of female moral development (pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional) was used as an explanation for how female school principals develop and transition into school leaders. The final section of this framework incorporated research on the concept of resilience within adversity (Masten, 2015; Werner, 2005). Resilience is taken to mean bouncing back from adversity, in a cognitive and/or non-cognitive sense (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009), coupled with a layer of tackling hardships with a sense of well-being (Ungar, Ghazinour & Richter, 2013). The behaviour traits are undoubtedly significant in hierarchical, androcentric school environments.

Research Methodology
A qualitative approach in the form of narrative analysis was adopted for this investigation into women in school leadership. Creswell (2006) describes narrative research as having many shapes and forms, along with utilising a variety of analytic practices and techniques. The narrative strand of inquiry is rooted in different social and humanities disciplines (Creswell, 2006; Riessman, 2008) and it begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals. Narrative analysis is synonymous with storytelling (Riessman, 2008:3).

The sample size of this study consisted of 15 black female school principals from the Insikazi

School Circuit in the Ehlanzeni District, which is located in Mpumalanga, South Africa. These individuals were purposefully selected because they were central to the research question about what can be learnt from female school principals as they recount their career trajectories. A multi-layered approach to data collection was undertaken. Two kinds of data were collected and integrated: spoken and written. Spoken data were collected through individual and focus group interviews comprising of 15 participants. Using a digital voice recorder, the narratives were captured using open-ended interview sessions, and this averaged about 2 hours per session. As a survey instrument, the 15 individual interviews and three focus group interviews captured direct quotations from the lived experience of women leaders and provided a rich context for their life narratives and career trajectories. Written data were also captured through the use of an open-ended questionnaire, providing an opportunity for each interviewee to expand upon her experience. A pilot focus group was conducted in order to refine the list of questions.

Obtaining trustworthy, valid, reliable, and meaningful insights into this subject of research was achieved through the analysis of interview transcripts, detailed field notes, a reflection journal, and other interpretative skills. We ensured that procedures such as establishing a chain of evidence, taping and transcribing interviews, documenting the protocol and process of research, and obtaining peer reviews of the draft report were followed to establish the reliability and validity of the data collected (see Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research [COREQ] checklist in Tong, Sainsbury & Craig, 2007). A systematic approach to the analysis of the data was employed. This involved the identification of topics, the use of coding into categories and the emergence of themes. In the first domain, the criteria or personal characteristics and the relationship with participants were highlighted, checked, and reported per page number. In the second domain, study design criteria were grouped into (a) theoretical framework, (b) participant selection, and (c) data collection. Again, the criteria for each topic were highlighted, checked, and reported per page number. The semi-structured questionnaire and interview questions were subjected to content validity procedures from experts at the higher education institution (HEI). The necessary permission to conduct research in sampled schools with female school principals and deputies in the Insikazi Circuit (under the jurisdiction of the Ehlanzeni District in the Mpumalanga Department of Basic Education) was secured. In addition, clearance was received from the Insikazi Circuit Manager. Finally, ethics clearance was obtained from the Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee of the HEI.

Findings and Discussion

The first theme to emerge in this research was the significance of the participants' formative experiences in childhood and adolescence, which served as a base for their recollections and reconstructions of their careers and resilience. The second theme focussed on the theoretical, practical and psychological preparedness of participants for the principalship position, while the third theme dealt with decision-making dynamics. The fourth and final theme centred on how participants valued mentoring and the need for learning leadership skills.

Theme 1: Formative Experiences: Early Narrative Identities

Fourteen of the 15 research participants were born in rural Mpumalanga between 1955 and 1968. The childhoods of these participants were indelibly marked, therefore, by the historical context of this specific period in South African history. Apartheid fundamentally controlled and shaped their formative experiences, particularly in demarcated homeland areas. The participants' formative years were spent under apartheid in a rural agricultural setting in the former Eastern Transvaal (now Mpumalanga) province. The majority of the research participants described parents and relatives who worked as agrarian labourers, tending fields in commercial farms or eking out an existence as a subsistence farmer or homemaker under exceptionally difficult conditions. A handful of participants had parents who held other occupations, such as a chef in the mines, a truck driver or dressmaker, but the majority were agricultural labourers in both formal (such as the well-known commercial farm) and in informal settings. Tending the fields with their parents and witnessing their gruelling, arduous work for food was a commonality in the data. Principal B relayed her story as a young girl:

> I watched my mom handle back-breaking work in the fields shortly after she had given birth to a sibling: She's having a baby, and after that [she immediately had] to go to the field and plough the field and look after [the baby]. And I remember when they grind the meal to make food for us, and it was very difficult for my mother … but she didn't give up, she didn't give up.

