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Voices of Ohio Women Aspiring to Principalship

By Mahshid Pirouznia¹

Abstract

Women who aspire for principalship might encounter obstacles such as: lack of encouragement; myths about women's work; sex stereotyping; lack of aspiration; role conflict; low self-esteem; family responsibilities; lack of mobility; and hiring and promoting practices. The research problem is to investigate the major obstacles of women seeking the principalship in public education in the U.S.; and also to explore changes of different obstacles to women's principalship because of changing women's role over time. Most studies include one or two obstacles; but this study investigates major obstacles or any other possible obstacles that may have not been recognized in past studies.

The qualitative method for this study includes interviews with women (a sample of 9) to obtain a more in depth understanding of the barriers women faced. The subjects are women who are certified as principals in Franklin County, Ohio. Women in interviews are asked to reveal the most important obstacles while they are searching for leadership positions. Women's experiences were collected and were analyzed to determine similarities and differences in these experiences. The two most influential factors that prevented the women in this study are: gender stereotypical views, followed by family responsibilities.

Key Words: Principalship, Sex stereotyping, Family responsibilities

Introduction

The exclusion of women from the workforce in the U.S. dates to the beginning of the industrial era in the early nineteenth century. For the last 150 years, women were openly discriminated against by employers, who either refused to hire them under any circumstances or who rejected them if they were married or had children.

Although women made up 46.7% of the U.S. workforce in 2010, women held 11.7% of board director positions of Fortune 500 companies, and only 12.5% of the corporate officers of those companies were female. In 1994 women filled 56% of the government's lower-paying positions (grades 1 through 12), while men had nearly 77% of the mid-level positions (grades 13 through 15) and 83% of its senior-level post (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). Today it is clearly evident that women are more likely to be employed in low status and low paid positions (for example child care workers and dental assistants) and less likely to be successful in high status positions such as board directors of large companies.

This research was designed to explore issues that prevent women from obtaining a leadership role in educational administration. The research questions are:

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1. For those women who do obtain a principalship, what are the perceived obstacles they have encountered?
2. For those women who actively seek but do not obtain a principalship, what are the perceived obstacles they have encountered?

Thus this study helps us understand the barriers. This will then lead to the development of strategies to address these barriers and thus result in better representation of women in administration positions in education. There is also the possibility that what we learn from education could be useful in other areas of employment.

This study also will produce new knowledge about changing women's roles (with focus on women positionalities) especially in the past decade. Women's roles are changing over time; therefore, we need to craft legislations, policies and procedures in response to current realities. The results from this study may be used to assist in creating new legislation and institutional policies in favor of hiring women in administrative positions. Also the results from this study can be used to create training programs to prepare women for administrative positions.

Methods

Participants were asked to answer questions regarding teaching experience, administrative experience, race, and age to obtain a more in depth understanding of their background. Two rounds of interviews were conducted in this research. In the first round of interviews six women (three women who sought but did not obtain principalship and three women who obtained principalship) were interviewed. In the second round of interviews three women (one woman who obtained principalship and participated in the first interview; one woman who sought but did not obtain principalship and participated in the first interview; and one woman who obtained principalship and did not participate in the first interview) were interviewed. The second interviews were conducted after one year and a half after the first interviews. After the data from the first round of interviews were analyzed the researcher decided that additional information was needed in certain areas so chose to conduct a second round of interviews for the purpose of: a) following up information about barriers, particularly in relation to issues identified in the literature. Issues were chosen from literature to guide the interviews. These issues included: styles of leadership; and Pocock's (2002) view about motherhood and women's struggle to combine both family and career. b) identify if the women's position toward principalship have been changed over time. This documentation pulls together the similarities and differences between the interviews and ties the findings back to the overall research objectives of the study.

Description of female participant's age, race, administrative and teaching experiences

The women's description of age, race, and administrative and teaching experiences (involved in the first and second interviews) are summarized in Table 1.

Some changes happened to two interviewees (Donna and Judy) in the year and a half between the two interviews. Donna had retired in that period. She had 36 years of experience of working as a teacher and as an assistant middle school principal and had decided that it was time for her to retire. Judy, a librarian confirmed that she has not applied for principalship during the last eighteen months and she does not intend to apply again because she feels she has little

chance of success. She claimed that as a librarian she has more autonomy and more freedom to affect children than as a principal.

