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Gender Related Differences in Career Patterns of Principals in Alabama:
A Statewide Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to determine the status of women administrators in the Alabama in terms of demographic and career patterns. A survey was sent to all principals in Alabama. Five hundred-fifty, or 42% of the principals responded. In Alabama, women principals are generally more recent in their position, are somewhat more likely to have come directly from the classroom, and have less mobility in acquiring the position.

Introduction

In many fields research has shown that women fare differently from men in terms of their career patterns. In cases such as engineering, there are far fewer women than

men recruited into the educational programs which prepare them for the career field and those women experience higher levels of attrition than do their male counterparts (Riehl and Byrd, 1997). This unequal situation is compounded by the fact that women also tend to receive less compensation than their male counterparts, advance within the organization at a slower rate, and generally interrupt their professional careers in order to devote time to raising a family (Gupton & Slick, 1996). In K-12 education, females comprise 83 % of the elementary and 54% of the secondary teaching populations. Yet they constitute only 52 % of the principalships in elementary schools and 26 % of the high school positions (Henke, Choy, Geis, & Broughman, 1996). Only 7 % of the school superintendents in the United States are women (Shakeshaft, 1998).

There is a general consensus that the administrative leadership of a school is the key element to the effectiveness of the school (Wallace, 1992; Short & Greer, 1997). While not disregarding the obviously critical role of teachers and parents, a poor principal or superintendent can nullify even the best of teachers' and parental efforts. Therefore it is essential that schools have effective, quality leaders. When examining women's capacity to serve as school leaders, some researchers believe that males and females have different leadership styles. (Nogay and Beebe, 1997; Irby and Brown, 1995). As Fisher (1999) put it,

> ". . . Sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, even business analysts
> have extensively described this multifaceted gender difference: women's
> interest in personal contacts, their drive to achieve interpersonal harmony,
> and their tendency to work and play in egalitarian teams versus men's
> sensitivity to social dominance and their need to achieve rank in real or
> perceived hierarchies. "(p. 29)

Both Grogan (1996) and Aburden & Naisbett (1992) report that women's leadership style tends to be more transformative and inclusive than that of their male counterparts making females more capable of adopting a collaborative management, approach than men. These researchers add that this style is the preferred one for today's schools.

Others disagree with these assertions and argue that males and females do not differ significantly in the ways in which they lead (Astin & Leland, 1991; Dobbins & Platz, 1986; Eagly & Johnson, 1990). Mertz and McNeely (1996) suggest that the either/or, male/female dichotomy is too simplistic and that a multidimensional approach, which examines context, ethnicity, and other factors is required when conducting research on the issue of leadership style.

Whether differences exist in female and male leadership styles and whether one style is preferable to another is unresolved and merits further research. However, the research supports the fact that females are at least as effective in their leadership roles as men (Shakeshaft, 1990). Thus there is no apparent reason why women should not fill these positions in proportion to their presence in the educational field.

Alabama, like most of the nation, is entering a decade in which there will be a significant turnover in the principalship. Within 5 years, 40% of present principals expect to retire. Another 30% expect to leave these positions within 10 years (Kochan & Spencer, 1999). It is imperative that an ample supply of high quality professionals will be available to fill the vacancies these retirements will create. If there are factors which hinder the recruitment of able women into leadership positions, then public education and the state will pay a price in lost credibility and potential in securing quality leaders for its schools.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the status of women administrators in the Alabama in terms of demographic and career patterns. We sought to discover the degree to which females were represented in the administrative ranks and whether there were any discernible barriers hindering their entrance into these positions.

Methodology

Data Collection

A survey was developed around demographic questions and the state principals' competencies. The survey was sent to all principals in Alabama. The mailing included an explanatory letter, guaranteeing anonymity, and a postage paid self-addressed envelope. Questions addressed demographic issues of gender, ethnicity, age, and number of years in position. Principals were also asked about retirement plans and how they acquired their leadership styles. The last part of the survey asked principals to rank order the Alabama principal competencies and then to rank their own capabilities on these skills.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze most of the demographic data. Differences between men and women, reasons for retirement and experiences which influenced leadership styles were counted and placed in rank order. Mean scores were computed for responses to the importance and competence principals assigned to each of the Alabama principal competencies.