Principal N described her disabled mother, who was paralysed from the waist down, ploughing the fields while seated on the ground:

> It was hard, because when she arrived, she would sit [on her] knees, but she will plough, and you will find that even when she left home, when she's not around, we'll just go to the tracks … where you'll end up knowing where she is. It was hard, but due to perseverance … there are people who are able to do what was impossible for them, but they did it.

The memory of a child coming home from school to track her paralysed mother's shuffling movements in the fields was distressing, and yet Principal N spoke with sincere admiration and equanimi-

ty about her mother's positive attitude.

The other participants recalled their primitive living conditions when they were young, growing up in a homeland area that was deprived in every way imaginable. They related stories of living in windowless mud huts, with straw mats for beds, and sleeping on cow-dung floors. Going to school barefoot, hungry, and without a proper school uniform was common. Principal A spoke about the desperation her family often faced, to the point where they had to raid dustbins for food. She spoke with tremendous gravity and sadness while recounting this story: "*That was so painful. We faced hunger and humiliation repeatedly, over many years. I recalled my serious plans (as a teenager) to end the unbearable pain and ongoing deprivation by drinking or eating rat poison with my siblings.*"

Principal K emotionally recounted her inability to study at night, as the paraffin often ran out. She had tears in her eyes when she recounted these painful memories, which still drive her to help children today: "*Sometimes I had to go to our next-door neighbour, we were using these tins, and then you put a cloth to give the light ... I asked just to dampen the cloth* [with paraffin]."

The omnipresent scarcity of resources was a recurring topic in the data. Responding to this scarcity, the participants started to improvise in the face of adversity. According to Masten (2015), the motivation to succeed, coupled with self-regulation and self-efficacy in the face of adversity, are common adaptive systems in children who grow up to recover from trauma and deprivation. Scarce resources are prevalent in many emerging economies. However, the success of women leaders depends on how resilience and other coping mechanisms are cultivated.

Theme 2: Being Prepared Theoretically, Practically, and Psychologically for the Principalship

It was clear from the data that being prepared for the principalship is essential. This preparation happens in three distinct dimensions: theoretically, practically, and psychologically. In terms of theory, acquiring degrees, certificates, and advanced diplomas was universally agreed as being critical. The Advanced Certificate in Education (School Leadership and Management) soon to be replaced by an Advanced Diploma in Education, is a good example of the theoretical underpinning that is required as a base for principalship. Coupled with this qualification, the participants' strategies included being life-long learners through knowledge-acquisition activities, such as reading and partaking in workshops and online courses. They valued being life-long learners in order to stay relevant, and to keep teachers "on their toes." One participant claimed that "*principals always need to be ahead of teachers (in terms of knowledge acquisition) in order to garner and maintain respect.*"

Another theoretical preparation is the knowledge and mastery of education policy. Policy knowledge was viewed as essential by the participants, and was often referred to with zealous devotion and respect. The participants stressed that knowing policy was a significant part of their "power-with" base within the school environment. The benefits of knowing policy were also highlighted in the data from the focus groups and the circuit manager interviews. Policy knowledge is an irrefutable part of a school principal's skillset, although it cannot exist within a vacuum of other vital school leadership skills and practices, as listed below.

In terms of practical preparation, principals were aware of several of the core effective leadership skillsets and decision-making techniques that were covered in the research. The four core school leadership skillsets consist of the following: (a) articulating a vision and mission; (b) understanding, leading and motivating staff; (c) designing an effective and conducive organisational culture; and (d) instructional leadership, which pivots on curriculum management (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008:30). Part of this finding is that prospective principals should be prepared to handle the challenging practical aspects of school leadership by equipping themselves with this repertoire of skills.

In terms of the significant practical challenges they faced in their career trajectories, several topics were recurring. The first day as principal, marked by both joy and shock, should be prepared for carefully, and with intention. Powerful stories were told about the first day as a principal. Principal C averred that:

> These first days can set the tone at a school and should be carefully orchestrated. It is not a job for shrinking violets or for those without a backbone, as the circuit manager repeatedly stated. There is no substitute for the hard, daily work that takes place in schools.

