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# Mexican–American Women in the Principalship

Trudy A. Campbell

Shakeshaft's<sup>1</sup> ground breaking work on women in administration parallels Tetreault's<sup>2</sup> work on the evolution of thinking about women and how including women shifts or alters beliefs about what is legitimate knowledge in a discipline. Both researchers provide a framework of several stages by which educators can evaluate the level of representation of women in school administration curriculum at all levels.

In the first stage of the literature on women in educational administration, an absence of women is documented. Stage two identifies the "women firsts". In the third stage women are discussed as victims, disadvantaged or subordinate. It is not until the fourth stage that women are studied as an entity in and of themselves. The fifth and sixth stages pose a challenge to include women's experiences actually leading to a transformation of the theory.

Knowledge of this research of the progression of women was expected to result in a drastic change in educational administration such that an increased participation of women in school administration roles would be achieved. Early studies by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NAASSP) showed certain patterns of principals' characteristics.<sup>3</sup> One of those patterns indicated only approximately 18 percent of the elementary principals were women in 1978. Subsequent work by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) documented an increase in female elementary principals to 25 percent while only 8.3 percent of the middle/secondary principals were women.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, knowledge of the progression of women was expected to lead to academic content more inclusive of the contribution of both genders. The research on educational administration to date, however, predominantly reflects the experiences of white male administrators. Further, in the scant body of research about women administrators, the experiences of women of color is rarely addressed. Another observation of this literature speaks to a rather limited scope and range of studies addressing the advanced stages of Shakeshaft's framework. For instance, the professional literature deals primarily with characteristics of the selection, hiring, and skill development of female and minority school administrators. While these are

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important considerations there is a tendency for researchers to clump all women together, all minority groups together. "In the literature on school administrators, "minority" is virtually synonymous with "black."<sup>5</sup> In addition, the professional literature often examines these characteristics of gender and ethnicity separately. The motivation for this practice of treating all women or all minority groups as synonymous is often found in the desire for the development of normative and or standardized criteria by which to improve and make more efficient selections of administrators. What is lost, however, is an understanding of within group diversity. According to projected demographics, in less than fifteen years, there will be thirteen states plus the District of Columbia with more than 40% of their students from minority backgrounds.<sup>6</sup> Certainly, a range of variables affect whether minorities will achieve in schools and look to education as a means to attaining a successful life. However, researchers have evidence that teacher expectations, minority role models, and minority principals with a commitment to the communities where they work show great promise for increasing the success of minority children.<sup>7</sup> Yet, in an era where multiple perspectives are needed to improve schools to better meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population, Hispanics represent only 3.9% of the principalships.<sup>8</sup>

It is for these reasons that an exploratory study of Mexican–American women's perceptions of the elementary principalship was undertaken. The purpose of this study was to make a contribution to an understudied area: the relationship of gender and ethnicity (focusing on the Mexican–American) to the practice of the principalship.

## Research Design

To better understand the experiences of Mexican–American female elementary principals, a research project emphasizing a qualitative approach was used. Seven principals (from the same Southwestern urban school district) were interviewed in their respective buildings using a set of open ended questions. There were five broadly framed questions in the interview guide:

- (1) How would you describe your leadership style?
- (2) How would you describe your role with respect to your students? your parents? your teachers?
- (3) What do you see as one of the biggest challenges of this job (and how do you handle that challenge)?
- (4) How do you believe your gender and ethnicity affects your performance in the principalship role?
- (5) What suggestions do you have for mentoring new or prospective administrators?

The principals ranged in age (34–50+), in years of teaching experience (5–23), and in years of administrative experience (4–6). They all held masters degrees, considered themselves bilingual, and worked in buildings with at least a 74% minority student population. The characteristics of these individuals are provided as information for the interpretation of the findings but do not presume to be a representative sample. (See Table 1.)

Interviews were transcribed and coded for the purpose of analyzing and integrating gender and ethnicity content to reveal emergent themes associated with the Mexican–American female principals' perspectives. Analyses and interpretations were inductive and driven by the substantive coding and clustering of content categories.<sup>9</sup> Additional data sources used in the analysis included demographics about the principals and their schools, district documents, informal interviews with district personnel, and field notes.