Findings

Demographic Characteristics

Five hundred-fifty, or 42% of the principals responded. Of these, 514 included a designation of gender and only those responses are included in these findings. Sixty-three percent of those responding to the gender question were males and thirty-seven percent were females. Eighty-four percent of the principals were white, non- Hispanics, 15 % were African American, and the remaining 1% were other minorities. Almost 90% of the principals are 40 years of age or older while forty-three percent are 50 years of age or older. The average age is 48.3. This is slightly higher that the last reported national average of 47.7 (Henke et al., 1996).

Educational Preparation

Data related to educational preparation indicates a difference between males and females. Male principals as a group have somewhat lower levels of professional education than do their female counterparts. Table 1 displays the educational degree and post-degree levels of female and male principals. Almost half of the males have a Master's degree. Slightly less than one-third have post Master's work or a Specialist Degree and less than a quarter have a post-Specialist work or a Doctorate. Females, on

the other hand, are virtually evenly distributed across the three levels with more than one third having post Masters work or Specialist Degrees and more than one-third having post Specialist work or Doctoral Degrees. Using a Chi square analysis, these differences were found to be significant at greater than the .001 level (chi-square (df=2) = 15.332, p < .001).

Table 1
Educational Levels of Principals by Gender

	Masters or less	Post Masters or AA	Post AA or doctorate	Total
Male	151 (46.6%)	101 (31.2%)	72 (22.2%)	324
Females	59 (31.1%)	63 (33.2%)	68 (35.8%)	190
Total	210 (40.9%)	164 (31.9%)	140 (27.2%)	514

chi-square (df=2) = 15.332, p < .001

Consistent with this finding, the data also show that males have lower levels of professional certification than do female principals (Table 2) with about twelve percent more females having "AA" certification. These differences in formal preparation were also statistically significant (chi-square (df=1) = 5.67 (Corrected), p < .05).

Table 2
Certification Levels of Principals by Gender

	"A" Certification Principal	"AA" Certification Superintendent	Total
Males	130 (42.2%)	178 (57.8%)	308
Females	56 (30.9%)	125 (69.1%)	181
Total	186	303	399

chi-square (df=1) = 5.67 (Corrected), p < .05

Another difference between the groups is in the undergraduate preparation of principals. As shown in Table 3, female principals are much more likely to have majored in education as undergraduates than males. Men were more likely to have undergraduate majors in social science, natural science, mathematics or engineering than females. In part this may simply reflect the fact that at the elementary level principals are more generally female while at the middle school and high school levels, males predominate as principals. Again these differences are statistically significant (chi-square (df=4) = 55.44, p < .001.

Table 3
Background Preparation of Principals

	Education	Social Sciences	Humanities	Nat. Sci, Math or Engineering	Business or Other	Total
Male	176 (58.5%)	48 (15.9%)	10 (3.3%)	50 (16.6%)	17 (5/6%)	301
Female	160 (86.5%)	3 (1.6%)	8 (4.3%)	5 (2.7%)	9 (4.9%)	185
Total	336 (69.1%)	51 (10.5%)	18 (3.7%)	55 (11.3%)	26 (5.3%)	486

chi-square (df=4) = 55.44, p < .001

Length of Tenure in Position

As can be seen in Table 4, females have fewer years in their current positions than do their male counterparts. From those in their first year as principal up through about 8 years in the position, females are more prominent than males. Beginning with the ninth year and going forward, males are overrepresented. The maximum time in the job for a female principal was 21 years whereas the maximum for the males was 32 years. It is largely this highly skewed distribution that accounts for a significant difference in the average years in position for females vs. males (5.53 years vs 7.41 years). Thus women's entrance into the principalship roles appears to have increased in recent years.