Energy and a bias towards action (Fullan, 2006; Mintzberg, 2009) are prerequisites for effective leaders. Being prepared for this transition from teaching to leading was essential.

In addition, school financial mismanagement was a sharp lesson for many, as were tensions and disagreements in school governing bodies (SGBs) – some of which turned violent. Principal B recounts her relationship with the SGBs and the teachers she served with:

> Whenever I asked for feedback regarding funds, I had to take an oath of confidentiality. In this way I keep a good relationship with the SGB chairperson or it can make or break a school. Fostering a productive relationship with the SGB chairperson was a clear lesson. Problematic educators were critical

> *tests, whether they were sick, underperforming, demotivated or insubordinate. I had to face a great deal of headwind when trying to diagnose and fix these issues with teachers.*

In terms of psychological preparation, the research participants imparted knowledge about the headwinds one would face during the first few days and weeks in the principalship, as noted above. Framing this challenging time as universal, instead of personal, can help newly-appointed principals deal with the inevitable psychological struggles they will encounter. Participants also highlighted several resilience mechanisms that assisted them in their daily lives, at school and at home. Collaborating with others, engaging teachers, helping specific learners where possible, and cultivating connections with strong colleagues (coming out of the "oven" as one participant said, for love) were techniques that they utilised to weather the storms at school. Spirituality as a coping and resilience mechanism was also a commonality within the data, particularly when used as a public antidote to witchcraft allegations.

Theme 3: Decision-making Dynamics: Pushed and Pulled into Promotion

It was striking how often the participants mentioned that they did not have a career path in mind when they set out to teach, all those decades ago. Teaching was seen as the sole goal. Only two participants spoke about having greater ambitions in the early teaching years, and even these ambitions were vague until they started being recognised for their above-average performance in the school setting. Huston (2016:69) writes about the "decisiveness dilemma" and stereotyping that occurs from misperceptions of female indecisiveness. Quick, firm decision-making may exclude consultation, empathy, compassion, care and inclusion, which are typically valued by female school leaders. Inclusion and consultation can slow down the decision-making process, reinforcing a stereotype that female leaders are indecisive.

What was clear about the journey to promotion is that participants often spoke about someone else, a colleague or family member, nudging them to apply for their first promotional post as a head of department (HOD). Often, these were women mobilising other women. Once the first steps were taken, the path opened up. Principal G was identified as an HOD by her former principal and was set on a promotional path, thanks to this assistance. Even as an HOD, she was encouraged by her colleagues to apply for a promotional position as deputy principal, even completing a draft application on her behalf. This finding mirrors the international literature on female principals, where "even a little support" from colleagues or family and friends nudges women to apply for promotional posts (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011:108).

A similar situation happened to Principal M, whose close colleague encouraged her to apply and helped her draft an application form. Principal M's brother prepared her for the interview process and held a mock-interview session for her, with a gruelling question and answer session. Principal C said that other people saw her potential for school leadership before she did, and encouraged her to apply. Principal I spoke about the pivotal role her former principal played in her decision-making and work style. "*He will look through you. It's like, when doing* [allocations] *he will push you to extremes, that you will eventually see the potential that is hidden,* [that will] *be unleashed,*" she said, noting how he had made her believe in herself. Taking it a step further, Principal I also described the practical role that a colleague played in her promotion:

> *No one thought that I would be principal from the two of us* [referring to her husband]. *What actually happened is that I sprained my ankle while I was at school, and I was on sick leave. While being on sick leave, a friend of mine came to me with a gazette of promotional posts. He was a colleague and friend. He said you must apply for this* [for the deputy principal position].

Principal I related feelings of uncertainty and trepidation: "*Those shoes seem to be too big for me,*" yet her friend insisted. She actually lined up two applications, one for a deputy principal position, and the other for an HOD position. She was offered both positions. After initially hesitating and being advised by her husband to take the junior role, she resolved to take the plunge to accept the deputy position. "*When I woke up in the morning, I told him, 'No, I am going to that school!,*'" she emphatically stated.

