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Women Elementary Principals and Work-Life Balance

Abstract

Work-life balance (WLB) is a challenge for principals to navigate as the ever-increasing responsibilities require more time. Because time is limited, achieving balance between principals' workloads and home responsibilities can cause significant stress. Often, women principals face additional challenges because of childcare and household responsibilities. To support principals in their practice and encourage them to enter and persist in the role, better policies and practices should be implemented. By providing more site level staff, fostering a culture where WLB is valued, releasing principals from non-essential obligations, and training principals to prioritize tasks, districts can help mitigate the overload principals experience.

Keywords

Elementary Principals and Work-Life Balance

Author Statement

Joyce Lee Yang has served in public education for over 20 years. She's held positions as a teacher and school site administrator at traditional public and charter schools in three states. Currently, she is an assistant professor at Biola University in the teacher preparation program. Her research interests include how women principals balance work and life, how principals manage the growing responsibilities of the role and what systemic changes might help address burn out, and assessing learning without letter grades.

Women Elementary Principals and Work-Life Balance

The role and responsibilities of the school principal have grown immensely in the past 30 years (Copland, 2001; Fullan, 2014). Principals are required to be instructional leaders, parent and community liaisons, skilled orators, human resource directors, lunchtime supervisors, and facilities managers, among an ever-growing list of duties, all of which add to the stress level and, therefore, desirability of the position (Pounder & Merrill, 2001). Administrators are no longer simply operational managers; they are also expected to be actively engaged as educational reformers (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007), answer to the district office, and most importantly, deliver results (Fullan, 2014). The escalation of administrative responsibilities can take an inordinate amount of time, which makes it difficult to balance obligations at work and home, particularly for women principals.

Several factors contribute to the work-life balance (WLB) of principals. The added roles and responsibilities have increased the demands on an administrator's time and the number of work hours per week, which has led to work overload. Bitterman, Goldring, and Gray (2013) surveyed 14,000 K-12 school principals and found that school principals on average spent 58.1 hours per week on school-related activities, with an increasing average of hours based on school enrollment.

It is imperative to consider organizational factors that may contribute to the experience of a principal. The context of each school adds to the complexity of the principalship. According to Hausman,

Crow, and Sperry (2000), "Context influences the demands on the principal's time, range of possibilities for reform, and a host of other constraints and opportunities that at least partially define the principal's role" (p. 5). In other words, the relationship between the context of a school and the principal is complex and mutually influential. As such, a principal's experience cannot be viewed without understanding the context in which a principal works.

A school's context includes demographics, fiscal solvency, and school culture, among other internal factors. External factors also come into play as schools are open systems that are intricately connected with the district, the community at large, and the national educational scene. Hausman et al. (2000) stated, "Principals today also work in a context of multiple reform agendas" (p. 6). During the past 60 years, reforms efforts have included Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the implementation of the Common Core standards. Additionally, there have been many state and local reform agendas, such as algebra for all and college entrance requirements (Lee & Reeves, 2012; Nomi, 2012; Smith & Teasley, 2014).

Personal context also impacts principals' WLB, which is particularly the case for women. During the past 40 years, the number of women participating in the labor market has steadily increased. Since the second wave of the feminist movement of the 1970s, more women have entered the teaching profession and risen in the ranks of school leadership. According

to the National Center for Education Statistics (2014), in 2011, 52% of all public-school principals were women, which is an increase of 21% since 1990. According to Hoff and Mitchell (2008), for women, entry into school leadership roles often depends upon timing, career planning, and time demands at home.

Hochschild and Machung (1989) first coined the term “second shift”, which refers to WLB challenges specific to the personal context of women. According to Hochschild and Machung (2012), “Most women without children spend much more time than men on housework; with children, they devote more time caring for both house and children. Most women work one shift at the office and a ‘second shift’ at home” (p. 4). With limited hours in the day, about 42% of women reported that they reduced their work hours in order to care for a child or other family member, while 28% of males said they had done likewise (Parker, 2015). For women, the compounding effects of lack of time, ballooning responsibilities, and the uniqueness of each school’s context and each administrator’s personal context, interact to create tension in a principal’s WLB. According to Shoho and Barnett (2011), “It was readily apparent that being single and having no kids made it easier for new principals to fully engage in their job without any outside concerns for neglecting other commitments. Based on these findings, the question then becomes, can people who aspire to be

highly effective 21st century principals have balanced professional and personal lives without sacrificing one for another?” (p. 578). In their study of K-12 principals, Kochan, Spencer, and Mathews (2000) reinforced that “managing their work and their time and coping with the stresses, tasks and responsibilities of the job” (p. 305) was the main issue for both men and women. The sheer volume of work has overloaded principals of both genders.

