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Female Middle School Principals' Voices: Implications for School Leadership Preparation

Cathy Jones, Martha Ovando and Cynthia High

This study was an attempt to add the voices of women to the discourse of school leadership. It focused on the nature of the middle school leadership experiences of three female middle school principals, their social interactions based on gender role expectations and their own leadership perspectives. Findings suggest that middle school leadership is characterized as challenging and sacrificial, that participants initially deny the effect of gender on their performance, but that social stereotypes influence people's perceptions about female principals, and that they tend to be more collaborative and nurturing than their male counterparts. Further, servant leadership and instructional leadership are the two leadership perspectives embraced by female middle school principals.

Introduction

Women continue to be underrepresented in school leadership positions, particularly at the middle school, high school and superintendency levels (Department of Education, 2002), and as a result leadership preparation programs tend to be informed by perspectives mainly derived from the male point of view. Some recent research has focused on women administrators such as superintendents (Garn & Brown, 2008; Miller, Washington, & Fiene, 2006; Reed & Patterson, 2007; Skrla, 2000) and the high school principal (Eckman, 2003; McGovern-Robinett, 2002). However, few have directly examined school leadership from a middle school female principal perspective, and how she is prepared to face the complexity of the job.

Although the number of females reaching principalship positions has increased to a certain extent, most of the gains have been made at the elementary school level. For instance, it was reported that 55% of elementary principals were female; 31.4% of middle school principals were female and 21% of high school principals were female (Gates, Ringel, Santibanez, Ross & Chung, 2003). Most recently, there has been an increase in the number of women reaching a middle school principal position. According to Young & Fuller (2007), 30.1 % of female principals were middle school principals in 1995, 37.0% in 2000 and 42% in 2005. However, little is

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known about the perceptions of these principals, and therefore, their voices have been absent from conversations of school leadership.

Researchers agree that certain factors contribute to the under-representation of female administrators in general. For instance, Greer and Finley assert that “though women are the majority of the employees in education, they are the minority of leaders at all levels and their numbers decrease with each step up in the hierarchical ladder to near non-representation at the top” (1985, p. 3). Similarly, factors such as social stereotypes, sex-role stereotypes, discrimination, career socialization, lack of mentors and role models, affect the aspirations of prospective female school principals. Further, the lack of preparation programs that directly address issues of concern for female aspiring leaders prevent women from pursuing school leadership positions. Therefore, it is imperative to focus on how female principals describe the middle school principal leadership. Releasing their voices may lead to an enhanced understanding of the challenges associated with being a female middle school principal. As Boatman notes, “Let’s wonder together if we’ve come a long way in our thinking about leadership and how women’s unique voices relate to it” (2007, p. 69).

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to present the results of a study conducted to explore the leadership experiences of three female middle school principals. The focus of this study was tri-dimensional. It attempted to determine the nature of middle school leadership experiences of Anglo female middle school principals, their interactions within social constructs based on gender, and their leadership perspectives. Thus, the following is a summarized account of the theoretical framework informing the study, methods, findings and conclusion including implications for preparation programs.

Theoretical Background

Providing middle school female principals an opportunity to express their voices regarding their perspectives of school leadership is most important to better determine and address their school leadership preparation needs. Such needs have changed dramatically and have become more complex as

the demands for highly competent female school leaders have increased, within the current accountability context.

Although some studies have focused on female perceptions of school leadership (Eckman, 2003; Howard & Mallory, 2008; McGovern-Robinett, 2002; Marchese, 2005. Pankake & Beaty, 2005), most research tends to be at the high school or central office level. A few studies have addressed gender of the principal at the middle school level. For instance, Trautman (2000) investigated gender in terms of synergistic leadership theory, Brown & Irby (2003) attempted to determine the multiple realities of female leaders within the same theory, and Brown & Anfara (2002) looked at the relationships between middle school principals and teachers. Thus, as Sperandio suggests, "Women's perceptions of the barriers they face and how they can be overcome, together with the benefits they perceive for both themselves and society at large by occupying such positions are important to determine what measures to take to create a more gender equal situation" (2007, p.17).

