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Women In The High School Principalship: A Study Of Leadership At Three Schools

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WOMEN IN THE HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALSHIP: A STUDY OF LEADERSHIP AT THREE SCHOOLS

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Educational Leadership and Foundations

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Dedication

To my husband, who understood I was going to go back to school before I knew myself. I could not have finished without his unending support, patience, and feedback. To my parents, Shannon Huggins and Gretchen Schwarzbach, who have always provided the security that allowed me to seek out challenges throughout my life.
WOMEN IN THE HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALSHIP: A STUDY OF LEADERSHIP AT THREE SCHOOLS

By

Kimberly J Baxter, B.A., M.Ed.

DISSERTATION

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Acknowledgements

An African saying states that “it takes a village to raise a child,” and it takes a community to produce a meaningful dissertation. Dr. John Daresh has shown consistent support throughout the process, and has bolstered my confidence when I began to wonder if I was worthy of this endeavor. He demonstrated a true understanding of the difficult work of the principal, both my own and of the women in the study. As the chair of my dissertation committee, Dr. Daresh was my champion and gave constant encouragement. Dr. Don Schulte also provided insight into the nature of the modern principalship, and used his extensive experience in K-12 schools to help improve the focus of the study. Dr. Méndez brought her knowledge in qualitative methodology and women’s issues and provided concrete, purposeful feedback that made my study meaningful. Dr. Hurley’s expertise in writing and gentle guidance also improved the quality both of the study and my writing.

The three women in this study are tackling the challenges they face daily in their schools with determination and caring. Despite pressures and difficulties, they enjoy their roles as principals and work daily to improve their campuses. Their eagerness to invite me to their schools and share their stories made the research eminently enjoyable as well as valuable. In addition, I extend a special thank you to Juni Mathews,
principal of Montwood High School, for supporting me as I began the doctoral program and for her strong leadership; she will always be mentor and friend.

Finally, I would like to thank the colleagues at the campuses where I worked while completing the program and the dissertation. Their understanding of the time constraints and pressures I faced made completing this work bearable. The central office staff of the school district, especially Holly Fields, has also shown incredible support throughout this entire endeavor.

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Abstract

This study is about women principals in Texas and their leadership in light of the current context of large high schools. Relatively few recent studies exist of women in the high school principalship since the passage of No Child Left Behind (2002). I attempt to provide insight into how the elements of gender and the contemporary context interact to produce individual experiences for three principals.

The purpose of this study is to provide a deep understanding of the ways in which gender and the modern context of schools interact to produce individual lived experiences for three female principals. This study shows what it means to be a female principal at a large high school in Texas. The analytical framework utilized for this study was Swidler’s (2001) concept of cultural repertoires.

The literature review includes a history of the principalship and a history of leadership by women in schools and other settings. The literature places the study in the context of both a changing principalship and changing experiences of gender.

Several conclusions resulted from the research. The women in the study operated within a cultural repertoire in three areas. They identified both positive and negative impacts of gender depending on the degree to which the characterization
conflicted with their roles as principals. They engaged in both managerial and instructional leadership activities; they focused in their discussions more on the instructional activities as this was at the forefront of their challenges. They used both direct and inclusive styles of leadership depending on the circumstances at the time and which style would best accomplish their goals. This study points to a “new kind of principal” that is required to lead large high schools in the era of high stakes accountability.
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Chapter One
Introduction to the Study

"All of the great leaders have had one characteristic in common: it was the willingness to confront unequivocally the major anxiety of their people in their time. This, and not much else, is the essence of leadership."

— John Kenneth Galbraith

This study is about women principals in Texas and their leadership in light of the “major anxiety of their people in their time.” Relatively few recent studies exist of women in the high school principalship in the contemporary context, including achievement pressures created in schools since the passage of No Child Left Behind (2002). I attempt to provide insight into how the elements of gender and the current context interact to produce individual experiences for three principals.

This study began as an inquiry into what it means to be a woman principal at a large high school. However, in the process of conducting the literature review and the research, the impact of the modern context in this age of accountability kept coming to the forefront. As I listened to the stories of the three women, it became clear that this was a study, instead, about how these three principals experience their roles as women leaders.

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1 In 2001, the United States Congress passed the reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Officially titled Public Law 107-110, the common title of the law is the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002).
within the circumstances in which they find themselves, both as leaders of schools who must ensure that their schools meet accountability standards and as women. This research question both examines and appreciates the nature of the principalship in light of current difficulties.

Principals in Texas are facing difficulties helping students meet state and federal standards. Under the No Child Left Behind Act, an increasing percentage of students is expected to meet standards as measured by a criterion-referenced test. No Child Left Behind also brings challenges in the form of teacher qualifications. In addition, requirements for English-language learners and students receiving special education services have increased. Students at all levels – elementary, middle, and high – are expected to meet the standards, which reach 100 percent during the 2013 - 2014 school year.

Although the percentage of women administrators has increased, a persistent gap exists between the percentage of female teachers and the percentage of female administrators. Nationally for the 1999 - 2000 school year, 74.9% of public school teachers were women, yet only 43.8% of administrators were (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2008a, 2008b). The percentage of female administrators, however, rose to 47.6% by 2003 - 2004, up from 34.5% in 1993 - 1994. During the same
time period, the percentage of women teachers remained stable at about 75%.

In Texas, the story is slightly different (Texas Education Agency, 2008b, 2008c). For the 2006 - 2007 school year, the percentage of female teachers was 77.1%, close to the national average. For principals during the same year, however, 58.2% were female. A lag exists, but it is smaller than at the national level.

The context of No Child Left Behind and the increasing number of women principals suggest intriguing questions about how women lead in this new environment. These questions are particularly important as the duties of the principalship at the high school level have expanded to include increasing amounts of curricular and instructional responsibilities. As a result, women who lead large high schools are required to lead in ways that are different from the principals of the past. Students face increasingly higher standards at school and a more challenging work market after graduation. If we are to create the best public schools for students in order to prepare them for both tasks, then it is important to study how these women lead. Given the current high school context and the increase in the numbers of women principals, how do women principals experience their roles as school leaders? The goal of this study
is to show how leadership is experienced by the participants and to learn about the culture and context in which they operate.

Statement of the Problem

This study, then, is ultimately a study of lived experiences within particular contexts. For the women in the study, “how do they experience their roles as women principals given the current context of high schools?” How have they have reached this position in their lives, what kinds of things do they do and experience daily, and what do their experiences mean to the participants themselves? The increasingly difficult demands on high school principals and the relatively small numbers of female high school principals make these questions worthy of study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to provide a deeper understanding of how three women lead their large high schools within the current context. This study will provide a way to see women leaders in public high schools by examining the women’s own words within the setting of their own experiences. The study will examine ways in which these three principals act and lead in today’s high schools. In addition, since none of the participants had been high school principals more than two and a
half years at the time of the research, I am also examining the women’s experiences as principals as they transition into their new roles as “high school principals.” This study will employ a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews to provide understanding of the meaning of female leadership by the participants themselves.

*Significance of the Study*

As the nation moves towards the expectation under *No Child Left Behind* that 100 percent of all students will pass the standardized tests in the 2013 – 2014 school year, an understanding of how high school principals face this challenge will become critical. Because the numbers of women principals are increasing, studying the ways women lead is also worthy of study.

Ultimately, the conclusions of this study suggest a “new kind of principal” that is required for contemporary high schools. Successful principals must possess knowledge of curriculum and classroom instruction. In addition, their leadership skills must include the ability to be directive when necessary as well as the ability to work with groups collaboratively to produce positive outcomes for students. Ultimately, high school principals must possess a vision for what is required for student success and be able to implement
that vision. The results of this study add to the knowledge base by increasing the understanding of the intersection of female leadership and high school leadership within the modern context.

Summary

Principals face many challenges in their roles. The standards set by both the state and federal governments require an increasing number of students to meet increasingly higher standards. While growing, the percentage of women in the high school principalship is still much smaller than the percentage of female teachers at the high school level. As a result, this study examines the stories of three high school principals in Texas and how those principals lead their schools.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

In this study, I am interested in how three women experience the high school principalship given the current nature of the job. As a result, understanding current research related to both the principalship and women’s leadership is important. Research related to entry into the principalship further illustrates gender issues in the principalship. The principal’s role has changed over time, and has evolved such that school administrators must both manage and lead within a context of current state and federal laws.

Because the study is about leadership by women, understanding both an historical and current perspective on female leadership is also relevant. Literature about women in non-principal roles deepens understanding of gender in broad terms. An historical view of gender issues situates the study within the context of earlier research, and more recent studies provide a current context for the study.

The research related to the role of the principal is relatively consistent and suggests a current context where effective high school principals both manage daily details and provide guiding instructional leadership. In contrast, the research related to women principals is not as conclusive; some studies suggest that women face difficulties due to gender and
others suggest that gender has an impact, but that the role of principal is more important than the role of gender. This study will provide an additional perspective that explores the relationship between the two roles.

Role of the Principal in High Schools

*Change over time.* The role of the principal has changed over time. Beck and Murphy (1993) outlined what they called dominant “metaphorical themes” to describe the principalship from the 1920s through the 1990s; these themes are useful in understanding the evolving nature of the principalship. During the 1920s and 1930s, principals were perceived as scientific managers as well as dignified spiritual and social leaders. In the 1940s, principals were expected to be democratic and to lead schools that would perpetuate the democratic ideal for a new generation. The 1950s principals also used a “management” approach, and principals were viewed as administrators who attended to the details of running schools. The principals of the 1960s were perceived as bureaucrats and protectors of bureaucracy, users of scientific strategies, accountable leaders, and inhabitants of a role in conflict. The themes of the 1960s reflected a returned emphasis to science and scientific knowledge and management. During the 1970s, dominant themes included the principal as community leader, imparter of
meaning, facilitator of positive relationships, and juggler of multiple roles. These metaphors were humanistic and reflected the cultural values of the 1970s. In the 1980s, principals are depicted as instructional leaders, problem solvers, resource providers, visionaries, and change agents. These themes reflected urgency in the principalship and showed its direct impact on school life. In the 1990s, the principal is described as a leader, organizational architect, servant, school architect, educator, moral agent, and person in the community.

These models for examining the principalship reflect the fact that schools are perceived as complex places requiring complex leadership. The role of the principal has endured cyclical changes (Beck & Murphy, 1993). The principals of today must be both technical managers and curriculum leaders who work through inclusive styles to ensure that all children succeed.