Principal A illustrated another strand in these findings, which is the role of family members in keeping a person motivated during the promotional application process. She applied for ten years before being granted a promotion. Her family kept her motivated during this time. Once she was promoted to deputy principal, it was the circuit manager who finally saw her potential and pushed her into a principalship position. If her family members had not supported her, she would not have progressed down the promotional path. It was evident that she valued positive relationships with family and colleagues, and relied on strong support structures which made her resilient. As noted in the theoretical framework, Lewin (1951) developed a theory that emphasised relationships and dependencies among individual personalities, inter-personal conflict and situational (environmental) variables. In a semi-structured questionnaire, when asked to describe her career pathway, Principal A wrote the following staccato paragraph about "taking a chance" to apply for a deputy principal position:

> [I] *was born a teacher. Started teaching in Sunday school, youth leader, group leader in class who*

liked to teach my peers. I knew I was to follow a teaching career from a young age. My best teachers were females and I looked to them as my role models. I became a deputy principal after working for ten years without a promotion. I took my chances and applied and it turned out I was the best of all the candidates. The district director and the circuit manager encouraged me to apply for [the] *principal's post as they were pleased with my work as a deputy principal.*

Principal E also mentioned that her husband played a pivotal role in her promotion journey, encouraging her to persist through 14 interview rounds. Relationships were critical in the decision-making dynamics for the participants, before, during and after their promotions. Only one participant had a parent who was a role model as a school parent, so the participants relied on non-relatives (colleagues, friends) for assistance with decision-making. All the participants spoke about the importance of relationships, a theme that shaped their leadership styles. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011:6) highlight this theme in their work on relational leadership, whereby women school leaders, "often talk about accomplishing goals with and through others." The "power-with" approach instead of "power-over" was common to all participants.

Another aspect of decision-making is thinking out loud. Decision-making can be shifted from an implicit manner to an explicit approach. As Huston (2016:20) explains:

Great decision-making isn't a single skill – it involves many skills. You have to be able to clarify your priorities, come up with options, analyse those options, test your assumptions, select the option that matches your top priorities, generate buy-in, and prepare for what happens if you're wrong.

Skills such as collective intelligence, social sensitivity, and empathic accuracy (all of which are important in a school environment) appear to arise more easily in female school principals, although this is not exclusive. There are greater areas of overlap between the genders, especially in effective managers and leaders. When making decisions, the female moral voice uses care as the central axis of decision-making. Relationships are sought to be preserved and nurtured. The ethics of care stresses relationships and responsibilities (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1996). As noted in the theoretical framework, Lewin (1951) developed a theory that emphasised relationships and dependencies among individual personalities, inter-personal conflict and situational (environmental) variables. Lewin (1951) highlights the importance of emotional tone or climate within an organisation.

Women may hold back on this decision-making due to the overpowering stereotyping and scrutiny in the position. Regarding discrimination and scrutiny, Lumby, Azeloa, De Wet, Skervin, Walsh and Williamson (2010:39) found that "many had negative" discriminatory experiences in their study of female school leaders in South Africa.

Lumby et al. (2010:39) write that "discriminatory behaviour ranged from subtle pressure, such as more critical scrutiny than would be applied to men, or ignoring women in meetings, to more overt and extreme behaviour including physical violence."

Theme 4: Valuing Mentoring, and Learning Leadership Skills

Mentoring emerged clearly as a theme in all the research participant interviews. Learning from both positive and negative experiences (in terms of role models) was a powerful influence in the career trajectories as a whole. When discussing negative experiences at schools, Principal I stated that, "*not everything works*" and one needs to see what does not work in order to make good decisions in the future. The participants could recount in great detail the role that their previous principals played in their lives, for better and for worse. Stories were easily told, often with humour, and with rich details about how the previous principal (when the participants were teachers, working under this person) excelled or failed as a principal. Using their stories as a counterpoint, the participants spoke candidly about these individuals and what they had learned. Principal E described her mentor:

She's a good mentor. And what I liked about her, she gives everyone an opportunity to develop our skills the way we want. She creates that platform. She's not somebody who is reserved. Okay, and she used to encourage us to say 'shine.' Wherever you are, in that small corner, whatever your situation, shine there. [Later] *you know her leadership style is that one of participative.*

Principal E spoke with great affection of her mentor, saying that she still consulted with her on a frequent basis. She said that this consultative ability, working together, has allowed her to work easily in her promoted positions. "*The school will stand still,*" she said, and people will resist you, if one imposes the old style of command-and-control management. Mestry and Schmidt (2012:548) underscore this out-dated style of patriarchy, observing that it is still rife in schools. Avoiding the maladaptive patriarchal leadership style is an important part of the way forward for female school principals.

