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The Changing Face of the Elementary School Principal

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Principals in today's schools have more experience, have more education, and are of a more advanced age than ever before (National Association of Elementary School Principals [NAESP], 2006). Women elementary principals in the nation have increased from 41% to 56%. Likewise, the age of principals at all levels has increased, as did the percentage of principals who had more than 20 years of experience before entering the position (NAESP, 2006). In addition, the number of elementary principals has increased by 7,000 over the past 10 years (NAESP, 2004, 2005); this number grew to 61,000 in 2003-2004 from 54,000 in 1993-1994. Of these 61,000 principals, approximately 14,000 served schools in rural areas, 17,000 served schools in urban areas, and 31,000 served schools in suburban areas. Thus, more than half of the elementary principals in this country currently serve schools that are classified as suburban. In addition, the number of principals of all levels increased during the same 10-year span from 104,600 to 115,000 and more than half of all principals in the United States work at elementary schools (NAESP, 2005). Therefore, an understanding of the largest group of principals and their characteristics is important for many reasons.

Recruiting and retaining qualified school principals is one of the greatest challenges facing district leaders today (Pounder & Young, 1996; Whitaker, 2003). In fact, low retention rates among current principals coupled with challenges in filling open principal positions has led some researchers to suggest there is a shortage of effective school leaders (Cooley & Shen, 2000; Portin, 2000). As many as 50% of school districts nationwide have reported difficulty finding quality applicants to fill principal vacancies, a problem that was found consistently among school levels (elementary, middle, high school) as well as types of schools (urban, suburban, rural). This

problem is even more pronounced in urban school districts (Education Research Association, 1998; Whitaker, 2003). Some state superintendents indicate principal shortages are a problem in as many as 90% of their school districts, and the shortages are expected to become only more critical with time (Whitaker, 2001). National data suggest that more than 50% of principal positions were vacant in the 1990s, with 40% more expected to be open by the year 2010. Specifically, Texas was noted as one of the states with critical needs due to a shrinking pool of qualified applicants for principal positions (Whitaker, 2001, 2003).

Future projections concerning retirement and job vacancies are often based on current demographic information. An examination of the demographics and characteristics of principals is critical to understanding and addressing challenges or recruitment and retention. Significant changes have been noted with the elementary principal position, particularly in “society’s attitudes toward public schools and in the related demands it has placed on principals” (Doud & Keller, 1999, p. ix). Trends can be identified and used to inform preparation programs and hiring practices. Therefore, this study examines the demographic trends of the elementary principalship in Texas over a three-decade span, the 1980s, the 1990s, and the first decade of the 21st century.

Principal Profile Studies

At the national level, approximately every decade since the 1920s, the National Association of Elementary School Principals has surveyed elementary principals to understand the position. Doud (1989) noted that these profile studies can provide educators with “both a running account of the factors that affect the status of the K-8 principal and a perspective of societal changes that have shaped American education” (p. xiii). In addition to national studies, research has been conducted in various states concerning the characteristics of elementary

principals and the conditions of their employment (e.g., Combs, 1994; Duffey, 1991; Field, 1992; Gousha, 1986; Nelson, 1983; Sweeney & Vittengl, 1986).

An examination of the elementary principals of the 1980s showed that he was a white man, age 46 (Doud, 1989). He had 22 years experience in education and was appointed to his first position at age 34. He held at least a master's degree and certification for his position. His school had an enrollment of 472 and he worked at least 9 hours per day, 51 hours per week. Over one third of his time was invested in instructional leadership tasks. Similar to the national profile, the Texas elementary principal in the 1980s was a white man around the age of 46 (Nelson, 1983). He had experience as an elementary teacher and received his first position at age 32. He, too, held at least a master's degree and the mid-management certification. His school had an enrollment of 478 and he worked at least 10 hours per day. Over one half of his time was consumed by administrative duties but he desired to spend more time on instructional supervision.

In the 1990s, an updated national profile described the principal as a 50-year old white man, an educator for 25 years, and a principal for 11 years (Doud & Keller, 1999). He expressed concern about fragmentation of his time and student achievement. In contrast, the Texas elementary school principal was a white woman between the ages of 45 and 54 (Combs, 1994). The principal had prior experience as an elementary teacher and held the mid-management certificate. Her school had a student population of 400-699. She devoted most of her time to duties related to instructional supervision or administrative tasks although excessive paperwork and the lack of assistant principals prevented her from devoting more time to instruction. She noted increased responsibility in the areas of site-based decision-making, personnel evaluation, and campus staff development.