Preparation, training, and entering the principalship. Because the job of principal is perceived as complex and important, it follows that understanding preparation of school leaders increases understanding of how principals lead. Preparation and training for complex, evolving leadership positions occurs in many ways. Wojtalik, Breckenridge, Hancox, and Sobehart (2007) studied the effect of childhood themes on the leadership aspirations of women later in life. The authors found that women viewed their parents as role models who helped
them choose fields for their careers; the authors used mixed methods employing interviews, focus groups, check lists, journaling, and self-esteem measures. Many women believed that strong views of their own mothers served as informal models for leadership and career aspirations, and women with strong role models in their families were more likely to choose leadership roles. The authors also found that self-confidence was an important career choice determinant. From the women in the study, it was learned that the themes of male dominance and female submissiveness were also evident, both as related to earlier home life of leaders and to the professional life of leaders across various professions.

In contrast, Adams and Hambright (2004) examined why women did not seek leadership roles. They sought to determine why a large percentage of the women in their graduate classes who were perceived to be talented were declining to enter into school administration. Using an open-ended written survey, the authors learned that perceptions of the role of principal, along with school politics, ranked high as reasons. When asked about the job of the principal, some teacher leaders (such as department heads) gave a negative interpretation of the job of principal, especially commenting on the fact that the role had many responsibilities, suggesting that this might be one of the reasons that these informal leaders remained in the classroom.
Bredeson (1991) found that for the students in his educational leadership class, only 42.6% wanted to enter school level administration. The data suggested a reluctance to accept the role of principal, even among those attending classes towards that end. For students who expressed a desire to lead campuses, their primary reasons were a desire to make important changes and to implement new ideas.

_Dual roles within the modern principalship._ Once appointed to the principalship, leaders must learn to navigate dual responsibilities - managerial tasks and instructional leadership. In their book on the principal as school manager, Sharp and Walter (2003) described an early model of the principal as one person in charge of the entire school building and all the teaching and learning that occurred there. However, as cities and schools grew, the amount of responsibility increased for the principal as well. The 1950s and 1960s, particularly, saw a growth in the principal role, with a focus on the principal as manager. The authors described the modern principal as a middle manager with duties that require skills of both management and instructional leadership. They argued that the instructional role of the principal has overshadowed the daily realities faced by most principals. According to the authors, principals are taught how to lead in preparation for district-level leadership, but not how to manage daily
operations of schools as principals. On a practical level, campus principals are required to create building-level budgets, hire staff, and provide for the safety of students, in addition to the responsibilities of curriculum leadership.

Sergiovanni (1995) also described the complex nature of managerial work. He argued that principals’ work is fragmented and that principals are unable to stay at any one task for an extended period of time. Therefore, efficiency, defined as the ability to know exactly what needs to be done, becomes important to survival as a principal.

In addition, Sergiovanni (1995) wrote about successful modern principals as having a strong focus on children. While many principals did not initially plan to go into administration, they did so out of a sense of duty. They are perceived as capable communicators and as able to strategize about the mission and ways in which to implement that mission (p. 16).

Finally, Sergiovanni argued for reflective practice, stating that effective school administration is a craft to be learned and practiced based upon theoretical knowledge. Knowing how to lead in a theoretical way is not necessary if one is only filling seats in a classroom or distributing books; as a result of changing school climate, today’s principals must do more than that.
Rayfield and Diamantes (2004) examine the impact of the principal’s role on job satisfaction. The authors used a focus group of 14 practicing administrators and determined 25 specific job activities carried out by principals. Some activities were clearly instructional in nature, such as “leading professional development” and “curriculum development or alignment” (pp. 710 – 711). Others were managerial in nature, including “fundraising” and “facilities maintenance personnel supervision” (p. 711). Finally, some tasks combined instruction and management, such as “development of a master schedule” and “compliance with state mandates” (pp. 710 – 711). Their results highlighted the complex nature of the modern principalship.

Gibbs and Slate (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of qualitative studies to analyze the leadership activities of secondary principals. The authors found 13 separate categories of activities: goal setting; monitoring; governing; communication; staffing; plant and equipment; evaluation; scheduling, allocating resources, and organizing; community relations; safety, order, and school ethos; staff relations; student relations; and modeling. While grouped differently, these categories generally encompass the tasks used by Rayfield and Diamantes (2004) and also showed the complex nature of the principalship.
Fink and Resnick (2001) further developed the concept of principals as instructional leaders. They argued that principals are first and foremost instructional leaders at a high level. They argued that “principals are the key actors in school improvement, and that [the deputy superintendent’s] main job as deputy was to teach principals how to be instructional leaders” (p. 599). In their article on principal development, they described a process whereby principals are actively taught and coached how to be instructional leaders on their campuses. They explained how through monthly principals’ meetings and ongoing staff development, school leaders are given the tools needed to make each campus a strong learning community focused on curriculum and instruction.

Current context of high schools. The current context of schools includes various state and federal legal requirements. No Child Left Behind includes several requirements: high student performance on standardized tests, use of scientifically based curriculum resources, parent choice to move children out of failing schools, and hiring only highly qualified teachers (US Department of Education, 2004). The impact of No Child Left Behind on principals surfaced in an in-depth study (Eilers & Camacho, 2007) of a new elementary principal who was placed in charge of a school labeled as failing under No Child Left Behind. The principal reported that in order to improve scores
on the state standardized assessment, he was required to improve the climate of the school, model high expectations, and create opportunities for shared leadership. In addition, the principal was expected to have curriculum expertise and be familiar with the ways in which data could be used to drive instruction.

At a conference titled “Preparing Today’s Leaders for Tomorrow’s High Schools,” educational scholars argued that high schools must prepare all students for post-secondary work (Olson, 2004). As a result, a different kind of high school principal is required. Today’s principals must engage students. In addition, they must be instructional leaders, which the speakers admitted was much more complicated at high schools than at elementary schools. The speakers cited both the nature of high school curriculum and the complex, hierarchical structure of high schools as reasons for increased difficulty.

Harris (2002) conducted a study of leadership in schools that were considered “facing challenging circumstances” (p. 16), meaning that a large percentage of students were not performing well on standardized tests and a large percentage received free school meals. Using case study data and semi-structured interviews at 10 schools, she determined that several leadership skills were needed for change. They included vision and values, distributing leadership, investing in staff development,
relationships, and community building. None of these areas can be considered trivial for schools.

In addition to and predating *No Child Left Behind*, Texas has its own accountability system based on standardized test results. Each school must meet particular requirements on a yearly basis or risk being labeled as failing. Indicators include student performance on the prescribed standardized tests, attendance rates, and drop-out rates (Texas Education Agency, 2008a). Schools of all sizes must meet increasingly difficult standards and the consequences for not doing so can include removal of the principal and reconstitution of the campus.

What can be drawn from the previously reviewed models of the principalship and the state and federal legal demands is that truly good principals are typically expected to be able to both lead and manage - not just one or the other. Students’ class scheduling has always been a challenge, but in the age of accountability they must be scheduled into classes that will advance their academic progress as measured by the prescribed standardized tests. Teachers must be assigned to teach particular classes and students at certain times of day, but the principal must also ensure that teachers have the appropriate tools to teach and that the teacher knows how to most effectively use those tools to enhance learning and improvement.
of test scores. Understanding the context of school leadership shapes an understanding of how principals experience their roles on a daily basis.

Gender Dimensions of Leadership

Women in non-principal roles. Studies outside the arena of K-12 education leadership contribute to the knowledge about female leadership in general. Since this study is about leadership by women professionals, understanding how leadership has been conceptualized and experienced in other settings increases an understanding of how women experience their roles as principals.

The literature reveals mixed, and sometimes conflicting, views of leadership by women. Different researchers have found different results and have drawn different conclusions. Some women related that gender was not a factor in their lives, and others found that gender very much mattered in what they did and how they did it. Others explained that gender mattered, but only in shaping the how of what they did, and not in necessarily negative ways. Because the research is so mixed, my study will add an additional perspective in a search for understanding how

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²The use of “negative” will be used to describe instances where being a woman was a hindrance, and “positive” will be used to describe areas where being female was a benefit. “Neutral” will be used when the impact is different, but not inherently harmful or helpful.
gender might impact how women principals experience their roles as school leaders.

Younes and Asay (1998) asked graduate students about the importance of advanced degrees, their self-perceptions of the multiple roles, and their recommendations to institutions of higher education in order to learn about how female graduate students negotiated their multiple roles as women, graduate students, wives, and mothers. Their mixed methods study used interviews, participant observation, and a group discussion.

The graduate students in the study described advanced coursework as a tool for empowerment and as a factor in the creation of a new identity. The participants responded that they were required to act as mothers first, and then as graduate students; they believed that women attempt to integrate their personal and professional lives in order to ease some of the conflict. Since all principals must receive at least a master’s degree, it is possible that the very act of completing advanced schooling assists in the creation of a new identity as school administrators.

Gold and Hawley (2001) conducted a study of beginning counselors who rated statements as being either male, female, or neutral, in order to understand their perceptions of gender. The quantitative results showed that the counselors’ responses were typical of the general population; the researchers had expected
to find that the counselors were more flexible in their attributions of characteristics to gender. As a result, Gold and Hawley concluded that many beginning counselors were unaware of their identities as women and the counselors simply perceived their views as normal. As a result, beginning counselors were often unable to identify gender views and biases in the individuals they counseled. The results of this study imply that some women may not recognize ways that gender affects their daily lives.

In a study about women administrators in higher education, Andruskiw and Howes (1980) used a quantitative survey to study the relationship between sex-role differentiation attitudes and evaluations of administrators in higher education. They learned that women were perceived to be sensitive and understanding, while men were seen as more aggressive and independent. In general, college and university administrators were perceived to be liberal in their attitudes towards gender. However, their conclusions were that issues of gender still existed; for women to be hired for high level positions, they had to have the skills typically perceived as held by men – independence and aggressiveness – and generally had to be extremely talented.

In a study about leadership by women in general, Lougheed (2000) found that while both men and women generally believed that women could be good leaders, men and women were perceived
to have different leadership styles. In this large, longitudinal study using interviews and a survey instrument, both men and women were found to believe that discrimination existed in the selection of leaders. Only half of the women and a third of the men stated that they would choose a woman leader if the opportunity arose. The two groups also reported that men and women generally perceived their career goals similarly. The author did not, however, describe how these attitudes by men and women might have changed over the 14 years of the study.

Margolis and Romero (1998) found that minority women in graduate sociology programs were acutely aware of the ways in which their status as women of color influenced their experiences as graduate students. Their results contrasted with those of the study by Gold and Hawley (2001), where women were found to be unaware of gender influences, and the study by Andruskiw and Howes (1980) where women felt that male traits might be favored for leadership. The 26 women in their qualitative study provided evidence that the practices of their graduate sociology departments reproduced cultural norms and stereotypes that forced the women students of color to act in certain ways if they hoped to be successful. Using open-ended interviews that allowed the women to discuss themes that the participants found to be important, Margolis and Romero were able to obtain a sense of how these women had been socialized.
The women quickly determined that they needed to become content experts in order to be taken seriously by their male peers.