Although the analysis reminded the researcher of the danger of trying to generalize the experiences of a group (e.g., Principal #7 did not perceive gender or ethnicity to affect her job while the other six provided numerous examples), certain themes or understandings were generally shared by members



**Table 1 Mexican-American Female Elementary Principals' Characteristics**

Code	Age	No. Years		Educ. Status*	Marital Eng. &	Bilingual	% Hispanic students	No. students
		Teacher	Prin.					
P1	43	5	4	M.S.	D	Spanish	>12 % 88 % black	191
P2	50+	23	6	M.S.	S	Spanish	99	550
P3	38	10	5	M.S.	M	Spanish	74	500
P4	37	8	6	M.S.	M	Spanish, some French	99	650
P5	34	10	5	M.A.+	M	Spanish, French	98	600
P6	42	15	5	M.S.	M	Spanish, oral skills	99	768
P7	43	19	4	M.S.	M	Spanish, oral skills	92	475

\*Marital status code: M=married, S=single, D=divorced

of this particular group. Three common understandings will be reported along with a discussion of their relationship to existing literature. Implications to the field are found in the final section.

### Report of the Findings

The first common understanding emerging from the transcripts was that these Mexican-American women defined leadership as being characterized by educational, symbolic, and cultural leadership components rather than the traditional two-dimensional paradigm (task v. human dimensions) reported frequently by earlier researchers.<sup>10</sup> Emphasis on the old two-dimensional paradigm tends to produce competent schools (well-organized, well-run, but not highly educationally effective). These women strived for excellence through exhibiting educational leadership (diagnosing and solving pedagogical and curricular problems), symbolic leadership (communicating purpose, values, and consensus as to a vision), and cultural leadership (developing a strong organizational culture influencing how people think, feel, and behave).

Rather than focusing on well run schools that were not necessarily effective, these women cited examples of their focus on instruction, problem-solving, and commitment to a vision in order to better serve children. Principal #1 voiced this clearly:

Principal #1: What I do and what I try to teach the teacher and the kids is walk the walk and talk the talk, and do it by example. Academic achievement is non-negotiable. You know we have to excel at all costs. That means you put in extra time, that means revamping curriculum. If it means additional training, if it means doing things differently, not asking kids to do things differently, but us doing things differently, then we do them. Because it is what's right for the kids. And really building the school climate. My campus improvement team, they really are the decision makers on the campus. And we're philosophically in tune. We think alike and have the same goals in mind for our kids.

The second understanding held by these women was that gender and ethnicity significantly affected their work in both positive and negative ways. Many felt teachers held differing expectations for female principals. Female teachers expected more patience, more tolerance, and fewer consequences for less than satisfactory performance.

Principal #1: You don't understand, you should understand. You're a woman. You should understand. I say . . . you've done something that is unacceptable and you're being told you will not do it again. But the choice is yours, you do it again and these are the consequences.

Male teachers (especially Hispanic) did not want to receive directions from a female.

Principal #1: Then I have young men that don't like to be told what to do by a woman. You're a female and women are always telling me what to do. I tell them, well you have a choice. Go to school where there's a male and he's still going to tell you what to do.

Expectations of parents were also a factor. Fathers preferred working with men. Principal #2 stated, "too often, especially with the Hispanic male, you end up having somebody not wanting to deal with you because you're a female. In our culture, Hispanic women are supposed to be meek, very docile, very you know, you give in to the male." Principal #4 stated, "If I'm walking in the neighborhood with a colleague who's male, he's much more likely to get the respect. So sometimes I will experience the negative screaming, the cussing parent . . . because you're not the authority because you're female. It's very macho to be macho."

According to the feminist literature, the principles underlying bureaucratic structures give priority to values traditionally considered male. Female scholars such as Gilligan and Miller argue that women experience life differently than men and the sense of relationship and the interconnectedness of people drive their actions.<sup>11</sup> Women use conversation to expand and understand relationships; see people as mutually dependent; emphasize caring; and consider actions within a context and linked, one to another. Men, on the other hand, use talk to convey solutions (leading to the end of conversations); view people as self-reliant; value freedom; and, regard events as isolated and discrete. These differing values affect how women approach ethical dilemmas (they are more concerned with compromises to maintain social contracts than the abstract rights and wrongs). Confronted with a society which does not appear to value intimacy, and caring women learn as girls to "silence" their unique voices . . . they become more hesitant in offering opinions and lack confidence in speaking out. While these women did not convey a "silencing" of their voices, they clearly experienced conflict over differing role expectations and related behaviors.

These principals also reported a perception of superiority to their male colleagues in some areas of administration.

Principal #2: Well, I've yet to have worked with a male that possesses the structure that females possess. They [men] were mostly inflexible. If the agenda was set, right or wrong, it's going to go that way. We're quicker at making that decision, restructuring, and realizing what the consequences are going to be. Those of us that have made it



into the principalship or any administrative position, have had to work twice as hard as the males and have had to have shown a lot more strength in every area.