Table 1:

Women participant' age, race, administrative and teaching experiences

PS: Pseudonym name P: Principal AP: Assistant Principal
R: Race A: Age TE: Teaching Experience
AD: Administrative experience FI: First Interview
SI: Second Interview C: Caucasian AF: African American
MS: Middle School HS: High School Y: Yes N: No

PS	P	AS	R	A	TE	AE	FI	SI
Joann	N	N	C	54	32	N	Y	N
Ruth	N	N	AF	50	27	N	Y	N
Judy	N	N	C	50	28	N	Y	Y
Cathy	Y,MS	N	AF	54	15	12,AP,P,MS	Y	N
Sally	N	Y,MS	AF	34	4	4,AP,MS	Y	N
Donna	N	Y	C	56	27	8,AP,MS	Y	Y
Anne	Y,HS	N	C	54	25	6,AP,P,HS	N	Y

The names used to identify the women are pseudonyms. For the sake of confidentiality and anonymity, the names used are pseudonyms adopted for the women for the purpose of this study.

The following description of the women's experiences with barriers uses the information gathered from all interviews.

Discussion

In this section the experiences of women who sought but did not obtained principalship are compared with experiences of women who obtained principalship to gain an understanding if barriers were different for these two groups of women.

Gender stereotypical views

Gender stereotypes are used to judge an individual in preference to specific and relevant information about that individual's performance (Archer & Lloyd, 2002). If all you know is that there is a woman applicant for a vacancy in an engineering company, stereotypes are more likely to be activated than if a woman who is personally known to you applies for a position as a child-care worker (Archer & Lloyd, 2002; Sharp & et al, 2000).

The administrative role is typically identified as a male role in gender stereotypes, therefore, any individual woman administrator is unlikely to be seen as adequately fitting or meeting the role requirements (Stivers, 1993, p.67). One female middle school principal interviewed highlighted her views associated with people's biased expectations: *We still have*

double standards, the idea that men can make better administrators is strong. We believe that men can do a better job (Cathy).

Cathy, who is working in a principalship role, perceived a strong association between being male and having authority held by the people around her at work. Cathy's dissatisfaction with her surroundings was due to the fact that her staff members favored male authority. Cathy stated, the male authority association represented by her male trainee was privileged in conservative community discourses. Cathy indicated in her interview that the students in her school had social issues. Since her students had social issues people around her at work might have perceived that only a male authority is able to discipline the students. Therefore, it is possible that people around her at work might have perceived that authority is closely associated with masculinity and student discipline. It is argued that masculinity becomes an issue when associated with student discipline, and then only when connected to overt student violence (Mac An Ghail, 1994; Sunderland, 2004).

Similar to Cathy's view, Blackmore (1999) found in her study that staff members felt that the physical presence of a male vice principal alone was able to quell even the most disruptive male students. She indicated his authority was clearly associated with the 'masculine' attributes of physicality, rationality, lack of emotion and hardness.

According to some theorists (Franzway, 2001; Halford & Leonard, 2001), the masculine type of leadership (authoritative style) is often preferred over feminine type of leadership (caring style). This question was asked in the second round of interviews from three female participants. One female middle school assistant principal indicated: *I am not sure that it has to be either or, in other words there are men who are not very authoritative at all and women who are, and vice versa (Donna).*

Another female participant who obtained high school principalship believed that her style of leadership is not authoritative but she was very confident in conducting her duties as a principal. She said: *I am very team oriented. I have definitely worked with males that are the same (Anne).*

Donna claimed that she is authoritative and did not ascribe the authoritative type of leadership to all men. But Anne who obtained her high school principalship, claims that although her style of leadership is not authoritative, she is comfortable with her style and confident about conducting her job as a principal because the males that she worked with were all the same.