Evidence suggests that gendered role identities are shaped by both local and societal contexts. Proweller (1998) conducted a qualitative study of high school girls to learn how their identities were constructed using interviews, participant observation, and group discussions. The girls did not express an awareness of conflict in wanting to be successful in a career and wanting to become a wife and mother; there was no sense that they had to choose between the one role or the other. The “schizophrenia” (p. 147) of the two roles was balanced in their minds. As a result, they rejected feminism in its most extreme form – where all traditional female roles are seen as negative – truly believing that they would be able to do all of the things that they wanted to do both at home and in their careers. What Proweller does not examine, other than the environmental context, are the reasons for the girls’ attitudes.

The research cited above offers a range of explanations and is therefore inconsistent. On one end of the spectrum, the women in the sociology departments were very aware that their position as women affected them in very adverse ways. At the other end of the spectrum, female counselors and high school students were completely unaware of how their roles as women affected the ways in which they lived their lives. The rest of the research seems
to be somewhere in between the two extremes – the women are aware that being female affects them but does so in mixed ways.

**Role and identity management.** Despite the paths taken to leadership, women must sometimes negotiate multiple roles as leaders, wives, and mothers. Howell, Carter, and Schied (2002) conducted a study using observations and interviews in a factory setting in order to learn how gender impacted women’s experiences at work. The women in this study reported that women were expected to be “juggling demanding full-time jobs and raising young children” (p. 121), and they reported experiencing conflict between their difficult paid jobs and the full-time job they were expected to do at home. In addition, the authors found that women were expected to be “cheerful, positive, and supportive” (p. 118); women who were aggressive or who complained were not perceived as cooperating with the team.

Hall (1972) also conducted a study using interviews, which focused on the role and behavior of college educated women using a survey instrument. He found that women reported facing role conflict because of the multiple roles that they are expected to fulfill. He also learned that women cope with this role conflict in three ways: 1) through a structural redefinition of the role; 2) by sharing tasks assigned to the role and through changing perceptions of the role demands; or 3) by “reactive role behavior” which means that the women choose to work harder.
An historical view of female public school administrators. Early work by Shakeshaft (1989a, 1989b) and Ortiz (1982) provides a starting point for examining women in public school K-12 administration; their research examined the access and practice of women school leaders during the late 1970s and 1980s. Understanding this research is enlightening because it provides a starting point for examining some of the ways gender impacts school leadership.

The early works portrayed a picture of “male dominated” systems (Shakeshaft, 1989b, p. 83). Beginning with descriptions of the small number of women who have been principals, especially at the secondary level, Shakeshaft argued women had a difficult time entering into leadership roles, that their paths were different if they do enter leadership, and that they led in different ways once they obtained leadership roles. In addition, the women in Shakeshaft’s work were likely to have served as a curricular specialist and then ended up in the elementary principalship. A small amount of encouragement also increased the chance that women would choose to be school administrators. Finally, Shakeshaft argued that the women entering school administration are perhaps more qualified than their male counterparts because of the fewer career opportunities available to females at the time.
Shakeshaft (1989b) also argued that the structures of the educational system are “male dominated and male run” (p. 83). In a profession that is made up mostly of women, it is important to understand how women perceive themselves as women and as educators in an environment that is ruled by males, and by male rules.

Shakeshaft (1989b) described the typical female administrator as different from the typical male administrator. She made the argument that women tend to collaborate and rely on inclusive styles. In addition, she found that women secondary principals had a high percentage of contacts initiated by others, more time spent completing paperwork after work hours, more contact with superiors, longer meetings and phone calls, and more cooperative planning (1989b, pp. 170 – 171) than men. In addition, women’s communication styles tended to be grammatically correct, use expressive language, use questions, and use language that invited cooperation. Language is an important part of a principal’s life and the ways language is used are important. Shakeshaft also showed that women’s decision-making styles tend to be democratic and inclusive. Shakeshaft’s (1989b) conclusions argued that women follow a morality of response and care.

The findings of Ortiz (1982) generally corresponded to those of Shakeshaft. Ortiz’s work focused on career patterns of
school administrators and how school leaders operate on a daily basis. She employed ethnographic techniques, including observations of administrators while they went about their work and extensive interviews.

Ortiz described what she learned about the typical career paths of female administrators. The experience in relation to the jobs they chose and their future career paths were different for men and women. In the educational arena, the goals of elementary and secondary principals were not the same. Elementary principals generally stayed in the elementary principalship and did not advance beyond that post. The secondary principalship, however, was often only one step towards the superintendency.

Ortiz found that men and women aspiring to the administration tend to act in different ways; men and women behaved differently at the outset of their careers as educators. Women tended to believe that teaching in the classroom was their final goal and were less likely to behave in ways that would prepare them for administration. In addition, ambitious women were frequently required to keep their aspirations to themselves so as not to be perceived as “masculine” or “aggressive.” Ortiz also wrote that for women to become administrators, male “sponsorship” was generally required; therefore, mentorship of someone, preferably a male, could help a woman gain a promotion
into the principalship. The few women in the superintendency-track positions were often ultra-visible “tokens” who were held responsible for the representation of all women in the field.

Anticipatory socialization involves departing from one group in order to join another (Ortiz, 1982, p. 31); Ortiz found that principals in her study believed that they were required to disengage from teaching in order to join administration. Before an individual becomes a principal, she has typically learned about what she thinks it will be like to accept and be successful in that role. Change was part of the socialization process as women began to participate in the collective activities of the principalship and gradually incorporated the beliefs and customs of the principalship.

Difficulty in learning to be a principal was increased because principals often had no one clear supervisor. They were beholden to the curricular leaders responsible for the implementation and improvement of instruction, but also responsible to the management individuals who lead to the superintendent. This dual responsibility reflects the dual nature of the principalship itself; principals were expected to be both effective curriculum leaders and effective managers. Ortiz found that women were required to change in two ways: they had to be different from the way that society traditionally
expected them to be as women and they had to change to learn to do the job.

Ortiz found that high school principals were socialized by central office, by other principals, and by teachers. In addition, there were very few high school principals; thus, socialization around a fairly tight set of norms and beliefs was possible. Three ideas – disengaging from one group to join another, change to become principals, and the socialization of high school principals being a tight process – implied that that becoming a high school principal for women potentially required her to experience major changes and shifts.

Finally, Ortiz found the participants perceived that “women instruct students, [and that] men administer adults” (p. 54) and again reinforced the idea that the roles of men and women in educational leadership were perceived differently. Ortiz argued that the hierarchy, organizational structure of schools, and opportunities for power combined to create spaces in which the personality of a particular person were expressed through leadership.

The work of Ortiz and Shakeshaft described the principalship for woman principals during the 1980s. Both authors found that women generally led differently than did men and that women's styles tended to be inclusive and democratic. Women principals typically came from a curriculum background and
the principals had to adapt to the current school climate to survive.

*Changing perceptions for female principals.* More recent research on female principals portrayed a different view of the experiences of women school leaders. The more current studies were consistent with the results of the studies of female leaders in other settings. The experiences of participants still reflected some negative effects of gender, but also included results that suggested that women were sometimes unconscious about the ways in which being female affected their leadership either positively or negatively. While the work of Shakeshaft (1989, 1989b) and Ortiz (1982) reflected the difficulties women principals faced in the 1970s and 1980s, more recent studies suggest that circumstances might be changing somewhat.

Coleman’s (2003, 2004, 2005, 2007) work provided perspectives on secondary headmasters in England during the 1990s and in 2004. In the 1990s, she found that most women reported discrimination in appointments, domestic responsibilities that made work difficult, and fewer plans to enter administration. In 2004, one-half of the women reported gender as negative and one-half reported gender as positive. Fewer principals reported sexism and stereotyping, but evidence of the practices still existed. Women at both times reported they felt they had to work hard to prove their worth as women.
principals. In contrast, participants in the 2004 study were willing to dismiss sexism, saying that it occurred, but not in their case, or to deny that sexism existed at all.

Coleman argued that leadership for principals of both genders encompassed a variety of styles. The leadership styles of both men and women were expressed in feminine terms - defined in the study as having the qualities of caring, intuitiveness, tolerance, creativity, awareness of individual differences, and informality. However, both men and women attributed their success to hard work and long hours. Career planning was at the same level in both studies. The number of headmasters who were mothers had increased, possibly due to increased awareness of work and life balance.

Hoff and Mitchell (2008) also examined entry into and perceptions of the principalship. Using quantitative survey data, they found that women reported challenges in managing both job and family time demands. The women in the study entered administration at a later age and were more prepared as a result. In addition, the women were more likely to be hand-selected by a superior instead of seeking out a principal role themselves. While the women reported isolation in the principalship as women, they were equally likely to deny that they were marginalized because of their gender.
A study of female elementary principals by Tabin and Coleman (1993) revealed a mixed view of the nature of gender identity. The authors conducted a qualitative study that compared two separate cohorts of female elementary principals in Canada; one group had been principals for longer than eight years, and the newer group had been principals no longer than three years. The research question was “how do the experiences of recent women appointees to administration differ from those of earlier appointees?” (p. 383)

About half of the principals in the study reported that administration was not part of their original career plan. Despite this, the participants described several factors that helped them to enter the job of principal and to be successful once they became principals. For many, family was the most important non-professional influence on their work and lives. The issue of networking was also mentioned; because women were less likely to have informal networks to promote their career advancement, they were less likely to be selected based on factors other than their capabilities. Instead the participants – especially the earlier cohort of principals – had been chosen as school leaders from the pool of those perceived to be strong teachers within their districts. The authors also found that women’s attention to family has been both positive and negative. The participants reported that while a family focus lead to a
devaluing of the teaching profession itself, it also helped women be good principals because they were able to build positive relationships with children.

Mentors, especially for the newer principals, were also reported as important. The authors found that mentors provided guidance and helped new leaders develop leadership skills. In addition, mentors helped the more recent principals clarify their personal philosophy.

Women were perceived as articulating a clear sense of priorities and a list of goals for their campuses. Personal beliefs enabled the principals to articulate a set of school goals not only to themselves, but also to the teachers and students. The principals who focused on learning in a personal way were better leaders once they became principals. These leaders actively sought out new experiences and information from other principals and teachers. These women viewed utilizing “empathy, intuition, emotion, nurturing, cooperation, and understanding” (p. 389) as important skills. Participants encouraged other leaders to be true to their own identities and to not be afraid to be both leaders and women.

The newer cohort of principals described a slightly different experience from that of the more experienced cohort. The less experienced principals said they believed they were generally more accepted as women leaders and did not report
effects of direct discrimination or harassment. They did still believe, however, that there was sex-role stereotyping within their school districts. As a result of less direct discrimination, the more recent appointees to the principalship found their new leadership role as women easier to navigate than did the earlier appointees. Despite this fact, however, both groups still had to handle issues of gender, albeit currently in a more subtle manner.