Previous research also suggests that principal preparation programs based on leadership perspectives from a male perspective only, tend to be problematic. For instance, Irby, Brown, Duffy and Trautman found that "male-based leadership theories fail to give voice to a marginalized group (women and minorities) in the population of chief executive officers in education" (2002, p. 308). Consequently, adding female administrators' voices to the discourse will enhance our understanding of leadership theories from a more inclusive perspective.

This study is located at one of the levels of the "Stages of Research in Educational Administration" advanced by Shakeshaft (1999). According to this framework there are six stages of research of women in educational leadership and each aims at specific aspects and constructs associated with women in school leadership. These include (1) Absence of women documented, (2) search for current and previous female administrators, (3) women as disadvantaged or subordinate, (4) women studied in their own terms, (5) women as challenge to theory, and (6) transformation of theory.

The present study is an attempt to expand stage four by affording middle school female principals a chance to explain their experiences in their own terms. By reporting the voices of these underrepresented school leaders, their perspectives can be added to the discourse of school leadership, and their needs can be highlighted. The addition of the "varied perceptions and notions of leadership offered by women leaders may contribute to new and unconventional perspectives of leadership" (McGovern-Robinett & Ovando, 2003, p. 85). This study expands the knowledge base needed to inform preparation programs by illuminating middle school female principals school leadership perspectives, as they attempt to respond to the calls for student success.

Furthermore, it is imperative to understand leadership in the context of middle schools which serve students in their pre-adolescent and adolescent years, from sixth to eighth grades. This school level has unique needs, re-

quires constant rethinking, and planning to include “techniques that address the typical social and academic development unique to early adolescence such as tendencies to discourage parent and teacher involvement in their lives and struggles when it comes to controlling their behavior” (Heinauer, 2008, p.A8). The middle school context adds to the complexity, demands and challenges that school leaders must address either through reform efforts that promise to better address students’ unique social and academic needs or through specific initiatives that aim at enhancing students’ academic success. Although some reforms have been introduced at the middle school level, there is little research based evidence of their effectiveness, therefore, school leaders, including female middle school leaders are in search of strategies that can better address the unique needs of the student at this grade level.

Methods

The focus of this study was tri-dimensional. It determined the nature of the leadership experiences of three female middle school principals, their social interactions based on gender role expectations, and their own leadership perspectives. These three areas were included following a previous study of high school female principals conducted by McGovern-Robinett (2002).

This study employed a qualitative research paradigm, with a multiple case study design. Case studies are “particularly useful where one needs to understand special people, particular problems, or unique situations in great depth” (Patton, 1990, p.54). Further, “each case study must be carefully selected so that either it a) predicts similar results (a literal replication) or b) predicts contrasting results but for predictable reasons (a theoretical replication)” (Yin, 2003, p. 47).

Purposeful and convenience sampling techniques were used to select three female middle school principals. These principals were considered information rich cases. According to Patton, “information rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (1990, p. 169). The following criteria were employed to select each principal: (1) be of Anglo ethnicity, (2) served as a middle school administrator for a minimum of three years, and (3) served for at least one year on their current assignment in a campus rated at least “Academically Acceptable,” according to the state accountability measures.

All three participants had a Master’s degree in Educational Administration, but only one had a doctorate. They all had administrator certification. Their professional experience included an average of 8 years of teaching. Their administrative experience included an average 5 years as assistant principals, and an average of 5 years as principal. Only one participant also had a superintendent certification.

The middle schools included in this study encompassed grades six.

seven and eight. This level of schooling requires specialized training to respond to the social, psychological, emotional and academic needs of adolescent students. Although all participants had formal preparation and advanced degrees in educational administration, they felt that this training was not enough to lead a middle school and that on the job training was just as critical. "You can get all the degrees you want to but then there is OJT-on the-job-training-and there are just things that classrooms are never going to teach you . . . you can study all about management, but until you actually manage . . . nothing takes the place of experience," stated a participant.