In the 21st century, the elementary principals' characteristics continue to change. Although an updated profile study at the national level is not yet available, Combs and Jackson (2006) continued the profile studies in Texas. In 2005, the elementary principal in Texas was a White woman in her 50s. She had prior experience as an assistant principal and elementary teacher, working in education for 23 years. Her first appointment to the principal position was at age 40. She worked approximately 57 hours a week with the help of an assistant principal in a school serving 520 students.

These studies can help district leaders, preparation programs, and researchers understand the changes in the roles and expectations of principals. A comparison of these studies can help to identify trends and provide focus for the future. Thus, the purpose of this study was to describe the changes and identify trends in the characteristics of elementary principals over the past three decades. Specific research questions for the study examined the changes in demographics, teaching backgrounds, and mobility characteristics of elementary principals in Texas. By examining trends in demographics, teaching backgrounds, and mobility characteristics, greater understanding related to job placement and future vacancies may be reached.

Method

Participants

Findings from three statewide profile studies were examined (Combs, 1994; Combs & Jackson, 2006; Nelson, 1983). All three studies used the same research design, instrument, and procedures; however, different principals were selected to participate in the three studies as each study was conducted in a different decade (i.e., 1980s, 1990s, 2000s). In all studies, principals were randomly selected from the population of public elementary school principals in Texas who were included in a list obtained from the state agency (Texas Education Agency [TEA], n.d.).

Approximately 600-800 principals were randomly selected to receive a mailed questionnaire. In all three studies, the researchers used a second round of duplicate mailings to improve response rates, which resulted in response rates of 38% to 45%. Target populations for each study included 4,206 elementary principals in 2005, 3,305 in 1994, and 2,976 in 1983. In each study, sample sizes were deemed adequate for statistical purposes (Dillman, 2007; Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). The 2005 study used Dillman's criteria, who recommended a sample size of 232 to represent a population of 4,000 with +/- 5% sampling error at the 95% confidence level. The 1994 and 1983 studies used Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) criteria of having at least 340 participants to represent populations of 3,000.

Instrument

The same instrument was used in each study and included approximately 50 items grouped into sections of demographics, responsibilities, resources, and challenges relating to the work of principals. Items included forced response questions, Likert-format items, and open-ended items. In each study, researchers used measures to improve validity and reliability of data. For example, subject matter experts were used to improve the question wording. A pilot test was conducted in 2005 with 30 principals. Although the researchers improved wording of some questions in subsequent studies following 1983, only questions utilizing the same wording were compared in this trend study.

Procedures

Data sets from each study were obtained from the researchers and variables of interest in this study were isolated. Demographic variables included gender, ethnicity, and age. Previous work experience included questions about teaching experiences and previous positions held by

principals. Mobility variables included age at time of first appointment, years in current position, and years in current district.

Results

Demographics

In 1983, the majority of principals were men (87.8%) as shown in Table 1. In 2005, the majority of principals were women (64.1%). In the 20-year span examined in this study, there was a 52% increase in women elementary principals. From 1983 to 1994, a 43.4% increase in women elementary principals occurred and from 1994 to 2005, an 8.5% increase was noted.

Most of the elementary principals in Texas were and remain White, although the percentages declined 17% from 1983 to 2005. Hispanic principals showed the largest increase of 11%, representing 18.5% of all principals in 2005 as compared to 10.4% in 1994 and 7.5% in 1983. Black principals increased by 1.3% and accounted for 6.1% of the sample in 2005, as compared to 4.8% in 1983.

Table 1

<i>Gender and Ethnicity of Texas Elementary School Principals</i>			
	2005	1994	1983
<u>Gender</u>			
Male	28.1%	44.4%	87.8%
Female	64.1%	55.6%	12.2%
No response	7.8%	0	0
<u>Ethnicity</u>			
Black	6.1%	5.2%	4.8%
White	68.0%	80.5%	85.2%
Hispanic	18.5%	10.4%	7.5%
Asian	0.4%	0.5%	0
Pacific Islander	1.3%	1.6%	0
Other	0.4%	1.6%	0
No Response	5.3%	0.2%	2.5%

2005 ($n = 228$), 1994 ($n = 385$), 1983 ($n = 335$)

As shown in Table 2, a majority of the principals in all studies were in their 40s and 50s. In 2005, elementary principals were older than those practicing in 1994 and 1983. The percentage of principals in their 50s has increased 11.9% from 1983 to 2005. Those in their 30s held constant at approximately 15%. Because the principals appear to be aging in the position, further analyses were conducted. For example, principals in their 40s in 1983 were compared to principals in their 50s in 1994 (approximately 10 years later) and these percentages were nearly the same (32.3%, 33% respectively). As such, it is possible that principals in this age category

remained in the position from 1983 to 1994. Similar findings were present for principals in their 40s in 1994 (41.6%) and in their 50s in 2005 (41.7%). This pattern is not present when comparing age categories of 30s to 40s or 50s to 60s.