Gupton and Slick (1996) also argue that female school administrators have been traditionally underrepresented but that circumstances might be changing. Using a questionnaire and in-depth interviews in the early 1990s, the authors examined access and equity of gender in the principalship. The authors argued that there was an increased concern about the quality of educational leadership, and as a result, highly qualified administrators, both male and female, were rising through the ranks of school administration. They found increased aspiration for the principalship on the part of women and better preparation of women principals, suggesting that a wider pool of qualified women principals existed. In conclusion, Gupton and Slick made the argument that leadership by women in schools is changing for the better, but that circumstances and opportunities will not improve without deliberate intervention by those within the system.
Other studies show evidence of what more modern principals do and how they do it. Strachan (1999), examined the beliefs of women secondary principals. She found that they were committed to academic achievement and anti-violence. The principals also involved care-givers of the students and supported at-risk students. They demonstrated evidence of “shaping” (p. 315) the school, consensus decision-making, and valuing diversity.

Dillard (1995) and Mertz and McNeely (1998) conducted case studies of women high school principals and found them to be dynamic and committed to their schools. The experiences and backgrounds of the principals were shown to have an impact on the ways in which they led.

The research reviewed above shifts from a portrayal of women principals who have difficulty accessing the principalship and in interactions with others because of their gender to a mixed view of the impact of gender. The recent studies of principal and non-principal roles showed evidence that gender has negative, positive, or no effect at all. The results are inconsistent. In addition, even if perceptions have changed since the work of Ortiz and Shakeshaft, the current research offers no explanations for the differences.
Summary

The principals in this study are women, and so their experiences as women and as principals will be situated relative to recent studies about both the nature of the principalship and the nature of women’s leadership. That said, the body of literature is relatively thin, especially since the passage of No Child Left Behind. Few studies exist examining the intersection of the current state of high schools, which includes the impact of both No Child Left Behind, and gender. This study attempts to provide insight into how these two elements of context interact.
Chapter Three
Methodology

Because I was interested in questions of meaning and culture, a qualitative approach was appropriate. Although it began as a study about what it means to be a woman high school principal, it evolved into a study about what leadership means, from the perspective of woman participants within the current high school context. Specifically, given the current circumstances of schools, including No Child Left Behind, and the increase in the percentage of women principals at the secondary level, I sought to understand how three women principals experience their lives as school leaders. I also wanted to understand the perspectives from the viewpoints of the participants themselves.

Qualitative Approach

As a result of the type of questions being asked, interpretive methods were appropriate (Erickson, 1986). Generally, key questions in qualitative research include, “What has happened here, specifically?” and “What did these happenings mean to the people engaged in them?” (Erickson, 1986, p. 124) Qualitative methods were also appropriate to examine questions of culture. Qualitative research enabled an understanding of how the culture and social organization of schools interact and
allow for choices and actions principals make (Erickson, 1986). Geertz (1973) offered a similar definition of culture, arguing that the purpose of research and analysis is to interpret observable actions in an attempt to ascribe meaning and understand the culture that shapes the actions.

Research Design

The research is a multi-case study employing an qualitative perspective. The participants consisted of three high school women principals. I visited each principal for an entire school day at their campus. Because I was interested in questions of meaning, interviews, participant observation, and written questions were used as research techniques.

Sample. Participants consisted of three female high school principals who were within two and a half years of beginning their first regular large high school principalship. The participants were principals before their current position, but only at the elementary and middle school levels and not at large comprehensive high schools. Because there are only a small number of female principals at large high schools who are new to their positions, participants came from different parts of the state.

Participants were found using contacts available through university and public school K-12 networks, and via professional
administrator organizations. The individuals chosen fit the criteria of being female, new to the large high school principalship, and willing to participate in the study. As described in Hammersley and Atkinson (1995), the sample was chosen because they could help answer the research question and conducting research in their schools was feasible.

The sample was purposely selected to include principals new to the high school level because I wanted their experiences to be easily recalled and genuine. Leaders of large high schools were chosen as participants because large secondary schools have typically been perceived as the purview of men. With the strong emphasis typically placed on athletics, especially football, running a big high school in Texas has not been seen as something that women either wanted or were able to do. In addition, because these principals had all been principals at the elementary or middle school level prior to their current jobs, this study examines women who are in transition to familiar, but different, roles.

High schools in Texas are divided into five major categories by size; these principals lead schools that were in the top size category and have from 1900 to 2200 students each. As a result, each of the principals was responsible for approximately 250 employees, including 175 teachers and 75 other staff, including paraprofessional classroom aides, as well as
maintenance, cafeteria, and secretarial staff. For high schools, various sports typically included football, volleyball, boys’ and girls’ basketball, baseball, softball, boys’ and girls’ cross country and track, boys’ and girls’ soccer, as well as boys’ and girls’ wrestling, swimming, and golf. In addition, each of the large high schools typically had fine arts activities and other various academic competitions. Each participant will be briefly summarized below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Ethnicity of Principal</th>
<th>Age in Years</th>
<th>Campus Name</th>
<th>Grade Level Span</th>
<th>Campus Size</th>
<th>State Campus Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ann Delano</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Approx. 60</td>
<td>Grover</td>
<td>9 - 12</td>
<td>2164</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belinda Emerson</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Approx. 35</td>
<td>Hill Valley</td>
<td>10 - 12</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol Fuller</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Approx. 50</td>
<td>Inglenook</td>
<td>9 - 12</td>
<td>2104</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Texas Education Agency (2008d)*

Ann Delano³, a White principal in western Texas was approximately 60 years old, and believed in helping both underachieving and low performing students succeed. She practiced inclusive leadership, but also left the impression that she was responsible for everything that happened at the school and was willing to do what was necessary to ensure that...  

³ All names of people and places are pseudonyms.
campus test results improved. She had been at Grover High School for a year and a half at the time of the interview, after spending ten years as an elementary principal in the same school district. Grover High School had 2,164 students in 2007 - 2008 across grades nine through twelve and was rated as “academically acceptable” by the state. Grover missed meeting federal accountability standards in the area of reading performance.

Belinda Emerson, a White principal in the plains area of Texas was approximately 35 years old, and was the most feminine and most formal in dress of the three principals. She believed that her role was to assist teachers in helping to improve student performance as defined by state test scores. She had been at Hill Valley High School for a year and a half at the time of the interview, after spending two years as a middle school principal and five years as a high school and freshmen center assistant principal in the same school district. Hill Valley High School had 1,983 students in 2007 - 2008 across grades ten through twelve and was rated as “academically acceptable” by the state. Hill Valley missed meeting federal accountability standards in the area of math performance.

Carol Fuller, a White principal in central Texas was approximately 50 years old, and displayed a direct approach to her job. I sensed that she worked at being inclusive, but might have wanted to explain her plan in a straight-forward way to
teachers and others. She perceived her task at Inglenook as improvement of the standardized test scores and classroom performance of the students. She had been at Inglenook High School for two and a half years at the time of the interview, after spending five years as a middle school principal and several years as an elementary and middle school assistant principal in the same school district. Inglenook High School had 2,204 students in 2007 – 2008 across grades nine through twelve and was rated as “academically acceptable” by the state. Inglenook missed meeting federal accountability standards in the area of reading performance and participation, math performance, and graduation rate.

Data collection strategies. This study was conducted through the use of interviews, participant observations, and written documents. I used these techniques to get an “insider account” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 124) of the lives of principals. Insider accounts tell us both about the participant who produces the account and the research topic. In this case, insider accounts tell us both about the principals themselves and the principalship.

The campus visits generally lasted from about 8:00 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. During the course of the day, the principals spent time answering the three interview topics. Each principal also spent time interacting with members of the faculty,
students, and in one case, a parent. By the end of the day, the principals seemed to generally run out of things to say about leadership and the high school principalship. Each participant also provided a copy of her calendar for the months of October and November of 2008.

I visited each of the participants in the cities where they live and work to gain knowledge about the principals from the principals’ points of view. Seidman (1998) argued that through telling stories, people take their experiences and make meanings of them. By listening carefully to the stories of others, we can hopefully understand something about their life and situations, as well as what those situations mean to the storytellers themselves. The recorded portion of the interviews took approximately three hours with each participant.

Using a modified version of Seidman’s (1998) interview protocol, the principals responded to three questions as prompts: a) describe your life, especially as perceived as relevant to leadership role, up until this point in time; b) describe your daily activities as a high school principal; and c) describe what it means to be a female high school principal. Although Seidman recommends that each question be asked in three separate, 90 minute interviews spaced three to ten days apart, time and travel constraints required a modification in this case. The three interview questions were all asked on the same
day and did not last the full 90 minutes each. During the interview, we spent forty-five minutes to an hour on each of the three questions. All interviews were recorded, and transcribed verbatim into text by me.

Seidman’s (1998) protocol was appropriate for several reasons. In depth interviewing is a way of understanding the experience of participants and the meanings that they make of those experiences. This study is about the lived experiences of women principals in high schools. This particular protocol investigates questions of description, experience, and the meanings that the participants makes of those descriptions and experiences.

The first question put the participant’s experience in perspective and allowed the principals to tell their life stories in their own words. The second question probed into the principals’ daily experiences. It allowed the principals to describe activities and events of their days. The question about meaning allowed the principals to make their own interpretations of their stories and daily experiences. The semi-structured approach enabled the participants to discuss their histories, schools, and roles as principals without preconceived categories or notions from me.

In addition to interviews, I engaged in participant observation. Participant observation was employed because it is
a useful method for learning about a culture “in action” (Spradley, 1980). I shadowed each principal for the remainder of the day of the campus visit between the interviews. As we took breaks, the participant and I ventured into classrooms. I also observed as the principals conducted meetings with other individuals in the principals’ offices. I did not directly engage with others on campus except in limited and casual ways; I watched as the events occurred.

Prior to going to visit the participants, they were sent a written open-ended questionnaire. The topics on the questionnaire were chosen because they reflected those that were asked in the interviews. The topics included a description of the principals’ backgrounds in general terms and requested a copy of their resumes, if available. In addition, there was a list of the days, Monday through Sunday, in which they were asked to note general work-related activities typical of each day. Finally, they were asked what it means to be a female high school principal from their experience. The purpose of the written work was to allow the principal to begin thinking about the topics about which she was asked during the oral interview.

I recorded field notes during both segments of the visit: interviews and the participant observations. The notes included information about the setting, the words that were said, the mannerisms of the participants, and the feelings expressed -
basically everything that is possible about the situation (Hamersley and Atkinson, 1995). The purpose of the field notes was to better understand what is happening in the moment and to be able to better analyze the research material.