Over the course of the past few decades, WLB has steadily become a priority for employees (Breugh & Frey, 2008, p.345). It has come to the forefront of modern-day company policies and human resources debates (Poelmans, Kalliath, & Brough 2008, p. 229). In public education circles, however, there have been few applications of policies to address WLB concerns for school administrators. It is worth studying what principals perceive to be challenges within their organizational and personal contexts and how they manage WLB.

The present study was conducted to examine what women perceive to be the contextual factors in their organizations and personal lives that shape their work-life experiences as principals and how school districts can use this information to implement policies that encourage women principals to persist in the field. As such, this study addresses the following questions: What contextual factors emerge for women elementary principals in their

organizations that affect their WLB? What contextual factors emerge for women elementary principals in their personal lives that affect their WLB? Lastly, how do women elementary principals manage WLB?

Conceptual Framework

Method

Study Design and Participants

This study was a qualitative design based on semi-structured responsive interviewing grounded in the interpretive constructionist philosophy. Participants for this study were 11 women elementary principals in Southern California with at least three years as principal. Five of the participants had 10 or more years of experience. One participant was single, one was recently divorced, and

the remaining nine were married. Five of the participants had no children, while one was in the process of adoption. One had two young children under the age of seven. One had one child under the age of seven. Two had secondary school aged children, and two had children in college. Five of the participants were White, two were Latina, two were African American, one was Asian, and one was Asian/African American. Six of the participants were at Title I schools and five of the participants were at schools with more than 500 students. These demographics are summarized in Table 1. Being purposeful in the selection of participants enabled the gathering of data from those who had differing perspectives about WLB.

Table 1: Participants Demographics

Name of Participant ¹	Number of years as principal ²	Marital Status	Number of Children	Age(s) of Children	School Demographics ³	Ethnicity
Annie	8	Single	0	N/A	K-6, 450 students, Title I, 72% FRL, 27% EL, 13% SpEd	Asian
Diane	10	Married	2	13, 16	K-6, 670 students, 17% FRL, 20% EL, 8% SpEd	White

Name of Participant ¹	Number of years as principal ²	Marital Status	Number of Children	Age(s) of Children	School Demographics ³	Ethnicity
Barbara	4	Married	0	N/A	K-6, 358 students, Title I, 71% FRL, 38% EL, 18% SpEd	Asian-African American
Rebecca	15	Married	0	N/A	TK-5, 453 students, 23% FRL, 8% EL, 12% SpEd	White
Abigail	10	Married	0	Adoption in process	K-2, Title I, 400 students, 84% FRL, 59% EL, 8% SpEd	Latina
Pam	9	Married	2	19 months, 6	TK-5, 530 students, Title I, 31% FRL, 27% EL, 7% SpEd	White
Lisa	4	Married	0	N/A	TK-6, 750 students, 14% FRL, 17% EL	White
Elena	6	Divorced	3	11, 16, 21	TK-6, 918 students, Title I, 90% FRL, 68% EL, 9% SpEd	Latina
Dorothy	8	Married	1	5	K-6, 480 students, Title I, 85% FRL, 79% EL, Dual Immersion program, 8% SpEd	White

Name of Participant ¹	Number of years as principal ²	Marital Status	Number of Children	Age(s) of Children	School Demographics ³	Ethnicity
Leanne	10	Married	3	19, 21, 22	K-6, Title I, 626 students, 94% FRL, 52% EL, 9% SpEd	African American
Esther	13	Married	2	21, 22	K-6, 474 students, 34% FRL, 13% EL, 8% SpEd	African American

1. The names of the participants are pseudonyms.
2. The number of years as principal includes the year during which these interviews were conducted.
3. FRL denotes participation in a free and reduced lunch program; EL denotes students who are identified as English learners; SpEd denotes students who are in a special education program.