Table 2

Ages of Texas Elementary School Principals

Age	2005	1994	1983
20s	0	0.2%	3.3%
30s	15.8%	15.6%	16.5%
40s	32.5%	41.6%	33.0%
50s	41.7%	32.2%	29.8%
60s	8.4%	10.4%	2.7%
70s	0	0	0
No response	1.6%	0	14.7%

2005 ($n = 228$), 1994 ($n = 385$), 1983 ($n = 335$)

Previous Teaching Experience

As shown in Table 3, in each of the three decades studied, at least 60% or more of the sample reported experience as elementary teachers prior to becoming elementary principals. There was a 15.5% increase in principals having elementary teaching experience in 1994 (76.4%) as compared to 1983 (60.9%). Conversely, the percentage of principals having secondary teaching experience declined by 9.5% from 1983 to 2005. In 2005, about one third of the sample reported experiences as secondary teachers.

Table 3

Teaching Experience of Elementary Principals

	2005	1994	1983
<u>Elementary Teaching Experience</u>			
Yes	69.7%	76.4%	60.9%
No	30.3%	23.6%	39.1%
<u>Secondary Teaching Experience</u>			
Yes	33.8%	36.1%	43.3%
No	66.2%	63.9%	56.7%

2005 ($n = 228$), 1994 ($n = 385$), 1983 ($n = 335$)

Mobility

As shown in Table 4, more principals in 2005 had less tenure in their current positions as compared to those from prior decades. Over the past 20 years, there has been a 20.6% decrease in the number of principals with 10 or more years experience in the same position. In fact, almost half of the principals in 2005 had few years experience (1 to 3 years) in their current positions. The number of principals with 1 to 3 years experience increased by 28% from 1983 to 2005. Consistent across all studies was that approximately 40% of the principals reported 4 to 9 years in current positions. The biggest changes occurred in the increase in the least experienced category and a decrease in the most experienced (10 or more years) category. In general, the principals were less experienced in 2005 than in previous decades examined.

Table 4

Years Held in Current Elementary Principal Position

Years	2005	1994	1983
1 to 3	45.6%	34.8%	17.6%
4 to 9	40.8%	42.9%	46.9%
10 to 19	10.1%	14.3%	29.3%
20 to 29	2.2%	4.4%	3.6%
30 to 39	0	0.3%	0
No Response	1.3%	3.3%	2.6%

2005 ($n = 228$), 1994 ($n = 385$), 1983 ($n = 335$)

In addition to experience levels, the principals' ages at the time of their first appointments were examined. As shown in Table 5, principals in 2005 were generally older at the time of their first appointments as compared to those in 1983. In 1983, 38% of the principals were 35 or younger at the time of their first appointments compared to only 20% in 2005. Similarly, more principals (17%) received their first appointments at ages 45-49 as compared to only 8% in 1983. In all three studies, approximately one half of the principals received their first appointments between the ages of 35 to 44. Interestingly, in 2005, 9% more principals received their first appointments in their 50s or 60s as compared to 1983. In addition, 12.3% of the principals in 2005 were first appointed at age 50 or older as compared to 4% in 1994 and 3% in 1983. In 2005, principals were older and may have had more experiences as teachers or assistant principals as compared to those from previous years.

Table 5

Age at Time of First Appointment as an Elementary School Principal

Age	2005	1994	1983
Under 35	20.2%	31.2%	38.2%
35-39	25.0%	28.3%	24.5%
40-44	25.0%	22.1%	21.8%
45-49	17.1%	14.0%	8.1%
50-54	8.8%	3.6%	2.1%
55 or older	3.5%	0.5%	1.2%
No response	0.4%	0.3%	4.1%

2005 ($n = 228$), 1994 ($n = 385$), 1983 ($n = 335$)

A similar analysis was conducted to compare the number of districts in which principals had worked. The majority of principals (78-88%) have worked in only one school district as principal over the past three decades. In 1983, most principals (88.1%) worked in only one district. This number decreased by 10% from 1983 to 2005, indicating some mobility from district to district. About 10% more principals in 2005 worked in two school districts as compared to those in 1983. Relatively few principals (less than 3%) have served in more than two districts in the three decades studied.

Summary of Findings

As a result of the analyses, the following trends were noted:

1. There was a 52% increase in women elementary principals over the past 20 years and almost two thirds were women in 2005.

2. Although almost two thirds of elementary principals were White in 2005, Hispanic principals increased by 11% over the 20-year span, representing 18.5% of all principals in 2005.

3. Most principals in all studies were in their 40s and 50s; however, principals were older in 2005 as compared to previous years. In fact, there was an 11.9% increase of principals in their 50s over the past 20 years.