Furthermore, participants reported that their preparation programs did not directly address topics or issues related to leadership and gender. A participant added, "It (the university prep program) probably gave me some foundation of leadership styles, but I don't know that it helped me as a female leader. . . . The university, I don't think, differentiated between the female role versus the male role. It was more of a generalist type approach."

The primary data sources included interviews, one focus group session, and participant observations. According to Bogdan & Biklen, "the best known representatives of qualitative research are participant observation and in-depth interviews" (1982, p.2). Both the interviews with each participant and observations were conducted at each participant campus. Further, once the interviews were completed, a focus group was conducted to expand the data collection and to accomplish triangulation so that multiple perceptions could lead to clarification of meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Data analysis was completed inductively to identify patterns and construct a framework to communicate the essence of what the data revealed (Patton, 1999). Thus, data were examined, categorized, tabulated, and tested in an attempt to develop codes known as "nodes" that would lead to emergent themes.

Findings

Findings of this study are described according to the three areas of focus. These included the nature of middle school leadership, social interactions based on gender role expectations, and leadership perspectives. The following is a brief account of the results.

Nature of Middle School Leadership

Data revealed two themes related to how female middle school principals describe school leadership. Reflecting on the nature, that is the main essence or "the inherent character or basic constitution" (Merriam-Webster, 1987, p. 789) of this school level leadership, participants in the present study characterize leadership as challenging and sacrificial.

Challenging. While challenging refers to a stimulating or interesting task or problem, arousing competitive interest, through action, participants explained that in addition to the expected professional challenges of the

job, they also had to deal with other aspects related to their own personal situations. Being a middle school principal is so challenging that it creates stress, demands and pressure. Participants described their jobs using adjectives such as “stressful” and “demanding” which were used interchangeably with the term “challenging.”

As participants noted:

See this? (pointing to her face and hands). This is eczema and roseacea. The doctor tells me you have to have a latent tendency; it has to be in the bloodline. The stress is what brings it out. So now, I’m contending with all these skin issues, and you think, if your body is falling apart, how can you enjoy what you are doing?

I cannot tell you the number of times I’ve cried by myself in my car. I would sing church hymns in the car to myself, either coming or going in really tense times, just trying to get a grip, get some support. Just trying to put it all back together.

Right now you are working so hard just to stay up with the curriculum and make sure you’ve met all the TEKS so you can score (well) on the TAKS. It is like creativity is on the back burner . . . and then everybody is so exhausted. It’s so hard to make school fun anymore.

The challenges are finding time to do all that you need to do to run a good school, keeping up with your own family and being the mom and the wife and a person-having personal time. You need personal time. Self therapy. time for yourself. It is a real balancing act. . . . You have to keep all these other things in balance or your whole thing just comes crashing down.

Further, participants experienced declining health, weight gain and sleep deprivation derived from internal and external factors such as time commitment required by the job, parent grievances, high stakes testing, accountability issues, legislative changes, lack of support, and the balancing act that is required to juggle work and personal time and family life. These in turn may keep female school leaders from obtaining a principal position. According to Browne-Ferrifno’s study (2003), females are not seeking such leadership positions due to the challenges, excessive time requirements and the potential for job-related stress.

Thinking about the challenging nature of leadership in comparison with male principals, a participant added,

As a female, I think people have a tendency to challenge what you say as opposed to saying, ‘Okay. you really do know . . . it is really well thought out. . . . And you have the best interest of my child.’ There seems to be that, it seems to be that females are challenged more as opposed to males. There is a world of difference in leadership styles between the two. I don’t know how to describe it other than, it’s just my feeling that they are not challenged as much as females.