Table 4
Years in Current Position

	0 - 4	5 - 9	10-14	15-19	20 or more	Total
Male	151 (46.5%)	82 (25.2%)	45 (13.8%)	25 (7.7%)	22 (6.8%)	325
Female	98 (51.6%)	64 (33.7%)	15 (7.9%)	12 (6.3%)	1 (.5%)	190
Total	249 (48.3%)	146 (28.3%)	60 (11.7%)	37 (7.2%)	23 (4.5%)	515

chi-square (df=4) = 18.10, p < .01

Entry into the Principalship

An important dimension of recruitment is whether leadership of an organization is provided by individuals who are already employed by that organization or by individuals who come from outside the organization. Another important issue is whether these leadership positions are open to all or whether some individuals have limited access to them. As shown in Table 5, principals in Alabama exhibit a marked tendency to come

from within their own system. More than 80 percent became principals in the system in which they were already employed. However, of those who did come from outside the system, more than 75 percent were males. Thus females are somewhat more likely to become principals in their own systems than are males. This difference is also statistically significant (chi-square (df=1) = 7.48 (Corrected), $p < .01$).

Table 5
Origin of Principals

	Within Current System	From Outside System	Total
Male	253 (79.1%)	67 (20.9%)	320
Female	169 (88.9%)	21 (11.1%)	190
Total	422	88	510

chi-square (df=1) = 7.48 (Corrected), $p < .01$

A related issue of interest, is the position principals previously occupied prior to assuming their current principal role. Again, we observe a somewhat different pattern between males and females. As displayed in Table 6, females are proportionally more likely than males to have come from the central office or other supervisory position or from the classroom while males are proportionately more likely to accede to the principalship from either an assistant principal position or from being a principal in another school or system. Moreover these differences are significant (chi-square (df=2) = 19.9, $p < .001$). In spite of these differences, the trend for both groups is to become principals after being either an assistant principal or a principal in another school.

Table 6
Position Held Prior to This Principalship

	Supt, Asst or Assoc Supt,Supervisor	Principal or Asst Principal	Teacher, Coach or Other	Total
Male	12 (3.8%)	242 (77.6%)	58 (18.6%)	312
Female	15 (8%)	110 (58.8%)	62 (33.2%)	187
Total	27	352	120	499

chi-square (df=2) = 19.9, $p < .001$

Retirement Prospects

While mobility from one principalship to another may leave vacancies in a school system, overall the number of principals would appear to be relatively stable. However

this appears to be changing in Alabama. A large proportion of current Alabama principals plan to retire in the near future. In Alabama, all public school employees belong to the Alabama Teachers Retirement System. After 25 years of service, they are eligible to retire but are not required to do so. According to the data shown in Table 7, over the next five years almost 75 percent of male principals will be eligible for retirement but only about 62 percent of female principals will be eligible. Thus female principals can anticipate a longer service career ahead before they would be eligible to retire.

Table 7
Eligibility for Retirement

	Now or This Year	Next Year	Next Five Years	Next Ten Years	More than 10 Years	Total
Males	29 (9.2%)	101 (32%)	104 (32.9%)	42 (13.3%)	40 (12.7%)	316
Females	15 (8.1%)	45 (24.2%)	56 (30.1%)	45 (24.2%)	25 (13.4%)	186
Total	44 (8.8%)	146 (29.1%)	160 (31.9%)	87 (17.3%)	65 (12.9%)	502

chi-square (df=4) = 10.97, p < .05

Being eligible to retire and actually retiring are, of course, different things. Therefore we examined current principals plan to retire in the near future. We also looked at whether there was a difference between males and females in this regard. The results, contained in Table 8, show that while there are differences between the genders in this regard, these differences were not statistically significant. Thus we would conclude that the two groups likely do not differ in the time frame within which they actually plan to retire.