**Ethical considerations.** While there is almost always some risk to participants of any study, the risk in this case was minimal. The principals came from different parts of the state, which will make their identification more difficult than if they came from the same area. None of the participants came from the school district where I currently work, and so any concern that I might gain privileged information that could be shared was also minimized. None of the data that will be gathered will be shared with the principals’ supervisors.

However, the interviews and participant observations took the better part of a school day with each principal. Each principal was willing to clear her calendar to spend time speaking with me. In addition, the questions that were asked were potentially privacy endangering. As a result, I tried to be respectful of the participants’ time and to reassure them that everything said would be kept confidential.

Prior to the start of the study, a research protocol was submitted to the Office of Research and Sponsored Projects and to the Institutional Review Board for approval. In addition, approval was requested and granted from each of the three school
districts where the principals work. Before each of the interviews, participants were asked to sign an informed consent form, which was also approved by the Office of Research and Sponsored Projects. The following was explained as part of the consent process:

- the purpose of the study;
- what is involved in the study, including the interview questions about the high school principalship and female leadership;
- the risks and discomforts involved;
- what to do in case of injury;
- the benefits of participation;
- the option not to participate;
- who is paying for the study, and the costs and payments to the participant;
- that withdrawal from the study is allowed;
- who to call in case of problems or questions;
- confidentiality measures;
- that the interviews would be recorded and transcribed, and that notes would be taken.
Data Analysis

Data analysis in a qualitative study is an iterative process (Geertz, 1973). The researcher begins the research with an open mind, but also with tentative themes and categories. As the research material is collected, those themes are strengthened, modified, or discarded (Geertz, 1973; Hamersley & Atkinson, 1995). For Hamersley and Atkinson (1995), data collection and data analysis are concurrent processes. Erickson (1986) argues that by gathering data, the researcher is able to understand the patterns that might exist and the particulars for each case. For the reader, he or she must be shown the evidence that supports the claim of the researcher; the researcher must demonstrate that the conclusions are plausible and based in evidence.

Data analysis in this study was conducted using Swidler’s (2001) conceptualization of “cultural repertoires” (p. 24). Swidler found that individuals chose from a continuum, their personal cultural repertoire, when responding to particular circumstances and context of any given situation. Individual responses were shaped by events, personalities, and experiences but not ultimately determined by them. She rejected a notion of culture that is fixed; the researcher needed to do more than simply examine the data closely to understand what is happening and what those happenings mean. Instead, her depiction of
culture was one where individuals decide to believe or act in different ways in different situations and circumstances, although their choices may not always be conscious. Because actions were believed to be context specific, people were able to reconcile views of the world that differ with each other, and may in fact be contradictory.

Swidler’s work also suggested that individuals brought their personalities to any given situation and that the norms and values of the institution and position shaped a person’s response. The structure of work and the organization partially determined action, but the experiences and personality of the individual – the rest of the context – also had impact on the ways any one individual conceives of self as principal.

I began the research with the initial idea that for female high school principals, there is a cultural repertoire from which they choose to act on a daily basis. However, I did not know what the repertoire would include. By examining their stories, I sought to learn about what it meant to the participants to be female high school principals, given their gender and the current context of large high schools.

The actual analysis of the research data occurred at six different levels: (1) during the interviews; (2) during verbatim transcriptions while searching for preliminary themes; (3) after transcriptions to review for missed themes; (4) synthesis of
themes; (5) preparation for and writing of the narrative; and (6) reexamination using Swidler’s (2001) conception of cultural repertoires. The extended levels of analysis were necessary to ensure that conclusions of the study were justified by the data as presented by the participants.

Data collection and initial data analysis occur simultaneously in qualitative research (Hamersley & Atkinson, 1995). During the initial analysis, I recorded the interviews at the time of the conversations and wrote field notes. The second level of analysis occurred as I transcribed the recorded interviews verbatim. As I listened to the participants speak and transcribed the interviews, possible preliminary organizing concepts were noted and coded. The creation of the 12 concepts was also partially guided by the reviewed literature. Approximately 12 preliminary concepts were identified. They included:

- career path,
- learning for adults,
- use of data,
- keeping control as the principal,
- curriculum issues,
- teacher empowerment and responsibility,
- use of humor,
• relationships with students,
• high expectations,
• community relations,
• women’s issues, and
• the dual role of the principal as leader and manager.

After the transcription was completed, the text and field notes were reviewed again to ensure that no concepts had been missed. Next, the themes were reviewed and condensed. The areas included in the outline included the following:

• participant’s career path,
• transition to the high school,
• her approach to people (including community, students, faculty, and central office),
• professional growth and learning,
• approach to curriculum (including use of data, high expectations, and instructional focus), and
• women’s issues.

Next, a tentative outline was created for the research findings chapter. The text of each interview was reviewed a fifth time using the condensed themes in order to extract specific examples and quotes to illustrate each area that was included in the outline.
Finally, Swidler’s (2001) concept of cultural repertoires was used for a sixth review of the transcribed text. The purpose was to understand the principals’ responses as reactions to the circumstances and context of their daily experiences. The three areas of gender, daily activities, and leadership style were used as organizing concepts.

The Nature of Qualitative Research and Results

Qualitative research examines data in particular ways. It is, by definition, not a positivist endeavor in search of concrete right or wrong answers (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). As a result, “data” relates the stories of individuals and the interpretations of the data made by researchers. Because it is based on interpretations by individuals, “cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete” (Geertz, 1973, p. 29). However, cultural analysis has strength in that it has the potential to describe deeply “what is happening” in a particular situation. In this study, cultural analysis informed an understanding of what it means to be a woman high school principal in light of the current situation.

Subjectivity, validity, and generalizability are all conceptualized in particular ways in qualitative studies. In this study, subjectivity comes from the fact that I am a principal studying the principalship. However, in qualitative
research, subjectivity is considered a strength because it allows me to better understand the participants’ stories. Validity comes from the strength of the research material itself; deep, accurate descriptions give credibility and authenticity and significance to the findings. Generalizability in qualitative research also comes from the depth of understanding that is offered by studying a few cases in detail.

Subjectivity. Subjectivity of the researcher is central in qualitative research. Peshkin (1988) wrote that researchers should systematically search out their own subjectivity so that they can be conscious of how their feelings about the research shape their understandings and interpretations. He wrote “by monitoring myself, I can create an illumination, empowering personal statement that attunes me to where self and subject are intertwined” (p. 20). Seidman (1998) also wrote that for in-depth interviewing, the role and perspective of the interviewer positively informs the research. Approaching a study with a personal perspective, if one is aware of it, can strengthen a researcher’s understanding of both self and topic.

I am a principal studying the principalship. I currently work in a middle school, but 11 of 16 years as a professional educator were spent at the high school level, both as a teacher and assistant principal. In addition, I worked for three years with a strong female high school principal, whom I regard as a
mentor. As a result, it is assumed that I came to the study knowing something about how high schools operate and the high school principalship. My position may have enabled me to share a bond and mutual respect with the participants (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001), yet I was also cautious and listened to what the participants said with an open mind and without too many preconceived notions.

As the analysis has been conducted, it has been important to be cognizant of how my experiences and beliefs are shaping both the accounts and the interpretation of the accounts (Maxwell, 1992). According to Behar (1997), it is possible, and perhaps desirable, that the perspective of the researcher also be revealed in qualitative research. She made a case for a description and an explanation of events that is personal, and that draws its strength from being personal. The difficulty was to use the prior knowledge of the principalship as a guide during the research, but not so much that my views overshadowed those of the participants.

**Validity.** Since qualitative methods do not involve direct, simple testing of clearly delineated hypotheses, validity of the study must come from analysis of the data itself. Validity was not just a simple matter of being accurate; it was based in an accurate, thorough description of people and events and an interpretation of those descriptions that is true to the
meanings made by the participants themselves (Maxwell, 1992). Seidman (1998) also argued that internal consistency - similarities and sameness from a participant’s account - strengthens validity. In order to ensure that the conclusions were valid, I also considered alternative interpretations of the data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

Hamersley and Atkinson (1995) also described triangulation as a method for ensuring validity. I considered the stories of the three women, the participant observations, and written documents together to search for consistencies between the three sources of data.

**Generalizability.** It is only from valid description that there can be any hope of generalizing, whether it is to other similar cases or to other cases outside the same setting (Maxwell, 1992). For Geertz (1973), “thick description,” defined as a complete and accurate rendering of what the researcher saw and heard, enabled me to know and to show that something important has been learned about the object of study (p. 26). Erickson (1986) also argued that a “combination of richness [of description] and interpretive perspective” (p. 150) gives interpretive research its strength and ability to understand anything.

Throughout the research and analysis, every effort has been made to render an accurate and “thick” description of the
responses of the participants. In the analysis, I have also been cautious to ensure that the conclusions that have been drawn are supported by the data that was collected. Because the study focuses on only a few principals, the generalizability comes from this “thick” and accurate description of the experiences of principals and should enable some understanding of what it means to the women to be high school principals. Although the number of participants is limited, the research with each principal is deep enough to draw conclusions and to increase the understanding of what it means to these women to be a high school principal in Texas. In addition, the cases of the three women will be compared to discover patterns that emerged between and among the participants.

Summary

The nature of the questions that were being asked determined the qualitative approach used in study. I was interested in the lived experiences of these women principals within the current context in which they find themselves. The research occurred at large high schools in Texas and included three principals within their first two and a half years of being high school principals. Open-ended interview questions, participant observation, and document analysis were employed as techniques. Data analysis was conducted using Swidler’s (2001)
concept of cultural repertoires. Through the coding of transcribed interviews and field notes, with attention to a need for accurate and thorough representation of both the raw data and the interpretations, I obtained valid and generalizable results.
Chapter Four
Data Presentation

This study is about the lived experiences of three women principals in light of current conditions at large high schools. In this chapter, the experiences of the principals are described. Three main areas are discussed: career path and transition to the high school, approach and activities as school leaders, and the impact of gender on their leadership.

The stories of the three women have elements in common, yet each story is unique. The ways in which these women experience their principalships are described from their points of view. By explaining what the principals said and believed, their histories are illustrated.

Principal One: Ann Delano at Grover High School

Career path. Growing up in the Leave it to Beaver era, Ann Delano did not plan to enter the work force. She was expected to get a college degree, but also expected to be a mother and wife who did not work outside the home. She earned her degree in Spanish with a minor in secondary education. She made the rare move of turning down her first education job offer because she did not feel adequately prepared. Later, she began her career as a middle school foreign language teacher.
Although her preparation and training were for the secondary level, her first administrative job was at an elementary school. While there, she continued to learn how students learn a second language. She eventually moved to a neighboring district; she was intrigued by the individuals who led the district and their multi-track schedule, where schools are open during all twelve months of the year. After five years, she was invited to apply for a principal’s job back in the district where she had first been an assistant principal, and initially decided not to submit an application. However, after hearing about the problems and issues at an elementary that was intended as a language magnet school, she turned in her application just minutes before the deadline.