Sacrificial. The data also revealed that middle school principal leadership demands sacrifices from those in such positions. Participants explained that they are constantly giving up or offering something precious

on behalf of others. For instance, they report putting their own health and well being aside, deciding not to have children, having no time for family or other personal matters, in order to serve a higher purpose. As participants noted,

If this doesn't get any better, I'm gonna be dead by the time I'm 45. I chalk up the long hours to being new and thinking that I haven't gotten into a pattern yet. . . . I'd be better off moving my home here. All I do at home is sleep and bathe. I never have time to make dinner . . . it was such a big deal that I made homemade soup this weekend. When I was Assistant Principal, I'd have dinner ready every night by 6:30. Every night, 6:30. Now, I'm lucky to be packing up and getting ready to leave (the school) at 6:30. We have to eat out a lot.

I don't think you'll ever have a marriage that works, that will make it if they (husbands) don't understand the time commitments (of a middle school principal).

I don't know how you have a family and do this job. It would be really hard. You almost have to set an appointment to have time to go home and be a wife. It's a lot of hours, night events, games, dances, and meetings. It can really be a 24/7 day-a-week job. And all the paperwork and dealing with phone calls and parents. It's hard!

Sacrifice has been identified as a component of leadership. For instance, Maxwell states, "leadership demands constant sacrifice, It is an ongoing process, not a one-time payment. The circumstances may change from person to person, but the principle doesn't: Leadership means sacrifice" (2007, p.70). However, previous research suggests that these sacrifices may become a deterrent to female administrators entering the principal position. As others note, female administrators tend to postpone their education administration career due to personal and family priorities (Browne-Ferrifno, 2003).

Interactions Based on Gender Role Expectations

Three themes emerged related to how participants interact with others in relationship to gender role expectations. These included gender denial, social stereotypes, and differences in leadership attributes which illustrate participants' attempt to explain how they address social expectations associated with gender.

Gender Denial. Initially, participants claimed that gender did not matter. However, as this study progressed, the participants shared stories and experiences that reflected how gender influenced their interactions with others. According to the participants their experiences as leaders of their schools would not be any different from what a male principal would experience. When asked about whether gender was an issue, participants were more likely to say that gender was not a factor in how they did their jobs, how they got their jobs, or what was expected of them. They agreed that they were not aware that gender played a role in their experiences and also admitted not giving any thought to how gender might have an effect on their leadership. In the participants' words:

I don't know that gender has an influence on what kind of principal you are . . . I think that I adequately address the people who probably relate a little differently to a male than a female, but it hasn't been a challenge. . . . I think it is getting the buy-in of your staff and your community, regardless of whether you are male or female. I don't know that gender has an influence on that.

Gender doesn't matter to me at all. I don't know that it matters to them (male colleagues). They seem to really embrace me and include me in conversations.

I don't feel going into most job interviews that I would have any qualms about the gender of the candidates being interviewed, whether I was going into the interview as a male or female. I would feel pretty confident that the decision would be based more on the qualifications of the person.

Failing to recognize reality and negating the influence of gender on principals' interactions is congruent with previous research. Others have found that it is very common for female administrators to initially deny the effect of gender on their job performance (Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich, 2000) and their leadership actions.

Social stereotypes. The data revealed that, while participants initially denied the role of gender in their leadership, social stereotypes, an idea that many people regard as true or partially true about certain phenomenon or group, emerged as an example of negative interactions that these middle school principals have encountered. Social stereotypes tend to influence how people behave, and sex-role stereotypes determine what roles or jobs are appropriate for a person according to their gender. For instance a traditional stereotype is that men work while their wives stay at home or have jobs that are not as demanding. The following comments illustrate the social stereotypes that surround these principals,

I know a lot of administrators that have lost their families over their job. Families have fallen apart. . . . More so for women. That is just society. . . . Women hanging back because of family roles and not wanting all the extra hours that comes with those leadership positions. . . . It is a real battle with being a mom. Even though we've moved past a lot of that, it's still more acceptable for the father to put in late hours than the mom. That still hangs in there in society.