4. Most elementary principals had elementary teaching experience, and this increased by about 15.5% from the 1980s to the 1990s. About one third had secondary experience in 2005, showing a decrease of 9.5% over the 20 years.

5. Principals have fewer years experience in their current positions and this phenomenon of less tenure has increased by 28% over the past 20 years.

6. Over the past 20 years, principals were older at the time of their first appointments as principals and 9% more principals received their first appointments in their 50s or 60s.

7. Most principals have worked in only one district; however, more principals worked in two or more districts in 2005 as compared to 1983.

Discussion

The elementary principalship has experienced change in gender and ethnic representation over the past 20 years. Specifically, opportunities for women administrators have received much attention in the research literature as have barriers for women desiring administrative positions in schools (Loder & Spillane, 2005; Shakeshaft, 1989; Tyack & Hansot, 1982; Young & McLeod, 2001). Some of the barriers are related to the historically domestic role of women, who were thought to be best suited for teaching positions (Shakeshaft, 1999). As such, the majority of elementary principal positions have been held by men up until the 1990s, even though the majority of elementary teachers have been women (Choy, Henke, Alt, Medrich, & Bobbitt, 1993;

Matthews & Crow, 2003). As reflected in previous literature, findings in this study indicated that a majority of principals are women. In addition, the gender representation of elementary principals is moving closer to the percentages of women teachers. For example, in Texas in 2006-2007, 88.26% of the teachers were women (TEA, 2006) and in 2005, 64% of the elementary principals were women (Combs & Jackson, 2006).

Moreover, it appears that principal ethnicity representation is also more closely aligning with teacher ethnicities. For example, in Texas during the 2006-2007 school year, 66.7% of teachers were White (TEA, 2006) as compared to 68% of principals (Combs & Jackson, 2006). More principals are Hispanic than in previous years; this trend is hopeful as the Hispanic student population is the fastest growing in the state (Murdock, 2007) and is predicted to be the majority by 2026. Although the ethnic representativeness of principals does not match the diversity of their students, it does appear that the need for increased diversity is being noted.

Many believe that elementary teaching experience is an important career path for elementary principals so that principals can support instructional improvement and the work of teachers and students. In fact, Crow and Glascock (1995) suggested that women leaders were more concerned with instruction and needs of students than were men. A comparison of the three-decade studies indicated that most principals had elementary teaching experience and fewer had experience as secondary teachers. These findings could be a function of the changes in gender representation as the majority of elementary teachers are women. It could also be that elementary teaching experience is viewed as an essential prerequisite for the position.

Mobility was studied by examining the variables of age, years experience in current positions, and employment by multiple school districts. Principals were slightly more mobile from district to district and reported less tenure in their current positions as compared to previous

years. This may be due to the personnel changes that result when district administrators remove principals that have not improved student performance in a one to two year period (Pierce, 2000). These principals may be reassigned to other principal positions in a district, removed from the position, or terminated.

Principals are older and are being appointed to their first positions at older ages than in previous decades. In fact, more principals received their first appointment in their 50s in 2005 than in prior years. This may be because the route to the position has been lengthened with the addition of assistant principals (Combs, 2007). In addition, the position may be less desirable than in past years. As such, researchers reported that fewer teachers were willing to seek administrative positions than in past years as teachers identified several disincentives related to the position (Howley, Andrianaivo, & Perry, 2005). Even though principals are older, most appear to be exiting in their 50s or 60s.

Implications

There are several implications as a result of this study. By examining trends in the demographics, teaching backgrounds, and mobility characteristics of elementary principals, conclusions can be drawn related to job placement and future vacancies. Those persons desiring elementary principal positions may want to consider having elementary teaching experience and understanding that positions may take time and experience to acquire. Greater opportunities exist for women, those of various ethnicities, and older candidates than in years past. These findings may provide encouragement and direction for those seeking positions.

Another implication is that principals appear to be more mobile than in past years. More principals reported fewer years tenure in current positions. These findings might suggest that principals are moving in and out of various positions within and between school districts at

higher rates. Such movement could affect stability in school programs and long-term achievement outcomes. Although further research is needed, such mobility may begin to mirror the trend found among school district superintendents who report relatively brief tenures (Cooper, Fusarelli, Jackson, & Poster, 2002; Kowalski, 2003). In addition, over one half of the principals were in their 50s and 60s in 2005. Many of these candidates will be exiting the profession in the next 5 to 10 years (Whitaker, 2003; Young & McLeod, 2001). With these predicted vacancies and increased mobility, district administrators will likely be concerned about recruitment and retention of elementary principals. Further research is needed to understand the decreasing tenure rates in the elementary principal position. Studies that identify challenges and barriers may be helpful in understanding the perception of the position by principals themselves and potential candidates. Although several trends were identified in this study, more research is needed to shed light on why these conditions may be changing.

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