Ann’s first principalship proved to be a challenge. The community was not happy with the campus, and she had to work quickly to learn how students learn to read. Over the course of ten years, this elementary school changed from a school on the brink of being reconstituted by the state to a campus recognized for student performance on state tests. After a decade, Ann applied for the principalship of Grover High School, but did not obtain the position. As a result, she decided to retire from public schools and was looking forward to working as the director of a local private school.
While attending the Grover High School graduation ceremony, she received a phone call from the superintendent. He asked her if she was interested in taking over for the current principal of Grover who would be leaving for another city. She told him that she would “think about it” during the next week while vacationing in Florida. Upon her return, she accepted the superintendent’s offer, applied for the job, and was hired.

Transition to the high school. As the new principal of Grover High School, Ann Delano took over a campus that had been divided by the actions of the previous principal. During his year and a half tenure, he received thirteen formal grievances from the staff. Ann explained that the teachers she inherited were either for the former principal, or against him. As a result, she said one of her first tasks was to build positive relationships with the faculty and staff. She also spoke about deliberately giving every teacher a “fresh start” and not listening when one teacher complained about another teacher. Fortunately, the previous principal did have an intense passion for quality education, something Ann shared with him. His leadership style, however, was hard for some to accept, and Ann stated that there was some doubt as to whether or not she was “strong enough to come into this hot bed” that existed at Grover High School. According to Ann, she had been able to create working relationships with the majority of the faculty who
remained at Grover; a few teachers and other staff chose to leave after the former principal left.

Ann viewed the context of her transition as generally positive. The students at the elementary school where she had been principal for ten years eventually attend Grover High School and as a result, she knew many of the students, parents, and community members. In addition, coming to Grover High School was a deliberate choice; she had decided on retirement yet chose to remain in public schools. She was asked personally by the superintendent to apply for the job, which implies that he had confidence in her abilities and would hopefully lend her his support.

Approach to people. Ann’s approach to the community, students, campus personnel, and central office personnel were all discussed during the interview. There was evidence that Ann Delano recognized the importance of parents as part of the school community. Upon her appointment to the elementary language magnet school, she realized the community was quite angry about the school in general. She told her new secretary to invite “two or three of the parents who were the most vocal against what’s been decided” to the campus for a meeting. When she went to the library to speak with them, it was completely full. When challenged by this unhappy group of parents about why they should trust her, she responded that they should not trust
her yet but that they should give her a chance to earn their trust. Over time, she did.

There were other examples of how she dealt with parent and community issues. In speaking about the National Hispanic Scholars, a group of students recognized by the College Board, she described their recognition for their high test scores at a banquet; their parents were also recognized at the same banquet. Ann also discussed two instances where she took time to meet with individual parents regarding their personal concerns. One was the head of the band booster organization who was requesting that a disciplined student be reinstated into the jazz band, and the other was a meeting with the parent of a volleyball player who was unhappy with the coach. Finally, although she expressed frustration with the strong alumni association of Grover High School, she recognized the power they hold within the community and had met with them several times in order to form a better working relationship. Her goal was to take action as principal without fear of backlash from the community.

The principal showed a strong concern for students, especially those she believed to be unsuccessful or underserved. The campus policy dictated that teachers allow students to redo unsuccessful work, and she pushed the teachers to follow the policy. The ninth grade teams met every other day, and were expected to conduct a “roll call” among themselves for students
who were failing more than one class; parents of these students were then contacted by the teachers. In addition, during one of the morning department meetings, she reminded teachers that educators sometimes set up “roadblocks” for students that could be very effective in keeping a student from being successful.

She had individual conversations with students who were unsuccessful. During the course of the day, she spoke to a student who had not been attending class. She also described how she revoked the transfer of a student who was not attending; however, she had hoped the student would come and speak with her and plead her case in order to stay at Grover High School. In a conversation about the poor lighting at Grover, she commented “not everybody’s got great vision,” believing that the poor light might contribute to poor attention in class. She stated that “kids, they do make mistakes” and showed a willingness to work with them so students learn from the mistakes instead of having consequences so harsh that they never recovered.

Language minority students were mentioned several times, and the English as a Second Language (ESL) students were involved in a program spending time reading daily and assessing their reading skills. Ann said, “I’ve always cared a lot about language acquisition.” With a background as a foreign language teacher and the principal of a language magnet elementary school, Ann expressed concern about challenges students face as
they are just learning English and as they experience schooling in the United States for the first time.

Ann also pushed her teachers to build positive relationships with students and to understand the barriers they faced at school. At one point, she commented, “I need my teachers to know the challenges that these kids face to pass the Exit level TAKS, when they come in in ninth grade, and they are new immigrants, what a huge hurdle that is for kids to conquer.” She also worried about high school teachers, stating that teachers often “fall in love with science, but, they forget about the kid part of it.” As a result, she had made an advisory period a priority. Every two weeks, all certified adults in the building, including the principal, meet with a group of students. The intent is for adults to serve as mentors and advocates for these students. Ann also had made efforts to recognize successful students on a personal level; she described how she had gone to visit a student in class who was the winner of a district-level art contest.

With all of the safety nets and supports for struggling students, Ann also believed that the students themselves needed to put forth effort. She said, “I will bend over backwards for the kids, but if they just blow you off, then you know, you’ve got to let ‘em know.” She believed that some high school
teachers lacked confidence in student abilities and so do not push them towards high standards.

She also worked to ensure that all students had opportunities for high levels of academic success. She told a story of the last Grover High School graduation where students who had met college standards on a particular examination were asked to stand. To her surprise, many of these students were not in the top ten percent of the class which meant to her that these students had not been taking pre-Advanced Placement (pre-AP) and Advanced Placement (AP) courses. This was perceived as a problem; students with potential had not been exposed to college level courses. She also stated that she would like to “get rid of pre-AP in ninth grade,” believing that the practice limited the numbers of students who went into Advanced Placement courses later in high school. She had implemented a few programs at Grover to challenge students; one was a summer science class intended for enrichment and not class credit, and the other was an engineering program where students learned to use sophisticated drafting software to create three-dimensional objects.

Ann’s approach to personnel management showed two main ideas. She showed that she believed in shared leadership with teachers, but in contrast she also believed it was ultimately
her responsibility to ensure that teachers were doing what was necessary to guarantee student success.

There were several instances where she pushed teachers to make their own decisions. In discussing how the mid-year benchmark exams would be counted as grades, she told the teachers, “you just need to decide.” In a department meeting where teachers were discussing a policy allowing students to redo failing work, she kept referring the teachers to the work of the Grade Policy Committee and reminding them that any changes to the policy would come from that group. The local newspaper had written an unfavorable article about teachers; she encouraged them to write a letter to the newspaper as a response.

Ann followed a principal who had divided the campus. However, she explained that she gave everyone a “fresh start,” and worked hard during the first year to build relationships and trust with teachers. She told one teacher, “it’s really okay to disagree with me, ‘cause so far, I don’t know everything.” She explained her belief that teachers are leaders within their classrooms, and that they need to believe in themselves to be effective leaders.

In addition to this attitude towards teachers as leaders, Ann was not hesitant in giving negative feedback to teachers who were not meeting expectations. In one instance, she visited the
classroom of a teacher who was not enforcing “sustained silent reading” to let him know that the reading time was a required campus program. In another example, she conducted a walk-through visit and had concerns about what was happening in the classroom. As a result, she met with that teacher to discuss the concerns and was planning to return to that classroom to look for improvement.

With respect to central office, Ann expressed some frustration, but also worked with central office personnel to gain support for her decisions. In one example, Ann described the difficulty she had in starting a new science engineering program for about 20 students on the campus. She had received preliminary approval, but then the school board hesitated because one of the board members wanted the same program at another high school in the district; the central office personnel supported the board member instead of Ann. Although the program was finally approved and implemented, the process seemed to Ann to take more time than it should have. She said to another individual, “I want you to know I almost quit last summer.” The principal also was not happy that the district controlled the large amount of money allocated by the state for college readiness; the programs bought with those funds were chosen by the district and not the high school principals.
In contrast, however, Ann did reach out to central office when she needed support for difficult decisions with a teacher on campus and in dealings with another high school. A special education teacher had spent the department budget for the year on teacher supplies which had then been “hoarded” and not used for student needs. Ann sought support in order to take the supplies and reallocate them to the teachers within the department. She also received confirmation on a decision to not accept a special education student into one of the classroom units on her campus because the school from which the student came should have been able to accommodate the student’s needs. In both examples, Ann knew she was correct in her decisions and used central office personnel to preempt complaints.

Professional growth and learning. Despite the fact that Ann had been an educator and a principal for many years, she still considered herself a learner. As part of a grant, she worked closely with a person from a well-known national charitable organization. She referred to him as her “mentor.” She explained that in transitioning to the high school, her “learning curve was [very] steep.” She readily encouraged the faculty to disagree with her. She also admitted that she was a product of what she had learned, implying that in order to improve, she needed to learn new things.
The expectations that teachers would also continue to learn was evident. For her, weak teachers were simply lacking in their training and knowledge. She explained that part of her job was explaining and showing teachers what rigor looked like in the classroom; her responsibilities were a combination of having high expectations and then giving teachers the tools that they needed in order to reach them. Communication of high expectations was accomplished through conversations with teachers and visibility in the classrooms, and the training was accomplished through both outside staff development that was done off campus and through internal staff development that was designed and implemented by the principal.

*Instructional leadership.* Three themes related to instructional leadership were evident in the conversations with Ann, including use of data, communication of high expectations, and the knowledge of how students learn. She spoke of gathering and using data to make decisions as the principal. She described how at the elementary level, she examined students’ reading progress on a weekly basis. At the high school, she lamented that there was still “much more that [could] be done here” when she reflected on the data. At the last Grover graduation, she noticed that a large percentage of the students who performed well on a college readiness exam were not in the top ten percent of the graduating class with respect to grade point average; for
her, she felt this signified that these students had been underserved. She spoke repeatedly of classroom walk-throughs, where she visited classrooms for a few minutes at a time; she then used data from the visits to design staff development and to give feedback to teachers. This information served as a measure of the quality of instruction in the classroom. She also examined demographic data, such as the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch, before making decisions. When making a case with the district maintenance department for lighting improvements, she asked for a measure of the level of lighting in the halls and classrooms and a comparison to what the lighting levels should have been. Data related to special education students and Adequate Yearly Progress for the No Child Left Behind Act were also examined to ensure that each student took the correct test so that Grover High School met the standards set by the federal government. There were also two occasions when Ann asked me about data that had been used to make certain decisions. One was related to the criteria on campus for promoting students from eighth to ninth grade, and the other instance was related to a state proposal for a uniform grade point average calculation for graduating seniors.