The common threads within this positive mentoring were many. Trust and open communication were hallmarks of the mentoring dynamic. Participants commented that long-term relationships have formed and still continued decades later, as Principal E noted earlier. With a smile, Principal E divulged that her colleagues tease her by saying that she was still "*drinking milk*" from her mother – her former principal. Connecting personally and nurturing young teachers was powerful. Creating opportunities by assigning activities and tasks (such as register-taking, conducting assemblies, and submitting schedules) were also mentioned. Au-

thentic sharing of information only happened through trust and "loving" relationships. Many participants used the word "mother" when they described a positive mentor. This mirrors the findings in the literature regarding mothering as being a school leadership advantage for women (Coleman, 2007; Lumby et al., 2010).

One opposing view of mentoring came from Principal L, again, who said that she had struggled to find a peer mentor when she was finally promoted to principal. She felt isolated.

> *Let me start with the issue of a mentor. When I got the post as a principal, I tried to get a mentor from the old principals, but when I discovered from them, these female principals are, what can I say, they do not want to share information with us new teachers. And then as a result I for myself, I decided to make the circuit manager to be my mentor. Because you would ask a principal about something, and then the principal would say, 'Oh wait, I'm still going to check, I'll phone you tomorrow,' 'I'll phone you after 20 minutes,' 'After one hour,' and then you phone again and then you say, 'Oh Ma'am, I'm sorry, I did not have time,' and then the following day is like that, then the next is like that, and then I decide that people are not willing to assist.*

When pressed for details, this principal said that she had only tried one peer as a mentor, and it did not work out well for her. Instead, she was able to form a superordinate mentoring relationship with the circuit manager. The lesson here was not to give up after one attempt; perseverance, trust, and personal chemistry are required for a mentoring relationship to flourish.

A final point on mentoring from the theoretical perspective. In the resilience literature, Masten (2015) identifies mentoring as a central protective influence for resilience and the ability to move forward in life. Mentors and mentoring are essential aspects of career progression and career resilience. Success planning in schools will depend on this mentoring, and identifying other women to succeed is a clarion call. Changing attitudes towards women and girls achieving independence and success is a point raised by Lumby et al. (2010:37), who assert that "many of these principals made efforts to identify and nurture talent in all, but particularly women, 'especially to my young female teachers.'" Moving towards formal goal attainment with the assistance of mentors and colleagues is a critical precursor to successful promotion.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In the study reported on here we examined the antidotes for the obdurate barriers to female school leadership in South Africa. The most salient findings from the data were distilled into four themes: Formative experiences: Early narrative identities; Being prepared theoretically, practically, and psychologically for the principalship; Decision-making dynamics: pushed and pulled into promotion; and Valuing mentoring, and learning leadership skills.

A resilience framework for female school principals was produced to include the identification of discrete resilience mechanisms within the promotional journey, such as women mobilising other women, and the use of spirituality as a coping mechanism in the face of severe adversity. The results of this study capture a moment in time as a marker describing the conditions that currently exist for women who serve as school principals in Mpumalanga, South Africa. It was poignant to see that the interviews served as autobiographical reasoning and sense-making. For many participants, no one had ever asked them about making sense of their careers, or connecting the stories along their various life stages. It was moving to see the connections form, as the women began to trace their life narratives.

We recommend that tangible support for in-service principals should be provided. This can be undertaken by creating a professional learning community programme that would provide a neutral support platform for dealing with the everyday challenges and stresses that come from leading schools. Creating a psychosocial support programme to boost resilience for in-service principals, using these research findings, could serve as an antidote to these everyday stresses, especially in former homeland areas. Participants repeatedly mentioned stories of peers (teaching colleagues) who pushed them onto the promotional track and who helped them adjust to leadership positions. Formal mentoring programmes initiated by the Department of Education, NGOs as well as institutions of higher education could play a significant role here.

Authors' Contributions
Nicolette de Bruyn conducted the empirical study and Raj Mestry undertook the literature review. Both authors reviewed the final manuscript.

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