The only time I've ever felt anything at all as far as a male having possibly 'one up' on me as far as the position was when I interviewed for the high school principalship. And I think that, as much as anything, it was just knowing that it was a real heavy male-dominated field.

I just went to a conference this past week and I did notice that we were sitting at a table and we were all secondary folks and just a couple of females. The man didn't appear to reflect on what we had to share. And almost what you say isn't valued. I felt that.

There are times when some parents think that because he's a man, he's going to come in here and intimidate me. It's happened that way before. I think that there are times that it helps that I'm female. Sometimes, being recognized in the community settings, you know business settings, for some reason people look at

me and think a man might be naturally smarter, or can do something better. I think that's a societal type of thing. I think sometimes being recognized in those community aspects . . . until you open your mouth or they see what you've done on your campus or your knowledge base or your ideas . . .

Although the participants were aware of the social stereotypes that still exist, they also acknowledged that times are changing. As a participant related: "A community might feel that a male administrator had stronger discipline than a female administrator might have. I don't think that's in anyway true. I kind of think that might possibly be an old school thinking of males, and that probably goes back to the days of corporal punishment and swinging the board and that type of thing"

Differences in Leadership

According to the data, there appears to exist variations in leadership due to gender, as reported by the participants. Two themes emerged from the data regarding leadership differences. These mainly reflect leadership attributes or inherent characteristics associated with how female middle school principals enact leadership. Participants reported being more collaborative and nurturing than their male counterparts.

Collaborative. The data revealed that middle school principals tend to be collaborative. In other words, they prefer to work jointly with others. For instance, they report that involving others in the decision-making process with shared responsibility is the best way to work with teachers, and others. By being collaborative, these principals are able to engage all stakeholders and to work together as a team using a different mindset, such as "we, us, cooperation, and together," which recognizes the strengths and talents of the teachers, staff members as well as community members, and it calls for sharing of information, power and responsibilities.

90% of this job is problem-solving and supporting your staff. I am not a micromanager; I delegate. I am collaborative. You've got to have a heart for people. You've got to want to be in this business because you want to make a difference for kids and parents and community.

I find females are much more collaborative than males. When I think about the principals meetings, it is usually that the females are talking more instructionally about what is working and what is not working . . . where the men really say, 'I am going to solve this.' So there is a real difference there.

My leadership role is collaborative. . . . Always exploring what is that we can do better collectively—that we are not just examining ourselves individually but as a collective group so that we can improve the campus. That is an open door type of situation where they [stakeholders] feel freedom to voice concerns, take risks and that we are all learning.

Nurturing. The data revealed that female middle school principals espouse nurturing as an attribute of their leadership. Nurturing relates to the

personal willingness to promote the development, growth or progress of others. While several aspects of a nurturing attitude were observed during campus visits, participants in this study did not believe that they were doing anything out of the ordinary. Fostering the growth of students and teachers in a nurturing way seems second nature to them. Thus, they showed compassion, empathy, care and nurturance when interacting with students, various stakeholders in the school and the community. Affirming nurturing, a participant stated, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Participants also believe that being nurturing is more in tune with their own nature as women, and that they can freely and openly offer empathy and show care for both teachers and students.

Further, participants were observed displaying nurturing by hugging students and teachers, wiping away students' tears, cleaning up after the students, teachers and colleagues. In some instances they enacted nurturing by offering concrete help to students such as sewing buttons onto students' clothing which might not be the case for a male administrator. Reflecting on such a difference, participants noted:

When I'm working with the kids, I'm more of a nurturing, caring, teacher, mother, administrator, leader . . . I think you really have to have that nurturing, caring, loving piece on your campus for all those (students) who don't get that consistently.

You kind of mother your staff . . . as they are going through their personal stuff . . . I can tell you stuff that's going on in everybody's lives and how I'm trying to support them with those personal issues and still help them focus on being the best teacher they can be.