Data Collection

Data was collected primarily through in-depth interviews. The interview protocol was scripted and consisted of six primary questions, all of which had up to four additional probes. Each initial interview was conducted one-on-one in a location of the participant’s choosing, recorded using two devices, and required 60-90 minutes. The author took hand-written notes and recorded each conversation for audio and an automated transcription. After each interview, the author reviewed the

audio recording against the transcription to edit for accuracy. The author conducted follow-up interviews by phone with two participants to clarify information. All interview recordings and transcriptions were saved on a password-protected external hard drive and backed up on a password-protected cloud service.

The author collected relevant artifacts from each participant’s school website including the School Accountability Report Cards. These provided specific demographic information and the context of the schools which helped frame the interview data.

For anonymity, each participant was assigned a pseudonym and are reported here with those fictitious names.

Data Analysis

This study collected data from 11 interviews. Dedoose, a secure online qualitative data storage and

analysis software platform, was utilized for all the stages of coding and data analysis.

Interview notes and transcriptions were used for the first cycle of coding. The first cycle stage began with initial coding to employ in vivo coding, which “uses words or short phrases from the participant’s own language” (Miles, Huberman, Saldaña, 2014, p. 74). This was the first step in looking for words and phrases that were commonly used by participants, thus, “prioritizing and honoring the participant’s voice” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 91). The Dedoose software enabled the author to move forward with the second cycle coding beginning with pattern coding. Common major themes were identified considering the “rules, causes, and explanations in the data” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 211). Focused coding was employed to decide which codes appeared most frequently to cultivate the most significant categories in the data and determine which codes made the most sense. Finally, once it was determined which themes were most prominent “categories of categories” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 250), the author looked for possible structures and relationships as a guide towards theories, concepts, or key assertions.

Report of Findings

Contextual Factors in the Organization that Affect WLB

There were four main contextual factors within their work

organizations that participants reported as impacting their WLB: the site team, parents, the superintendent, and special education.

Principals reported that having a site team was a value add while lack of a site team contributed to the challenge of WLB. Elena expressed that it was critical to her success as a school leader to have a robust and effective team, including her AP who provided administrative support, a sense of collegiality, and collaboration. Conversely, Abigail did not have additional support staff at her site, which often resulted in being pulled in different directions to fill voids such as substitute teaching, serving food in the cafeteria, and acting as a nurse, which negatively impacted her WLB.

When asked, what would help make for a more positive WLB, every participant responded by asking for an assistant principal (AP). Regardless of the school demographics, Title I status, enrollment size, the participant’s years of experience, marital and family status, or gender, participants stated that an AP would positively impact their WLB.

Eight of the participants reported parents as a factor that impacted WLB. Some reported that parents positively impacted their WLB mainly through the support of the Parent Teacher Association (PTA). Lisa explained how an active parent community can be a positive because they provide support for events, fundraising, and activities, which can be a significant time saver as they

relieve the principal of these responsibilities.

Some participants reported parent relationships as negatively impacting their WLB when it came to communicating discipline issues. Several participants reported that investigating discipline issues prior to contacting parents absorbed a significant part of their work day because of how thoroughly they needed to prepare before calling parents. Participants reported that parent attitudes concerning discipline impacted how much time they had to spend on these matters.

Nine of the participants reported their superintendent as a contextual factor that impacted their WLB. Some reported that their superintendent positively impacted their WLB, mainly through general support and policy changes such as removing requirements for principals to attend every board meeting. Others reported that their superintendent negatively impacted their WLB because of the requirements placed upon them, such as attending city council meetings, the general lack of support, and lack of communication.

Seven participants reported that special education related responsibilities occupied substantial amounts of time. These responsibilities included the large number of Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings held on campus and their required attendance at the IEP meetings, as well as the presence of one or more Special Day Classes (SDC) on campus. Participants

reported that having a large special education population drained more time from their work day. Annie explained that her site had two SDC classes, one Resource Specialist Program (RSP) class, and one speech class taught by three speech teachers. By her count, she had attended 135 IEP meetings in one year.