Anne's style of leadership was based on a team oriented style and is similar to the styles used by women from Hall's (1996) study. Hall's research included six women head-teachers who explored gender separately from ethnic origin as a factor influencing women's approaches to school leadership. Hall (1996) indicated that suspicion of power that came with the position of head-teacher, and the conflict it created with other deeply held values about preferred ways of working, led the women to reformulate leadership in ways they found more acceptable. These included preferring 'power for' rather than 'power over', using power to empower, and sharing power. Women in her study demonstrated a comfort with the role, which they saw as sufficiently flexible not to require compromising their beliefs as education professionals and women. Their style reflected the characteristics of androgynous management, which is conceptualized in the literature as being about possessing a broad integrated repertoire of management skills rather than 'masculine' and 'feminine' characteristics (Wajcman, 1998).

The other female who sought but did not obtain high school principalship and participated in the second interview indicated: *I think men reinforce the masculine type of leadership (Judy).*

Judy, who did not obtain a principalship, believed that men promote masculine style of leadership but she indicated this style is not always the preferred style of leadership of others. This apparent conflict is addressed in the work of some authors (for example, Edley & Wetherell, 1996; Westwood, 2002) who claim that masculinity is constituted in relation to femininity through structures of gender relations. These authors believe power is incorporated into an analysis of masculinity. Therefore, masculinity is a part of the hegemonic culture, which is responsible for mediating domination. They indicated that power is differentiated so that particular style of masculinity becomes ascendant or dominant in certain situations. Masculinity has to operate or be competent at operating some degree of power and authority.

Strategic management is privileging men over women, and maintains as dominant certain forms and practices of masculinity (Kerfoot & Knights, 1993; Pincus, 2003). Central to feminist strategies to redress their disadvantage in education has been the same/difference dilemma. In western conceptual schema the feminine is usually defined with regard to male norm - different from or similar to men. Feminists use arguments of 'sameness' or 'difference' when political constraints suggest that these are the only means available to improve women's lives (Blackmore, 1999; Tamboukou, 2003).

Hegemonic masculinity and male/authority association with principalship becomes more evident when women seek secondary level principalship. The increasing number of males occupying secondary school principalship indicates that males are favored for secondary school administrative roles over women. The expectation is that women are able to manage small children in elementary school but as children become physically stronger and reach secondary school a male principal is believed to be more capable of disciplining the students. One female who sought but did not obtain high school principalship indicated: *I think women who aspire to go for principalship at high school level, might face bias views. Many feel that women can not do certain things with the students at the high school level (Ruth).*

Male leadership expectations

Ruth indicated that people believe that males are capable of dealing with problems and physical challenges that might arise in dealing with teens and older students. Ruth's view agrees with some studies that explored the role of women and men in management. Some authors (Wajcman, 1998; Jacob & Gerson, 2004) indicated, traditionally, men have been seen as better suited than women to executive positions. The qualities usually associated with being a successful leader are 'masculine' traits such as drive, objectivity and an authoritative manner. Women have been seen as different from men, as lacking the necessary personal characteristics and skills to make good leaders. Leadership traits that correspond with male traits are those such as dominance, and aggressiveness.

A female who sought but did not obtain a principalship had the same views about higher number of male high school principals when compared to the number of male principals in elementary schools: *I could honestly believe that two people could put in same resume, one female one male, the female resume would put to the side (Judy).*

Judy was certain the reason she did not obtain high school principalship was due to the fact that administrators in her school had gender stereotypical views.

One female who obtained middle school assistant principalship also believed that the higher number of high school principals than elementary school principals is the reflection of gender stereotyping views (Donna).

Gender role expectations

Historically, the public and private division of labor produced expressive traits in women, and instrumental traits in men, referred to as the feminisation of love and the masculinisation of work (Cornell, 1995; Fine, 2000). Thus, the personality traits of men and women, and the stereotypes associated with them, arose from the social structure that divided men's and women's spheres of activity.

All of the above analyses have tended to work with accounts of gender role formation. One female who sought but did not obtain principalship perceived this gender role formation among administrators who hire principals.

Ruth, who did not obtain a principalship, perceived gender role views from those who were involved in the hiring process while she was seeking principalship. This indicates the dilemmas confronting women in leadership - professional and political. The dilemma is women are facing gender biased views in educational administration.

All women's beliefs stated above about female stereotyping agrees with one study that explored the role of gender expectation in society. Grace (1995) believes male power has shaped the construct of leadership, its culture, discourse, imaging and practice for centuries. Grace (1995) pointed out; female managers are operating in a context of male hegemony.