Maybe it is my own gender bias and there is nothing to it, but just that normally for females, mothering or nurturing characteristics really come out to play because it is like being a Mama on the campus. I think that sometimes a lot of kids respond to that more than they do to the male strength.

I think we're (females) good with content, instruction, intuitiveness. We have that nurturing, caring to us for the most part. I think we can get the big picture of climate and family and campus. . . . I think we are hard workers . . . Women can stay up all night and work, work, work, and keep the attitude, do all the stuff and not fall apart. I think this is very true for women. It is a different kind of strength. You have to keep going.

Nurturing and collaborating as attributes of school leadership have been associated with women leaders by previous research (Noddings, 1991; & Shakeshaft, 1986, 1987) which indicates that women tend to be more collaborative and nurturing in their leadership style. Further, examining male and female attributes, socialization, role conceptions and role identity transformation, others found that collaboration and nurturing are characteristics that all principals possess (Browne-Ferrifno, 2003; Newton, Giesen, Freeman, Bishop, & Zeitoun, 2003). However, this study adds the voices of female middle school principals to reinforce collaborating and nurturing as leadership attributes.

Perspectives of Leadership

Middle school female principals' notions of leadership revealed two types of leadership perspectives. These included servant leadership, and instructional leadership.

Servant leadership. According to the data, participants believe that by addressing and responding to the needs, requests and demands of others, they are serving the common good. In the schools, they enact actions and decisions to meet the needs of the students, their families and the community. Further, participants modeled servant leadership by always putting others first, including teachers and staff. In an effort to serve others in the school, participants often make decisions or take actions at the expense of their own well-being, personal time, or family needs. In the participants' words:

I do everything I can do to support my teachers in the classroom, get the things they need, listen. Whether they want me night or day, I am there. Ready to listen, ready to whatever. Anytime.

Your time has to be all about making your staff happy, your kids happy, your community happy. Your time has to be about keeping up their strength, their morale, their nurturing, Doing whatever you have to do, funding-wise, supply-wise, creative planning to make time, it is all about them. It can't be anything about you. . . . You have no personal life. Your life is your job and your school.

Embracing a servant perspective of leadership suggests that these principals possess high levels of willingness to help others. This willingness or desire has been found to be an essential component of servant leadership. For instance, early notions of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970, 1977) suggest that a genuine desire to assist teachers, students and the community constitutes the basic foundation of servant leadership.

Instructional leadership. The data revealed that the participants in this study also embrace a leadership perspective centered in instruction, making teaching and learning a high priority. According to the participants, instructional leadership requires knowledge of the subject matter taught at the middle school level, of curriculum alignment, and best practices to deliver instruction to middle school students who are faced with challenges associated with their own social, physiological, psychological and emotional development.

I think we look at instructional leadership in a variety of capacities whether it means analyzing test scores or working with teachers, working with a department, and even evaluating teachers.

I would say that I am working as an instructional leader 85% of my day. I am either in the classroom or visiting with teachers about where they are at with the curriculum or where the kids are at and making sure there is a system in place for the kids.

I think very much every principal has an instructional leadership role. I think that it is an important role to be in. I think it is also very much a juggling act with

so many things happening on the campus. . . . Being an instructional leader is certainly paramount in this position.

Although these types of leadership were not directly linked to gender in the present study, the perspectives of these female middle school principals are congruent with the foundations of both servant and instructional leadership. For instance, Marzano, Waters, and McNulty suggest that “the servant leader is in contact with all aspects of the organization and the individuals within as opposed to interacting with a few high-level managers who also occupy positions in the upper strata of the hierarchy” (2005, p.17). Furthermore, a leader who is servant is driven by a high level of commitment to meet the needs of others first (Greenleaf, 1977). Similarly, instructional leadership is regarded as critical to the functioning of schools. As Marzano et al., said, “the principal actively supports day-to-day instructional activities and programs by modeling desired behaviors, participating in in-service training, and consistently giving priority to instructional concerns’ (2005, p.18).