Contextual Factors in the Personal Life Affecting WLB

There were three main contextual factors within their personal lives that participants reported as impacting their WLB: spousal support, children, and finances. Married participants reported that their spouse was the greatest contextual factor in their personal lives that positively impacted WLB. Participants cited that their spouse was supportive and contributed to childcare and household responsibilities, which significantly helped their WLB. An overall sense of spousal support appeared to be helpful. Participants also reported that their spouse's profession and flexible work schedule were invaluable aspects of their lives that supported WLB.

Participants who did not have children reported that not having children had a significant time impact upon their WLB. For those participants who had children, the responses were mixed depending upon the number and ages of their children. The four participants who were married with no children reported that they recognized it would

be challenging to have children while maintaining a sense of balance.

The responses of the participants who were married and had children depended upon the number and ages of their children. Elena was the exception as she was the only participant who was a single parent of three. The three participants who had older children reported that having children did not impact their WLB either positively or negatively, primarily because their children were older.

Pam reported struggling with WLB because she had young children. At the time of this study, she had a six-year old and a 19-month old. The struggle between balancing her responsibilities as a mom and her responsibilities as a principal was taxing. She expressed the difficulty of being everything to everyone and had twice contemplated going back to the classroom to be a teacher because that seemed to be a better job for managing WLB.

Financial need can be a complicated contextual factor because “need” can depend on one’s perspective. For participants without a spouse, work was not optional, and, therefore, financial needs impacted their WLB. Two participants reported that they were the main financial provider for the family, despite having a spouse who also works. Thus, for those participants who were the only, or the main, source of income, financial need impacted their WLB. The remainder of the participants reported that financial need did not

impact their WLB because their spouse’s income could be adequate for their financial needs with some reporting that working as a principal was enjoyable.

Strategies employed for WLB

While all participants employed strategies to manage WLB, participants described the emotional toll of managing a balance. Participants reported specific logistical strategies and personal thoughts about WLB.

It is important to note that all but one participant reported the emotional toll of being a principal. Seven of the participants reported feeling lonely; this was especially the case for those participants who had previously served in an administrative team setting. Leanne shared, “There’s a loneliness that comes with it [being an elementary principal], and it really struck me like last year. I was thinking everything is great, and I couldn’t ask for a better site. But why do I feel lonely during the day? I realized I don’t have anyone that is my direct support.” For many years in various administrative roles, Leanne had grown accustomed to working with a lateral team. As an elementary principal, however, she experienced what it was like to be an administrator without a job-alike team, which left her feeling lonely.

The stress of being principal was most evident in the interviews with Annie and Barbara, who were the only two participants from the same district. Annie reported,

I feel like I don't have a life. I'm always thinking about what I have to do next. It's very all consuming. Often, I don't have a lot of time to think about what do I want to do for me. When I do have free time, I don't want to do anything because it's too tiring. I think the sense of responsibility is totally different for a principal.

Isolation, loneliness, and a sense of responsibility all contributed to the emotional toll that participants reported experiencing.

All participants reported a variety of strategies for managing WLB. Participants reported hiring help at home. For those who had children, daycare was expected, although participants reported feeling concerned about finding the best care and guilty for leaving their child(ren).

Ten of the participants reported that they made conscious decisions to take a break from work by turning it off. Several participants indicated that after years of experience, they had learned that they needed to take a break from work once they arrived home. They cited that early in their career, they would work after hours at home regularly. However, after years of experience, they learned that taking conscious breaks helped them to be better principals, moms, and spouses.

All participants reported the importance of prioritizing and letting some things go, including both work

and home given the reality of time constraints. At work, participants reported doing the work that they valued the most first, such as visiting classrooms. At home, participants reported hiring cleaners or eating out helped to lighten the load.

Participants reported differing personal thoughts about WLB. Three participants, all of whom had ten years of experience, reported that they felt balanced. Despite admittedly working long hours, Rebecca felt balanced because she enjoyed her job despite the work load. She did not define WLB by the amount of time she spent at work or at home but by the joy she found in each. Elena reported feeling balanced 50% of the time measured by whether she had the time or energy to enjoy activities outside of work. All participants reported how the value of their years of experience taught them to be comfortable with taking a break from work and pursuing other priorities. However, despite their intention to spend more time on their personal lives, one of the greatest challenges the principals reported was finding time to take care of themselves.