Table 8
Planned Retirements

	This Year	Next Year	Next Five Years	Next Ten Years	After Ten Years	Total
Males	6 (2.2%)	13 (4.9%)	109 (40.7%)	81 (30.2%)	59 (22%)	268
Females	0	10 (6.9%)	51 (35.2%)	54 (37.2%)	30 (20.7%)	145
Total	6 (1.5%)	23 (5.6%)	160 (38.7%)	135 (32.7%)	89 (21.5%)	413

chi-square (df=4) = 6.18, n.s.

Reasons for Retiring

Turnover among principals is the result of many factors. Using information from

the literature, we listed 14 reasons principals retire in the survey and asked the principals to indicate those which applied to them. Respondents were also given the option of adding any other reasons. Table 9 displays the list of reasons these principals would retire and their relative ranks based upon how frequently the respondents chose them. The number one reason given for retiring was to assume a better position. Thus technically, they are not leaving the professioin, but they are leaving the State of Alabama. But when one looks at the reasons these respondents selected for leaving this role through retirement, the correlation between the relative ranking of reason for retiring is fairly high between males and females (Spearman r = .82, p < .001), with a few notable discrepancies. Females rank frustration of goals as second highest in importance while males rank it sixth. Similarly females place more importance on a lack of fulfillment than do males. They also ranked the need for having more time with family at a much higher level than males. Females also more often than their male counterparts ranked the time needed to do the job as a reason to retire. At the same time, they have less problem apparently in dealing with the external mandates than do male principals and are somewhat less inclined to seek a new position out of state.

Table 9
Importance of Reasons Given for Retiring

Stated Reason	Male N (Rank)	Female N (Rank)
Better Opportunity Elsewhere	222 (1)	118 (1)
Too Much Community Politics	100 (2)	56 (2-tie)
Burn Out	91 (3)	46 (4)
Take Another Position in Another State	85 (4)	40 (7)
Too Many External Mandates	83 (5)	25 (11)
Too Much Frustration of My Goals	65 (6)	56 (2-tie)
Job Requires Too Much Time	60 (7)	43 (5-tie)
Too Many Financial Problems in My School	58 (8)	27 (10)
Lack of Fulfillment with Job	53 (9)	33 (8)
Need More Time with My Family	44 (10)	43 (5-tie)
Deteriorating Relations within School and Community	33 (11)	24 (12)
Other Reasons	28 (12)	28 (9)
Too Much Influence of Teachers' Organization	9 (13)	2 (13-tie)
Inadequately Prepared for the Job	2 (14)	0 (15)
Maternity Leave	1 (15)	2 (13-tie)

$r_S = .82, p < .001$ N = 325   N = 191

Importance of Specific Skills and Self Evaluation

To understand more fully why there might be differences in the desire to retire

between males and females, a portion of the survey was dedicated to assessing (1) what principals now on the job believe to be the most important skills that a new principal would need, and (2) how those principals would assess their own level of proficiency in those same skills. As a basis for this, the researchers utilized a set of skills which the Alabama State Department of Education uses to evaluate principals in the field. Table 10 contains a list of these skills and their level of importance as seen by principals. While the relative importance level of each skill is the same for both males and females ($r = .985$), females tend to place more importance on the skills overall than do males. On balance there is about one fourth of a point difference which is statistically significant, $t(16) = 18.04$, $p < .001$.

Table 10
Importance of Principal Skills

Skill	Males	Females
Evaluates staff according to state and local policies and procedures	4.35	4.52
Demonstrates problem solving skills	4.35	4.49
Demonstrates organizational skills	4.29	4.48
Takes a leadership role in improving education	4.3	4.45
Communicates standards of expected performance	4.28	4.49
Improves professional knowledge and skills	4.18	4.53
Demonstrates skills in the recruitment, selection and assignment of school personnel	4.24	4.34
Manages Instruction	4.10	4.38
Implements clear instructional goals and specific achievement objectives for school	4.06	4.34
Establishes clear instructional goals and specific achievement objectives for school	4.04	4.29
Implements evaluation strategies for improvement of instruction	3.86	4.05
Understands special education laws and requirements	3.77	4.03
Understands the state's education accountability law and requirements	3.77	3.91
Understands legislative (political) processes that impact schools	3.67	3.68
Understands impact of the New Foundation Program for funding public schools	3.45	3.62
Understands the state's education trust fund and reports to board and community on finance issues (proration, etc.)	3.29	3.32
Understands the state's new accounting system for education	3.07	3.34