Conclusion

The number of female middle school principals has consistently increased (Young & Fuller, 2007). However, their voices tend to be absent from the discourse about school leadership. As a result, preparation programs continue to be informed by a male-based perspective. A few researchers have focused on female administrators at the central office and high school levels only. Thus, this study explored the leadership perspectives of female middle school leaders. An attempt was made to determine how these school leaders characterize leadership, how they address social interaction related to gender, and what leadership styles they report they embrace.

Findings suggest that female middle school principals characterize leadership at this school level as challenging and sacrificial. They perceive leadership to be challenging not only in relationship to the professional expectations but also in terms of the pressures of the current accountability demands, the need to balance their work and their personal lives, which at times become secondary to their jobs. This supports recent explanations of why qualified aspiring female principals are not applying for such positions (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003). Others suggest that the time requirements, and job-related stress are precluding qualified candidates from seeking principal positions (Newton et al. 2003). Similarly, they perceive the job to be sacrificial in nature due to the fact that they do make personal and family sacrifices such as putting their own health and well-being aside, putting their careers on hold to raise children or deciding not to have children, and/or not spending time with family. While sacrifice has been identified as one of the attributes of leaders (Maxwell, 2007), it can also be a factor that influences aspiring school leader decisions to put on hold their profes-

sional aspirations and re-consider the job of a principal. Thus, it is important for female school leaders to keep in mind that "the higher that a leader has climbed, the greater the sacrifice he usually has made. Effective leaders sacrifice much that is good in order to dedicate themselves to what is best" (Maxwell, 2007, p. 70).

Findings also indicate that as female middle school principals interact with social constructs based on gender, they are initially not aware of the effect that gender might have on their interactions, and therefore, they tend to deny its influence. Such denial is congruent with research reporting that women tend to overlook the influence of gender on their own performance (Noddings, 1991; Shakeshaft, 1999; Skrla, 2000; Skrla, et. al., 2000). Further, according to the findings of this study, social stereotypes based on gender tend to influence how people see a female in the position of a principal and the expectations they have for their performance. This echoes previous assertions that "as a result of imposed societal constructs, these women acknowledged additional challenges they face as female leaders, watched by others and required to overcome obstacles not fairly dispersed across gender lines" (McGovern-Robinett & Ovando, 2003, p. 71). Moreover, findings reflect differences in leadership attributes. Female middle school principals report that they tend to be more collaborative and nurturing than their male colleagues. Thus, being collaborative may lead them to work more in teams rather than in isolation in order to include teachers and others in the decision-making process. This supports the notion that as female administrators develop, their leadership actions are characterized by "working with teachers, students, parents and community members" (Fennell, 2008, p. 97). At the same time, by embracing a more nurturing philosophy, female leaders are able to "invest emotionally in their students and faculties" (McGovern-Robinett & Ovando, 2003, p. 81).

Additionally, findings suggest that female middle school principals' perspectives of leadership include two leadership styles: servant leadership, and instructional leadership. Although this study does not claim that these leadership styles are only embraced by female principals they do reflect some of the attributes that female principals often cite as differentiating them from male principals. It is also relevant to note that these two leadership perspectives are considered among other "prominent theories" of leadership (Marzano, et al., 2005, p. 13). As such, they offer distinctive explanations of leadership. For instance, others assert that "servant leadership also has a unique perspective on the position of the leader within the organization. Instead of occupying a position at the top of a hierarchy, the servant leader is positioned at the center of the organization" (Marzano, et al., 2005, p.17). Thus, servant leaders, just as the participants in this study report, put others first, and strive to meet the needs of students, teachers, and parents within the school community. This echoes Sergiovanni's notion that "servant leadership is practiced by serving others, but the ultimate purpose is to place oneself, and others for whom one has responsibility, in the service of ideals" (1992, p.138). Further, these

female middle school principals' perspectives support early assertions that servant leadership is more associated with "the feminist tradition" (Sergiovanni, 1992, p.135).