Discussion

As the role of the principal continues to grow in scope and responsibility, the struggle for WLB is actual and persistent for elementary women principals. The findings from this study show that within personal contexts, support from spouses and access to additional resources are

strong recurring themes and key contextual factors essential to WLB.

Within organizations, the key contextual factors that elementary women principals reported as affecting their WLB included: the site team, parents, the superintendent, and special education. Elementary women principals also reported recognizing the emotional toll of managing WLB, provided practical logistical strategies that they used, and shared personal thoughts about WLB. The findings from the data suggest: (a) support within the organizational context is vital to WLB; (b) time must be allocated effectively and prioritized; and (c) WLB is often a matter of the principal's own values and perceptions.

Organizational support

Support within organizations is paramount to WLB including strong site team support and the superintendent's support of WLB. Participants repeatedly cited the need for a strong site team, which could include full-time support staff such as instructional coaches as well as having an AP. When asked what would help them better manage WLB, participants consistently wished for a full-time AP. Research shows that assistant principals are immensely valuable and can assist with instructional leadership and stand in for the principal when the principal is off site (Hilliard & Newsome, 2013; Oleszewski, Shoho, & Barnett, 2012; Osabutey-Aguedje, 2015). Perhaps more importantly, an

AP could help mitigate principals' feelings of isolation, loneliness, and working alone which emerged as themes in participants' responses.

While there has been a consistent push in recent years for teachers to engage in PLCs, it has not been the case for administrators, despite research supporting this need. Turnbull, Riley, Arcaria, and MacFarlane (2013) concluded that principals value professional learning opportunities within collegial teams and communication. Principals who participate in a PLC may reduce the sense of isolation which may lead to greater success in the role (Bauer & Brazer, 2013). The addition of an AP at elementary school sites may serve to create the added benefit of an onsite PLC for administrators.

Superintendents can play a critical role in establishing WLB throughout an organization by setting expectations and modeling their values. This can be accomplished by minimizing attendance requirements at meetings and setting limits on weekend and off-hour communications.

Prioritizing the Use of Limited Time

Several participants cited the time drain that occurred from having to attend every IEP meeting. Participants reported that often they didn't speak during these meetings, causing them to wonder why their presence was required. With an effective SpEd team in place, principals may not need to attend

every IEP meeting allowing them to reclaim a significant amount of work time.

It is commonly known that principals have more work to complete than the number of hours permit (Adams, 2000; Braukmann & Schwarz, 2015; Okoroma & Robert-Okah, 2008). With a limited number of waking hours, elementary women principals must contend with the reality that there are simply not enough hours in the day to do it all. To make the work manageable, participants discussed learning how to make effective use of limited time. Grissom, Loeb, and Mitani (2015) concluded that stronger time management skills are linked to lower principal job stress. The literature supports the need for principals to develop the skill of prioritizing. Marsh-Girardi (2011) concluded that it was essential for principals' success to focus on priorities. Furthermore, Botha (2013) recommended that principals should set their own priorities and devote sufficient time to them as a means for managing their time more effectively and efficiently in the school context.

WLB Is a Matter of Perception

Finally, this study found that participants defined WLB differently. Although it is important to note that there is an actual time-bound aspect to each day, participants did not define WLB simply by the number of hours spent at work in comparison to home. The literature supports this finding that people “interpret WLB

differently, with some needing more personal time than others, to experience well-being” (Chandra, 2012, p. 1041). Depending on one's life stage, career progression, and personal values and needs, WLB can look, feel, and be defined in many ways.

For some participants, balance did not seem to be something that was attainable as the demands of work and home seemed to be more than could be achieved within the realities of time constraints. This did not seem to have any bearing on the number of years of experience, size of school, superintendent, marital status, or child rearing responsibilities. The only common thread between these participants was that they were principals of Title I schools. For these participants, there was never enough time to get everything done, and there was not enough support staff on site. These participants felt the need to dedicate a great deal of time to meeting the significant needs of the students so they could succeed.