Ann’s high expectations for Grover High School were communicated on several occasions and were related to different categories, including college preparation for students, failing
students, the campus in general, and finally, instructional strategies. Grover High School had conducted a tour of Ivy League schools the previous year, and was planning to take a group of students to high caliber colleges again during the current school year. Students who were recognized as Hispanic National Merit Scholars by the College Board were also openly recognized by the principal. In addition, the principal spoke of preparing students for college level work by pushing the teachers to increase the rigor in the classroom. She also expected students who had passed the state TAKS test to be preparing for the SAT college entrance exam.

In addition to high expectations for college-bound students, Ann expected failing students to be given supports to learn the necessary skills to pass their classes and state tests and therefore to graduate. She explained that she was about to begin tutoring sessions in the library conducted by National Honor Society students. In a morning meeting with teachers, she reminded them that campus policy allowed students to redo failing work. She also wondered out loud why students who had been successful in the sixth grade were now failing in the ninth grade.

Several comments made by Ann also conveyed her high expectations for the campus. She described herself as “running a tight ship,” and explained that there was still “so much more”
to do at Grover High School. She gave three examples of programs that were important to her where she monitored the teachers to ensure that they occurred: advisory time where the students were mentored, weekly silent reading time, and a math program at the elementary that required the teachers to use manipulatives. As an example of her commitment, she said, “Come hell or high water, we are doing [advisory] every two weeks.” Even with students, she was willing to hold them accountable. She had revoked the transfer of a student who had still chosen not to attend classes after an extensive meeting with the student and her mother.

Ann described the work of athletic coaches, and expressed a belief that good coaches had two skills that she thought were important for school leadership: the ability to work as part of a team and public accountability to high standards. While she expected her coaches to be classroom teachers first, she understood the value they added to a high school by motivating students and creating a place where kids want to be. She described that she had explained to all of the coaches at Grover that in order for them to continue in their coaching positions, they needed proven success inside the classroom first.

Ann described specific instructional strategies that were to be used inside the classroom. These were in the areas of special education, language acquisition, reading, and the
general importance of the teacher within the classroom. For her, the daily focus on instruction originated from the principal and the administration.

The principal was in the process of restructuring the special education program so that general education teachers would be primarily responsible for success of special education students. The special education teachers would then serve as supports and resources to general education teachers and special education students.

About language acquisition and literacy, Ann said that she had been required to learn about these areas after she became an educator. She learned about second language acquisition while she was a Spanish teacher early in her career. She learned about how students learn to read after she became an elementary principal. Within the classroom, she expected teachers to use strategies that increased literacy and academic language, including word walls, daily vocabulary, and sustained silent reading. On the staff development day planned for the following January, teachers would be learning about specific classroom activities to build student vocabulary.

In general, the principal described the teacher as the most important factor in the classroom. She encouraged the use of more general strategies, including improving “wait time” for questioning and academic teaming among teachers. She herself
worked to teach the teachers about the ways in which students learn best. Finally, she had also invested a large amount of money, about $78,000, to update the computers at the school.

Issues of gender. When asked, Ann was able to describe ways that being a woman high school principal had and had not affected her. Growing up, she said, “I never really saw myself in the work force.” She changed her mind about both a career in general and about becoming a school administrator over time. Ann spoke of instances where being a female restricted entry into the high school principalship and believed that being a woman secondary principal was more difficult ten years ago than it is today. She described how high school principals of the past were usually males and former coaches. In addition, she said that she had wanted to be a secondary principal for a long time, but that she did not believe that it would ever happen.

Ann gave other examples of how gender affected her adversely. In her transition to Grover High School, she explained that segments of the public were not sure if Ann was “strong enough” to take on a high school. She also said, ”But I do think there’s some resistance to women principals at the high schools, strictly because of athletics.” Working with the primarily male custodial staff was another obstacle she had faced, although she described a good current working relationship with the head custodian. Ann also described how a
female math teacher had been given “a lot of grief from the males in the math department” when she first arrived at Grover High School. The teacher, however, had “stuck it out” and after her state test scores came back much higher than those of the males, they were willing to “listen to her a little better.”

In contrast, Ann also made comments that sounded like she believed gender was not a barrier in educational leadership. She described how the former superintendent, a male, believed that gender had no relationship to efficacy. She explained, “I don’t think that there’s the kind of barriers maybe in education that women face, uh, like they do in business.” She stated that “if you worked really hard, and you did right by kids, you know, you would move ahead.” When describing barriers, she says “I never really thought about that.”

Management and leadership. As a principal, Ann described activities that seemed to be mostly managerial in nature and ones that seemed focused in instructional leadership. When examining her calendar, she could point to times when she would stay in the office and focus on paperwork. She described a meeting where she met with someone about putting new carpet in her office. Other facilities issues included working to have the lighting in the school improved. Ann also described how she had to “take care of…infrastructure, heating, cooling, cleanliness, building maintenance, and technology and things like that.” The
creation of a budget was another yearly task, and she explained that fund raising was an area that she had to learn upon her arrival at the high school.

Ann also demonstrated leadership. Initially, she said that she did not want to become a principal because she did not want to be removed from the instructional aspect of schools. After a conversation with another principal, however, she changed her mind and believed that being a principal was very much about instruction. She believed that small numbers of teachers at the high school knew about instructional strategies; it was her job to teach them. About building trust she said, “So those may be the biggest challenges, is just building trust, building bridges, making connections, to let people know that you think that the work that they do is important, whether it’s a core academic area or a non-core area.” During the day of the interview, Ann dealt with an issue related to a special education student coming to Grover from another high school. As an example of her approach, she told the educational diagnostician to “just say, ‘Well, Mrs. [Delano] apologizes, she didn’t ask the right questions, but now she has more information and she’s very uncomfortable with the placement.’”

Summary. In general, Ann Delano seemed to be a strong principal with an intent focus on student success and the details of instructional leadership. She was very clear about
her goals for the campus. She believed in shared leadership, but also demonstrated an understanding of the fact that she was ultimately responsible for the success of Grover High School. In discussing issues of gender, her comments indicated she did believe that being female had affected her, but she also believed she had been able to reach her position without much formal thought given to the notion that her progress or path had been different because of gender.

Principal Two: Belinda Emerson at Hill Valley High School

Career path. Although Belinda Emerson’s parents both worked in education, she began her college career as a marketing major, not planning to be a teacher. However, part way through college, she changed to the education field. She began her teaching career as a student teacher at a high school, and then worked as a long term substitute teacher in a home economics classroom. Her first formal teaching job was at a middle school, where she spent two years teaching English. While at the middle school, she was inspired by a strong female middle school principal to go back to school to get her master’s degree. She later moved to high school as a teacher.

Belinda’s first administrative job was as an assistant principal at one of the freshmen centers in the district. She described herself as “lucky enough to get it,” because she had
not yet finished her master’s program. After working at the freshmen center as an administrator, she became an assistant principal at Hill Valley High School where she worked for two and a half years. She served as an academic dean during that time where she was allowed to focus primarily on curriculum.

After her time as the high school as academic dean, she applied for the principalship of Hill Valley. However, she did not obtain the high school job. Instead, through the movement of other principals, she became the principal of one of the middle schools in the district. Belinda stated she believes she was the first female principal at the junior high, and stepped into a position where she did not know the faculty or community. After a few years at the middle school, the principalship of Hill Valley was open again along with a district-level secondary education position. Belinda applied for the district position, but ended up in the Hill Valley principalship instead.

Several community members and teachers had encouraged her to apply for the principalship. She stated that she received “a lot of positive feedback” after being named to the Hill Valley job. Because she had worked at the school previously, she felt comfortable returning because she knew many of the faculty members and because the staff knew what to expect from her.

Transition to the high school. The previous principal of Hill Valley High School was male, in his late 30s, and perceived
as having a strong personality. He typically made decisions without input from the faculty and did not take morale into consideration when interacting with the campus. As an example, he once told the teachers at the beginning of the year that “if they didn’t like the way he was doing things to look for another job.” He was also described as being “big on telling everyone he was the principal.”

Belinda described the transition to Hill Valley as the new principal as smooth. She felt comfortable because she knew the campus and its faculty. She sent the entire teaching staff a letter before the school year started reassuring them that there would be no major changes during the next school year. She believed that she had kept that promise. The instructional leadership on the campus, especially department chairs, had remained relatively stable and she had worked with the newer chairs previously when she was the academic dean. She stated that she felt that these were people she could trust and who would help carry out her vision. In her opinion, having a strong base of support made the transition go well.

Approach to people. Belinda’s approach to the community, students, campus personnel, and central office personnel were all discussed during the interview. For the community, Belinda described the importance of being visible at sports games and other activities. She described the community around Hill Valley
as being very supportive but not overly intrusive. She described them as “help[ing] you with anything they can, but they don’t try to tell you how to do it.” For her, this seemed to be an ideal situation and was different from some of the other places where she had worked.

The principal described her approach to students as “do[ing] what’s right for kids.” She discussed supports for failing students and the importance of building personal relationships with all students. For failing students, she described a computer coursework program where students could regain credits for classes that they had previously failed. She also described a situation with a student who had generally given up on himself and school because “he didn’t feel like anybody cared.” Belinda worked with him as a special project and his academic progress was improving.

Belinda’s willingness to work with a struggling student on a personal level also demonstrated her understanding of the importance of relationships with students. She explained that when hiring teachers, she “hire[s] people that like kids” and teachers who can connect with them. For her, connecting with students is the reason she attends as many games and events as she can. She also tried to be visible in the hallways before school and during transition periods so she and the students
could get to know each other. She stated that the favorite part of her job is “being out with the kids.”

When disciplining students, she also used a tone of respect and realized the importance of one-on-one relationships. She told of a situation where the student was cussing at her and she asked him if she had ever treated him that way. He replied, “No,” and then changed his approach to her. She also described how she was working with two smart students who had no idea about the SAT or college entrance requirements. She sent postcards to some of the students to welcome them back at the start of the school year; one student told her that she had returned to school because she received the postcard in the mail.

In addition, she actively solicited student input via a Principal’s Advisory Council. The Council is a group of students with whom she meets on a monthly basis to get feedback from them on how things are going within Hill Valley and on improvements that might be made. She also used it as an opportunity to explain rules or policies that students may not like. Some of the students in this group were ones who did not typically join other school activities, such as band or volleyball.

Belinda’s approach to the faculty generally demonstrated a belief that teachers should be treated with respect. Partly because Belinda followed a principal with a rough style, she
stated she realized she needed to stay calm when confronted by members of the faculty. She said, “You’ll get a lot farther by doing things certain ways than you do, by that ‘you will do this.’” She described a fundamental respect that she has for teachers even when they make mistakes and need to be reprimanded.