On the other hand the main thrust of instructional leadership is on instruction. Thus, female middle school principals place a high priority on efforts to enhance teaching and learning. This supports the notion that the principal who enacts instructional leadership tends to focus on matters of instruction by facilitating the study of teaching and learning, applying instructional research to guide instructional decisions (Blase and Blase, 1999), and by offering assistance to teachers related to their own teaching and other instruction related matters (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 1998). While researchers may advance different characteristics associated with instructional leadership, female middle school leaders espouse this leadership style because its main focus is on ensuring quality of instruction by working with teachers. One explanation for the preference of instructional leadership could be that the typical career path of female administrators begins in the classroom as teachers and that female teachers tend to stay in the classroom longer than male teachers before they pursue an administrative career. Others suggest that such additional classroom experience tends to make female administrators stronger instructional leaders (Ortiz, 1982; Grogan & Brunner, 2005).

Given the focus of this study and the self-reported experiences of female middle school principals, several implications are derived for providing professional support to female principals, preparation of aspiring female principals and further research related to leadership and gender. Since middle school leadership is characterized as challenging and sacrificial, it is imperative that practicing women school principals have access to a professional network. As noted by researchers, female teachers are attaining administrative credentials but are consciously choosing not to apply for the principalship (Adams & Hambright, 2004). Some view this as a waste of female talent (Adams & Hambright, 2004). Thus, an effective network could include mentoring to provide guidance and support to both practicing school leaders and aspiring female principals who are delaying the decision to apply for administrative positions. Similarly, professional organizations can play a key role in providing assistance with matters such as applying and interviewing for principal posts. For example, the Texas Council for Women School Executives and the American Association for School Administrators might provide sessions, within the conferences, that include topics related to women's concerns and gender issues. Female school leaders must also take a proactive approach and seek additional professional development opportunities. As others affirm:

To prepare for leadership, women should pursue formal education, utilize their experiences to gain knowledge, develop their skills, network with all different types of people, conduct a self-assessment, and read a variety of books and materials. (Scheckelhoff, 2007, p.143).

Further, it is apparent from this study that although the participants reported having academic degrees and professional administration certificates, there is a need for preparation programs to address the challenges that female administrators face due to their gender, as well as the demands associated with the specific school levels. Thus, preparation programs need to include innovative formats to foster open conversations of gender, on how it impacts the leadership of female principals, and strategies to address them. Some examples include literature reviews, book clubs, class debates and action research. Educating aspiring female principals about gender differences, social expectations, and stereotypes should take place in both traditional university preparation programs and alternative certification programs. Developing an early awareness of how gender-based expectations might affect their leadership practice, while at the same time providing guidance and developing tactics to address them, might lead to better equip aspiring female principals and enable them to respond to the challenges they face and more importantly to better serve students so that they reach their potential. Such efforts might also inspire more women to ascend to leadership positions. As Eckman states, "to encourage more women to pursue the principalship, we need to put the whole gender issue more clearly on the table and work with women in terms of the differences that exist, and help them better understand what they're going to face ahead of time" (2003, p. 181).

Finally, since the focus of this study was only on Anglo female middle school principals, broad generalizations are not possible. Therefore, further inquiry is warranted. Additional research may shed light on how factors such as diversity, age, and parenthood affect the practices of female school leaders. Similarly, it is imperative that further research continues to explore the experiences of women in school leadership at the different school levels with an emphasis on middle schools. Adding the genuine voices of more female school leaders to the discourse will expand the knowledge base that informs preparation programs, and will "widen the conversation on leadership by including alternative, differing perspectives often neglected in traditional research . . ." (McGovern-Robinette & Ovando, 2003, p. 5). Further research may also serve to empower aspiring female school leaders to openly reflect and share their experiences and success as they strive to ensure that all students reach high levels of academic achievement.

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