Community education level and supervisor's support

In contradiction to the views stated above, one female principal believed all female managers do not necessarily live in a context of male hegemony. A middle school principal in an upper-class community believed that stereotyping might exist in other communities but she said in her community the expectations are different.

Donna is a middle school principal in an upper-class community, and her views did not agree with most females in this study. One study has shown that education level is a factor that affect people's knowledge about stereotyping (Grogan, 2000). The upper-class community where Donna lived comprised wealthy, educated people. Therefore, it is logical to speculate that people in her community were well aware of women's issues and were sympathetic to working with women in the school.

Donna was successful in obtaining her principalship and did not think she experienced any gender biased views in her pathway to principalship. Donna did not experience disadvantage at all. The reason that Donna did not perceive gender bias could be due to the fact that she had her supervisor's support.

Discussion

Women in this current study who did not obtain a principalship perceived more gender bias than women who achieved principalship. It is possible that for women who obtained their principalship their success had outweighed any negative perceptions that they might have experienced when they were seeking principalship.

In conclusion the main strength of this discussion is in its attention to gendered cultural processes, such as the way people talk to each other how they interact informally and their taken-for-granted assumptions, values and ideas. Since most studies and most women in the current study indicated that, in their experience, gender biased views exist in educational administration, it can be suggested that people in general need to be educated about gender stereotyping. In fact

public awareness about female stereotyping has to be addressed for the purpose of removing this barrier for women who seek management positions.

Family responsibilities

A workplace structured on the ideal-leader concept is based on the assumption first, that the ideal leader is a man, and second, that, if the ideal leader is married, he can depend on his wife to fulfill all or nearly all, child-care responsibilities, thus freeing him to work extended days, and maintain inflexible work schedules (Pincus, 2003; Jacob & Gerson, 2004). Because employers perceive women leaders as confronting a conflict of loyalty between home and work, they assume that these women, regardless of their circumstances, lack the commitment required of the “ideal leader”, and thus they exclude women as candidates for positions structured for such leaders. Married women administrators claim that being married had proved a disadvantage to them in terms of their career development and advancement (Gregory, 2003). Therefore, there are considerable difficulties faced by employed mothers of young children in the management of job and family responsibilities.

According to Pocock’ (2002) models of motherhood remains unchanged and workplaces have at their center an ‘ideal worker’ who is free of caregiving responsibilities. The need to reconcile these work and family responsibilities has lead to part-time employment becoming more popular with women. This view was examined in the second interview by researcher. One female who did not obtain principalship indicated:

I think women are willing to work full-time and they will be willing to share the child caring duties with their spouse. But I think they will make sacrifice because of both family life and professional life (Judy).

Donna in the second round of interview simply agreed with the statement that because of unchanged motherhood model and existence image of ‘ideal worker’ who is free of caregiving responsibilities women are forced to accept part-time jobs.

One interviewee who obtained high school principalship had a different view and emphasized the role of women in establishing sharing duties with their husbands. Anne was able to divide her family duties with her husband and believed that women with families who were in administrative roles need to establish their roles within their family unit. Contrary to Anne’s view, most women in the current study believed having a career and running family life puts them at disadvantage for promotion to administrative jobs. The disadvantages that women themselves isolated included role conflict between running a home / raising children and a career, and not having enough time undertake these multiple roles.

Donna who obtained her principalship, admitted that raising her children for certain period of time was a barrier in her pathway to principalship. According to Donna and Anne, a principal has to spend long hours at school (around 12-14 hours a day). Therefore, women with family are assumed to be less likely committed to their job. Traditionally, men working in a masculine culture tend to emphasize the differences between the gender-role expectations of men and those of women as they relate to child-rearing responsibilities. Men can conclude that a woman’s family obligations conflict with her work responsibilities, thus requiring the assignment of women to less-demanding positions.

One female who obtained her principalship believed family responsibilities is not only for women but also for men as well. There are signs that a 'new breed' of husbands married to professional women is causing a shift in the distribution of home responsibilities more towards sharing (Grogan, 1996; Smith-Doerr, 2004). It is sometimes suggested that behind every successful high-powered woman there is a 'new man', who supports his wife in her career by performing an equal share of housework and childcare (Stivers, 1993). But are families really changing? Does the new man really exist? Research suggests that he does, but that he remains a fairly rare breed (Stivers, 1993; Grogan, 2000). One study indicated by 1998, mothers spent nearly 70 percent of their time with children and fathers spent 63 percent of such time engaged in other activities (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004). Another study indicated many men are reluctant to participate in the daily care of their children (Knonck & Kitch, 1994).