Principal #3: I'm more organized than most men I know. I think that I'm more compassionate, and the teachers know that. My family's young, I know what it's like to be up all night with a baby. In that aspect, I think I have more empathy for my faculty. I don't know too many men that have put their spouse through medical school and still come out of it smiling.

Principal #6: We do have intuition and we are more sensitive to the needs of the kids. We are so much stronger in curriculum and instruction because we didn't rise through the good old boy network. We are much better at taking a risk.

Educational administrative studies have indicated how women perform in relation to their male colleagues. Shakeshaft's examination of over 200 dissertations and 600 research articles provided three conclusions about female leadership styles: (1) relationships with others are central to all actions for women administrators; (2) teaching and learning are the major foci of women administrators; and, (3) building community is an essential part of a woman administrator's style.<sup>12</sup> Others have concluded that while women are underrepresented in schools, they are overrepresented in schools considered highly effective.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, women exhibit consistent patterns of behavior: they exert more positive efforts on instructional supervision; produce more positive interactions with community and staff; tend to have more democratic, inclusive, and conflict-reducing leadership styles; observe teachers more frequently (at the elementary level); and, spend more time in the classroom and in discussions with teachers about instruction and the academic content of the school.<sup>14</sup>

Discrimination was also part of the reality of the women interviewed. In addition to establishing the absence of women and minorities in educational administration, research has determined issues they must confront to enter or remain in the profession. According to Shakeshaft, there are literally hundreds of studies which document sex discrimination in hiring and promotion.<sup>15</sup> Women and minorities face "filtering methods" (e.g., recruiting filters include strategies such as limiting job announcements to the district when the district has few if any qualified minority or female candidates; application filters include downgrading an applicant for a top administrative position by suggesting that she apply for a lesser administrative or teaching position; selection criteria filters include applying dual selection criteria by allowing men to skip one or more rungs on the career ladder while requiring women to climb each step; interview filters include use of questions such as "aren't you concerned about returning home alone late at night?")<sup>16</sup>

Minority women face a double bind discrimination: "once for being female and once for being racially or ethnically different."<sup>17</sup> Although minority principals are well-educated, hold the necessary professional credentials, and have considerable classroom teaching experience, they acquire their administrative positions more slowly than their white counterparts.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, there are factors which contribute to the development and maintenance of inferior status. These factors (first presented by Young) include: the visibility of members (e.g., placement in less prestigious, predominantly Mexican-American schools to serve as role models for their students), the attributed competitive threat (e.g., very few Mexican-Americans are in the teaching pool from which administrators are selected), and the extra situation derivative denigrating beliefs (e.g., placement in positions not fully accepted by the majority culture or hiring a Hispanic physical education teacher to teach Spanish or bilingual education classes).<sup>19</sup>

Principal #2 sued (they settled out of court) the school district for unfair promotion practices based both on gender and ethnicity. She then experienced what she believed to be an attempt to "make it hard for her." She was placed in "a school that had a lot of problems. She will quit or she will make so many mistakes she will fail." In a conference with her superiors she was directed to change her decision regarding curriculum because "you're going against my manhood if you don't." More subtle kinds of discrimination included perceptions of automatic acceptance of males as the leader.

Principal #1: Female subordinates or teachers or whatever, are going to tolerate almost everything a man puts out. Male, automatically, they see it's leadership. And a female always has to work extra hard.

Interaction styles are also affected. Principal #3 noted her superiors "don't joke with me the way they joke with other people. Physical contact, it's always very formal." The ability to speak Spanish (the native language of most parents) was seen as an asset regardless of the ethnicity of the principal. Principal #6 and Principal #7 specifically mentioned PTA meetings are conducted in Spanish and English and parent conferences are more effective with bilingual capabilities.

Even though gender and ethnicity define how they performed, the principals perceived other characteristics equally deserving of attention. Age (too young to handle the job) and parent status (those with children understood parents better) were clearly a factor in community acceptance. Socioeconomic status and education put up barriers to communication.

Principal #1: When I worked in the Hispanic community they thought that because I was educated that I thought . . . you know, you think you're better. I've had comments made to me . . . well, you're not like other Mexicans. It's this thing, you're educated, you're more assimilated.

The *third understanding* emerging from the interviews was that a female consistently played an important role in either setting career goals or in mentoring to develop the necessary skills. The most frequently cited female affecting career choice was the principal's mother.