r = .985, p < .001; Mean diff = .23 (Females higher), t(16) = 18.04, p < .001

Self Rating of Principals

Using the same list of skills principals were asked to rate their own level of competence on each and the results are shown in Table 11. Again the results are similar to the previous case. Both males and females again are in basic agreement on their relative strengths and weaknesses. And again females tend to rate themselves slightly higher (Mean = .19) than do males, but the difference is statistically significant $t(16) =$ 8.57, p < .001.

Table 11
Self Rating of Principal Skills

Skill	Males	Females
Evaluates staff according to state and local policies and procedures	4.43	4.68
Demonstrates problem solving skills	4.56	4.80
Demonstrates organizational skills	4.60	4.79
Takes a leadership role in improving education	4.53	4.73
Communicates standards of expected performance	4.57	4.79
Improves professional knowledge and skills	4.44	4.78
Demonstrates skills in the recruitment, selection and assignment of school personnel	4.60	4.77
Manages Instruction	4.57	4.75
Implements clear instructional goals and specific achievement objectives for school	4.57	4.84
Establishes clear instructional goals and specific achievement objectives for school	4.61	4.82
Implements evaluation strategies for improvement of instruction	4.34	4.64
Understands special education laws and requirements	4.42	4.70
Understands the state's education accountability law and requirements	4.17	4.42
Understands legislative (political) processes that impact schools	3.85	4.15
Understands impact of the New Foundation Program for funding public schools	3.97	4.19
Understands the state's education trust fund and reports to board and community on finance issues (proration, etc.)	3.58	3.81
Understands the state's new accounting system for education	4.04	4.17

r = .977, p < .001; Mean diff = .19 (Females higher), t(16) = 8.57, p < .001

Discussion

The Status of Females in the Principalship

Female respondents in this survey comprise 37% of the principals, which is slightly lower than the state figure of 38% and the national average of 42%. From the

perspective of women seeking these positions, there is "good news" and "bad news." The findings suggest that although there has been an increase in the number of females entering the principalship in recent years, those who are in these positions have higher levels of education and more teaching experience than their male counterparts. This may be a factor in why females ranked their competence on the Alabama Principal Competencies more highly than males. Their higher levels of education and experience may have raised their competency levels and/or levels of confidence in their knowledge and skills. While it appears that opportunities are opening up, one-third of the females moved directly to the principalship from their teaching role.

That may mean it requires more time for them to become familiar and comfortable in the job. This may partially explain why the workload and the time the job takes was ranked more highly by females than males in retirement decisions. However, since this explanation seems to contradict females ranking their competence more highly than males, it is also possible that the time pressures females feel are related to family needs, a retirement decision factor ranked more highly by females than males. The impact of moving from a teaching position to a principalship requires further examination. The reasons a higher percent of females move from district office positions to the principals also bears further study.

An issue that may also be troubling for females is that while most principals are appointed to positions within the county in which they work, those selected for these positions from outside their county are predominately male. Whether this is the result of females having less mobility than males or is an indication of some type of discriminatory attitude in educational systems is something that bears further investigation.

Potential Actions

The role of the principal in today's schools is a complex and difficult one for males and females alike. However, our data suggest that females may have to deal with more stresses and difficulties in acquiring and functioning in this role. The actions recommended below may help overcome some of these difficulties. Although these recommendations focus on the role of women, we would like to stress the need for all principals to receive support and guidance. Thus strategies should be developed that support the needs of all principals regardless of gender.