Recommendations for Policy and Research

Based on the findings of this study, there are four recommendations for organizational policy and practice: (a) appoint assistant principals for elementary schools, (b) create and foster a culture of WLB with the superintendent's support, (c) provide parity for special education programs at school sites,

and (d) develop principals' skills for prioritizing and letting go.

Appoint Assistant Principals for Elementary Schools

The findings of this study show that elementary principals experience work overload and feelings of isolation and loneliness as they usually lead and make decisions alone. With the addition of an assistant principal, principals would benefit from the help and support of an administrative team. Principals who work in collaboration with an assistant principal could carry the work load together and delegate tasks in order to achieve a better WLB and to mitigate the sense of isolation and loneliness.

Superintendent's Support in Creating a Culture of WLB

Superintendents' leadership should include fostering a sustainable model for WLB. The findings of this study suggest that superintendents would be able to help principals achieve a better WLB by creating an organizational culture that values, implements, and practices policies for WLB. For example, superintendents have the power to minimize the types and numbers of administrative meetings principals are required to attend. They can support principals by considering which meetings are essential and release them from attending those that are not. Superintendents could also implement and adhere to protocols that limit weekend or after work hours. By helping to protect unofficial working

hours through their modeling, superintendents may effectively impact a culture of WLB.

Special Education/IEP Meetings

The findings of this study suggest that principals felt special education programs, especially IEP meetings, drained a significant amount of their time. When the special education teachers and administrators are present, it may not be necessary to duplicate the work by having the principal attend every IEP meeting. Releasing principals from attending regular and low profile IEP meetings would allow them to reclaim some time. Also, there should consideration for the parity of work between school site administrators when placing special education programs at a site. If a school houses more students with challenging needs that may require more principal's time, that principal should be released from other responsibilities to balance the time commitment of the work involved. These recommendations could reduce the amount of time that principals spend monitoring special education programs.

Develop Skills for Prioritizing

The findings of this study suggest that principals must develop prioritizing skills and learn to let some things go. Principals tend to be high achievers and often strive to accomplish a great deal in a limited amount of time. This can lead to overload and difficulty achieving WLB because it can be challenging to allow

tasks to go unfinished. Zigler (2007) stated, "It is hard to measure balance and to know when it has been achieved. But principals do know when they are chasing something that means an awful lot to them" (p. 32). Not all tasks are worth equal attention or priority. To achieve some sense of WLB, "building principals' time management capacities may be a worthwhile strategy for increasing time on high-priority tasks and reducing stress" (Grissom et al., 2015, p. 773). Districts could provide training on how to prioritize tasks and in helping principals, particularly new principals, understand that tasks should be prioritized while other tasks can be delegated or outsourced. Some principals might find this to be a less than ideal strategy; however, by prioritizing and letting go, principals may experience a better WLB.

Implications for Future Research

As principals navigate the ever changing and growing nature of the position, WLB must be considered for them to persist and succeed in the role. The findings of this study lead to three implications for future research. First, the findings suggest that Title I school principals may shoulder a greater amount of work that may impact WLB than non-Title I school principals. Further research specifically around Title I school principals could support assigning an assistant principal to these schools. Second, the findings suggest that women principals implement prioritizing skills both at work and

home and have tremendous support from their spouses. To increase the scope of these findings, it would be beneficial to research whether men also utilize prioritizing skills and whether they receive a similar level of support from their spouse. Finally, to extend the research, it would be beneficial to study how women principals with young children and single mothers manage WLB. This study included one single woman with no children and one single mother of three older children. More participants could lead to a stronger generalization of the findings.

Conclusion

WLB is a challenge for principals to navigate as the ever-increasing responsibilities of the role requires more time. Because time is limited, balancing between one's work load and home responsibilities can cause a significant amount of stress. To support women principals in their practice and encourage them to enter and persist in the role, better policies and practices should be implemented at the district level. By providing more site level staffing support, fostering a culture where WLB is valued, releasing principals from non-essential meetings and obligations, and training principals to prioritize tasks, districts can help mitigate the stress and conflict principals experience due to the challenges of WLB

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