Principal #2: In my own family, my mother was very assertive, very goal oriented. And my mother expected this of every one of her (six) females.

Principal #4: My mom worked. That made us view a woman working as acceptable.

The second person most frequently mentioned as affecting careers was a former (female) principal. They either created awareness of the possibility of an administrative career, or they actively engaged in recruiting, training, and promoting these individuals within the district. Principal #2 experienced a form of a love-hate relationship. "I had a tough principal from the beginning. I hated the woman and I thought she was the meanest woman there is. But now I look back . . . I learned a lot as to what you do to be a successful principal." Principal #1 expressed similar feelings, "That woman is mean! She's everything I ever wanted to be and I thought, if I could be as smart as that woman and as talented, and as articulate, but not as mean. . . She promoted me in and out of the district. I learned from her . . . desire to want to improve, the desire to excel at what you do."

The professional literature suggests other issues affect career choice for women including their own tendency to limit their aspirations. Self-evaluations of abilities and performance expectancies are lower among women than men.<sup>20</sup> Role models rarely exist for women (and this is equally true of minorities.) "Students who have never seen women in leadership positions are not likely to develop aspirations or values that move beyond traditional stereotypes."<sup>21</sup> Pressure to attend to family, child rearing, and childbearing<sup>22</sup> and mobility<sup>23</sup>



continue to hinder women. There are also commonly held beliefs about women's leadership qualities to challenge. Some qualities such as emotional stability, self-reliance, and aggressiveness, that are approved of in men are considered overbearing in women.<sup>24</sup> Leonard and Papa-Lewis summarize factors affecting access into the educational administration hierarchy as either intrinsic or extrinsic.<sup>25</sup> In addition to those already discussed, women are affected by low self-image, negative perceptions of advancement opportunities, lack of support for or opposition to sex-equity policy and Title IX mandates, lack of networks, and sex/race discrimination.

### Implications

The three shared understandings described and discussed in the previous section do not imply that all female Mexican-American elementary principals (or even those cited in this study) experienced all of the situations related in the examples, nor does it imply the degree to which the identified members perceived the impact. These understandings do, however, establish a framework for discussion and future research linking ethnicity and gender. Each participant in this study, in some manner, voiced concerns or provided examples of: (a) focusing leadership on educational, symbolic, and cultural dimensions; (b) experiencing the impact of gender and ethnicity on their performance; and, (c) recognizing a female role model (either a mother or a former female principal) as critical to their entry and success as a leader.

The implications of these understandings affect both training and future research efforts. Given the experiences these women reported, several approaches to formal training are suggested. First, graduate studies in educational administration will need to include a focus on leadership for excellence (rather than competence) and help candidates develop skills in improving instruction, creating and communicating vision and goals, and establishing a sense of the culture of the school. Second, the impact of gender and ethnicity must not be ignored in formal training. Even if you could agree the nature of the principal's work may be similar for all administrators, the reality is experienced differently. Strategies for dealing with the "realities" of being a woman from a culture with strong views on women's roles need to be described, honored, debated, and developed. Finally, the role of other females in supporting career choices and providing opportunities for success can not be overemphasized. The message these women received from their mothers set the foundation for the future. This was forcefully stated in the findings of Cantor, Bernay, and Stoess' study of<sup>26</sup> women in high elective office.<sup>26</sup> In their youth, they consistently received five messages: you are loved and special; you can do anything you want; it's okay to take risks; dream of greatness; you can use and enjoy your "creative aggression." A system for formal mentoring needs to be a part of the training model.

With respect to research, it is clear the study of the impact of gender and ethnicity on the work role needs to continue. There is a critical absence of scholarly work on race/ethnic minorities in general, and much of that work is approached through a "problem orientation". We are overlooking the role of minority women within the schools as well as the larger social structures.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, research must be conducted in context, examining variables together. Isolating one characteristic limits the kinds of understandings gained from the interaction of the two. These Mexican-American women found it difficult to separate issues related solely to gender or ethnicity. It was an unnatural framework for describing their realities.

Finally, if we are to ever reach the final stages of in the evolution of thinking about women, we must move toward incorporating this research into the development of the theories which inform practice. Some recent approaches to school lead-

ership characterized by a more participatory, curriculum-centered, consensus-driven style reflect a possible trend toward inclusion of what was once considered "female" behaviors.

Social, political, and demographic conditions make it clear that schools must change. Administrators have an opportunity to affect that change in positive ways. More importantly, now is the time to accept the challenge of incorporating the experiences, values, skills, and insights of those women and minority principals who may hold the key to ensuring successful participation in school for all children.

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