The disparity of females in the principalship relative to their numbers in the teaching force, may be the result of many factors: tradition, hiring practices, female unwillingness or reluctance to seek the role (Griffin, 1997), or issues related to family needs. This finding bears further study and examination within the state and school system structures. However, it is apparent that universities and school systems should take some actions to help deal with the disparate status of women in these positions. Programs of educational administration and school systems should consider establishing programs to identify, educate, and encourage females to enter the administrative ranks.

School districts should also examine their hiring practices and/or establish programs to groom and prepare female leaders in a systemic manner to assure that opportunities for advancement are made more apparent and equal between the genders. The lack of adequate role models is another issue systems should address. While the lack of a role model may have the advantage of allowing a new principal to be more open to new ideas it can also be the source of many difficulties including making political or technical errors and displaying a lack of confidence (Greenfield,1983). Having a role model provides validation for those entering a new role which is particularly important

for traditional outsiders, such as women. This suggests that the advantages of having a role model outweigh the disadvantages (Hart, 1995; Pence, 1995). Since mentoring is seldom available for these women, school systems and educational leadership programs should consider creating mentoring opportunities for them to provide support and guidance (Funk & Kochan, in press; Crow, Mecklowitz & Weekes, 1992). In addition, "women-friendly" promotion structures that recognize the special career patterns of females related to childbearing and childbearing, proposed by Griffin (1997) and the alternate career model proposed by Grant (1989) should be reviewed and considered as avenues for assuring fair and equitable opportunities are available for females to enter the administrative ranks.

Implications

While this study has by no means been an exhaustive exploration of all gender differences in the principalship in Alabama, it has been sufficient to indicate that women principals are generally more recent in their position, are somewhat more likely to have come directly from the classroom, and have less mobility in acquiring the position. A cursory look at the figures indicates that females have assumed the principalship in larger numbers and percentages than in the past suggesting that barriers to females assuming school administrative roles are being overcome. However, there are some cautions that flow from the results. First, there is no reason to believe that the increases in female principals will continue exponentially over time. In fact, some of the data indicate that barriers and pressures may deter females from seeking or being selected for these positions. The data demonstrate that females are hired more often in places they are known and have worked and are seldom hired outside of their school systems. Thus their opportunities for employment as principals appear more limited than those of males.

Second, there is the issue of whether females will seek these positions at all and if they get them, one wonders if they will remain in them. Data related to reasons for retirement indicate that family pressures fall more powerfully on females than on their male counterparts. When this is combined with the fact that women must have higher levels of education and more years of experience than males to get the position, some of them may decide not to seek these positions.

Third, the fact that many women come to the principalship without having been assistant principals may be an indication that they are getting principalships in schools where there are no assistant principals. This may be one of the reasons they selected the time spent on their job as a retirement factor more often than men. Further data should be gathered on this issue.

Most states, like Alabama, will be facing massive administrative retirements over the next decade (Muse & Thomas, 1991; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1998). Likewise, the percent of female principals in Alabama is similar to the field in general. Therefore it is probable that our findings have uncovered meaningful issues that are present not just in Alabama, but in other states and school districts thoughout the country. It might be helpful for them to conduct similar studies to determine the status of females in the principalship in their settings. We believe that this statewide study poses questions not only for our state but for other states and for the field in general to consider. Among them are:

1. Despite recent increases in females entering the principalship, are they being held to a higher educational standard than males before being placed in these positions?

2. Are hiring practices free from gender-bias, particularly when "outsiders" are being considered to fill positions?
3. Are females being consistently placed in principalships where they are the only administrator?
4. How can female administrators be given support and mentored when there are so few role models to guide them?

Although we have focused on females, the future of our schools will be largely determined by the quality of our leadership. Alabama and the nation cannot afford to limit the potential or quantity of the pool of individuals who can provide this leadership. This study indicates that there are limits and barriers being faced by women who are qualified to fill the principalship in our state. Although progress has been made, particularly during the last five years, not all is "right with the world." Fairness and the needs of our state dictate that the issues raised and the questions posed be addressed not only by those who educate and hire school administrators in Alabama, but by those who do so throughout the nation.

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