In spite of some research that suggests family responsibilities block women's advancement to administrative roles, some women do not perceive family responsibilities as a barrier to principalship. One female participant who did not obtain principalship did not believe that family responsibility was a barrier for her.

Ruth's view about family responsibilities agrees with a group of women administrators in Dunlap's (1994) study. Dunlap (1994) focused on a group of fourteen women administrators and asked each of them to describe their career development in administration. There appeared to be no pattern in whether single or married, or in whether they had children or other dependent responsibilities. Whatever their family or financial circumstances, they successfully negotiated the early career stages. They often used words like 'lucky' to describe their own negotiation of a difficult stage in their career of family. Once they had made a conscious commitment to administration, many of them did talk about conscious planning for balance between work and non-work needs. One example included timing of a promotion to coincide with last child leaving home. The difference between the experiences of the women in Dunlap's study compared to Ruth in the current study is that women in Dunlap's study were successful in planning to achieve administrative positions and Ruth, in this study, was not. Therefore, other reasons beyond family responsibilities could be responsible for her lack of success in principalship.

Another example that indicates family responsibility is not a barrier for women who seek principalship is from a female who had grown children and lives by herself. Joann who did not obtain principalship, indicated that the fact that she did not have family responsibilities did not help her to achieve administrative position.

Women with child responsibilities seem to be considered a bad risk by employers. However, contrary to this, Joann mentioned in her interview that she did not have family responsibilities and still did not obtain her principalship. This suggests other factors are operating as barriers for her in the hiring process. Joann was 54 years old and started to apply for principalship when she was 40. Therefore, it is possible that she might have experienced family responsibility as a barrier in the past 10 years and but at the time of interviewing she believed since she did not have family responsibility and felt this ought to have helped to a principalship.

Despite the fact that Ruth and Joann did not consider family responsibility as an important barrier for principalship, other women in the current study confirmed family responsibility as a barrier for principalship. The fact that family responsibility is a barrier perceived by most women in managerial positions is documented by other researchers (Home, 1995; Coltrane & Adams, 1997; Franzway, 2001). According to the literature, women continue to be socialized to be the primary parent (Konek & Kitch, 1994). Although it is true that most

men want to be fathers, the demands of the parental role for most mothers continues to be significantly heavier than they are for most fathers. Data are very clear that women, both those who are employed and those who are not, spend much greater portions of their time than men do on homemaking and child-rearing responsibilities (Shelton, 1992).

Conclusion

In current study, some women who did not obtain principalship did not consider family responsibilities as a barrier when they were seeking principalship. However, some women who obtained their principalship indicated family responsibilities prevented them to apply for principalship earlier especially when they had small children. The combination of ideas about family responsibility and male dominance of the institutional framework make career paths uncertain and even treacherous for women.

Results

The barrier of sex-role stereotyping was found to be major barrier in the current study. The masculine style of leadership is preferred over feminine style, perhaps because people are not aware, nor have experienced, alternative forms of leadership. In fact the preference for masculine style of leadership is an indication of biased views against women. This view favors male's qualities over women's qualities for leadership.

Woman will be trapped in the female stereotyping phenomena if traditional views regarding the division of labor continues. The closer men's perceptions and actions are with regard to changing the traditional division of labor toward modern standards, the greater the possibility that women will find relief from gender bias. One solution would be workshops offered in the workplace routinely which attempt changing traditional views about women.

In current study (6 out of 9) women indicated the barrier of family responsibilities as important barrier to obtain principalship. The introduction of 'family - friendly' working practices (Karsten, 1994) could benefit those with family responsibilities. 'Family friendly' policies are initiated to meet the needs of employees with family commitments. Flexible working practices which achieve a balance between the needs of the employer and those of employees have been successfully introduced in some cases.

Although initiatives such as family-friendly policies are becoming more widespread, organizations need to be proactive in the implementation of such policies if they are to avoid the negative repercussions resulting from handling both family and job responsibilities by women managers.

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