There were specific areas where Belinda showed respect for teachers. For example, she detested what she called “group discipline” where an entire group of teachers was reprimanded when only one or two were to blame for incorrect behavior. She was in the process of moving two teachers into a credit recovery program and she asked the Academic Dean to speak the teachers about the move. She used her experiences as a teacher as a basis, she described how she tried to give teachers advance warning about assemblies and other disruptions to the schedule so they could appropriately plan their lessons. She spoke of when she was a teacher stating, “And I was like, you know, none of the teachers knew. All the kids did. I don’t how they knew we were havin’ an assembly, but you know, I just remember that kind of thing.” The principal also checked proposed activities against those that were already on the calendar. Belinda sent birthday cards and positive notes to members of the faculty on a regular basis.
In developing a new comprehensive needs assessment that would examine the strengths and weaknesses of Hill Valley High School, she demonstrated the value of teacher input. The needs assessment was conducted as part of the staff development at the beginning of the school year, and she was happy that most of the teachers chose to participate when some could have taken a compensatory day for training that had been done earlier in the summer. After the teachers were criticized publicly by a central office staff member for what he saw as a lack of participation, she worried that "no one’s gonna show up tomorrow." Fortunately, they did. In addition, she solicited input from the department chairs and teachers when creating the annual budget. Belinda believed that she had strong teacher leaders on her campus, and worked with them to lead the school more effectively.

Despite her collaborative approach with teachers, Belinda also realized that ultimate responsibility for the success for the campus rested with her. She stated that while she took a positive approach to negative situations, she knew that "at some point you just have to do it, too," and that "you can’t let ‘em [teachers] run over you." For this principal, however, the "just do it" approach was very much used as a last resort when a more positive approach had failed.

Belinda’s comments indicated general frustration with central office. She described how as a campus principal, "you’re
right in the middle” between the campus faculty and central office people who may or may not have been campus-level administrators. She felt sometimes decisions made by the central office people did not take into account the daily reality of running a large school. For example, a major meeting was planned on the same day as the state assessment test. She also expressed frustration that principals’ meetings had grown to take up entire days.

The principal made comments that indicated she felt as if she needed to act as a buffer between central office and her campus, but that she was not always able to do so. The incident where the central office administrator berated her faculty was still on her mind. However, she did not feel she could say much because the administrator was her supervisor. A second incident was currently occurring. The district had recently held a training for counselors about a particular program. Only one counselor at Hill Valley needed the training, so only that one counselor attended. Belinda received a call that “it’s not gonna look good that y’all didn’t send but one person” and so she was forced to pull another counselor to attend the training even though that counselor already knew the information being presented.

Belinda felt an obligation to speak up at meetings where she disagreed with a decision that was being made, but was
willing to go along with the group decision after the discussion. She said, “it’s really hard when somebody says well, you know, someone says you weren’t in agreement with that. Well, in the meeting I wasn’t, but that’s what everybody decided, so that’s what we’re gonna do.” However, turbulence at the central office level left her vulnerable; her comments were sometimes used against her, causing her be seen as contrary. As a result, she said she felt intimidated and not free to say what she really felt and believed.

*Professional growth and learning.* Belinda saw herself as a learning principal. She readily admitted, “I know I don’t know everything,” and seemed to actively solicit input from the campus when making decisions. This was true despite the fact that she had background experience at the high school level, both as a teacher and as an administrator. She also stated that she was willing to ask questions of others who might have answers she did not.

In addition, the principal was about to begin a doctoral program during the following spring. She was excited about the prospect of learning new things and about the collaboration that would take place between herself and other people in the program.

For others, she only spoke about learning via a book study she had conducted with her assistant principals. Together they
read *What Great Principals Do* and then discussed it. She also worked with the assistant principals in monthly meetings where they discussed issues related to the campus.

*Instructional leadership.* Three themes were evident in the conversations with Belinda including use of data, high expectations, and her approach to the curriculum. The primary use of data for Belinda related to state testing. She examined the roster of special education students to ensure they were taking the appropriate test. She also looked at the numbers of special education students to determine if they would be counted in the school’s annual accountability ratings. Belinda described how she had researched historical test data to find students who had been successful but who were not taking college preparatory classes; she then met with these students to encourage them into tougher classes and towards college. When asked about where they would attend college, they responded, “Well, I don’t know.” She then said, “Well, you need to be thinkin’ about that, ‘cause you’re a junior and, with these kinds of grades and scores, you need [to go to college].”

High expectations were demonstrated in relatively subtle ways, but they were expressed. As a principal, she felt pressure from the central office to ensure that the campus was successful. For Belinda, this translated into what she called “instructional monitoring.” She worked with departments to
ensure that all teachers knew about accountability and could make sound decisions within district and legal guidelines. Despite this, however, she told teachers she realized that there would still be a few that “shut your doors and keep doin’ what you’ve been doing.”

Belinda described how one assistant principal expressed frustration with her leadership, telling her “you just expect so much more of them [teachers].” She continued to work with this assistant principal, but limited his curricular responsibilities; he was in charge of the health and physical education department where no state test is given. She pushed him within the boundaries of what she saw as his limitations.

In fact, the principal at Hill Valley expected all of the assistant principals to learn instructional management. The assistant principals had been placed in charge of a department to help them learn about the instructional side of running a school. Belinda’s background included two and a half years as an Academic Dean, which she described as a type of assistant principal who worked with “teacher[s], curriculum and instruction, [and] testing.” For her, this preparation had been invaluable in preparing her to be a principal. She expected all administrators to visit at least five classrooms each week, and stated that she tried to conduct walk-throughs on Mondays so her busy schedule would not interfere with time in the classrooms.
She also planned classroom walk-throughs and formal evaluation observations in advance.

Despite this experience, however, Belinda did not believe administrators could directly impact student learning. She spoke very little about specific instructional strategies and did not mention classroom practices as related to what teachers did on a daily basis. Compounding the issue was her recognition that “you know, I know how it is, y’all [teachers] shut your doors and keep doin’ what you’ve been doing [in the classroom].” Instead, she seemed to rely heavily on the expertise and influence of the department heads. She stated that she had a great deal of respect for them and she believed that each head was a “content expert” and “department expert.” She expected them to make decisions for their departments.

Issues of gender. For Belinda, gender affected leadership in mixed ways. She could describe ways in which being a female principal was positive, negative, and just possibly different. On the negative side, she stated she believed there were times when situations were handled in the same manner by a male and a female leader; however, the female would be questioned where the male would not be. Specifically, she described two men who “wanted to challenge everything” she did, even when the rest of the faculty was in agreement. In fact, she believed some of the problems she had with a difficult assistant principal stemmed
from the fact that Belinda is female. When the district was gathering input for qualities that the campus wanted in its next principal, at least one faculty member stated that he wanted a male principal, possibly because a male would be perceived to be more discipline-oriented. She believed the issue of gender was more a problem with individuals from “certain generations.” Belinda also explained that she thought female leaders needed to be “on their toes,” meaning that they had to be correct and accurate in their actions. Finally, she stated that she believed her mentor, a principal at a middle school, fought many more battles due to gender than Belinda currently did because the mentor was one of the first female secondary principals in the district.

However, Belinda perceived herself as not having some of the “typical” female traits; she said she was tougher and she came from a competitive background in sports. She also explained she did not “walk in and hang by the coffee pot and gossip.” She was glad, though, to have another female coach when she worked at the middle school.

Despite the comments about viewing being female as a hindrance, there were areas where she was not sure if gender made a difference or not. She explained that she “really hadn’t thought about, thought about it from the angle of bein’ a female.” She also said she was not sure if differences were “as
much about me being female as it’s just how they operate,” and that people might have reacted the same way towards her if she had happened to be male.

Belinda also perceived positive elements to being a female principal. She felt she paid more attention to the affective domain of schooling, and made more of an effort to let students and teachers know she appreciated them. Of herself, she said, “I think as a female principal, or female in any leadership role, or even just as a working, you know, that’s a role model for my daughter, that’s a role model for other, for the young ladies here in school.” She hoped that she could encourage others to take the path into school administration.

**Management and leadership.** Belinda described activities that fit into the managerial category and ones that fit into the leadership category. Upon taking the helm at Hill Valley, she realized that she was ultimately responsible for everything that happened there. She saw her mentor as a precise, organized, “get things done” kind of person, and seemed to admire these qualities. In addition, she admired her principal when she was assistant principal at Hill Valley because the campus had run “so well.” She stated that the creation of the budget had been an easy task for her.

Most of the activities described by the principal, however, were ones where she appeared to be more of a collaborative
leader. Before she began as principal, she told the faculty in a letter that she was not “gonna do anything crazy,” meaning that decisions about big changes would be made together.

Belinda felt the pressures of the media and accountability. She said, “When I got the job, the superintendent at that time said it, um, and he didn’t say it in a threatening way, but he said it matter of factly, are you comfortable with being held accountable for everything that happens there? And I said, Yes, sir.” However, she expected the campus to work towards meeting the high standards together. She expected the assistant principals to be instructional leaders but acknowledged that this was a new skill for some of them. The old model of assistant was of a person who dealt primarily with discipline and the managerial tasks of running a campus. In making decisions for the campus, she made a conscious effort to include people who were “hard to work with” so that the decisions made by the group would be accepted by all.

Because she expected to gather input and work with people, she found being unfamiliar with the faculty at the middle school where she was first a principal a hindrance. In addition, she expected a collaborative approach from central office. Even in situations where the “what” is required, Belinda believed that the “how” could and should be decided by the stakeholders. She
stated that educators are professionals and as a result, should be given respect.

Summary. Belinda came to the high school principalship via a typically traditional path through secondary schools, but also had curriculum experience. She believed strongly in shared leadership and demonstrated this belief in her approach to decision-making and the faculty. However, she was sometimes willing to give up her instructional authority to others. As an educator with only secondary experience, her understanding of the details of curriculum did not appear to be especially deep. Her views on the impact of gender were very mixed; she was able to articulate ways in which being female affected her, but did not seem to view gender as an insurmountable hurdle. Ultimately, there was no sense that she accepted any type of limitation due to gender.

**Principal Three: Carol Fuller at Inglenook High School**

*Career path.* Carol Fuller’s career as a classroom teacher was at the elementary level primarily in the area of math. She began teaching in Mexico and did not plan to be a principal. Upon returning to the United States, she stopped in a Texas city to visit friends, and ended up staying there to teach. After a few years of teaching, she became the instructional coordinator for the campus. Eventually she moved into administration,
becoming an assistant principal in a neighboring district for six years. She later made the move to Inglenook’s school district, and worked as an assistant principal at both an elementary and middle school where the students eventually attend Inglenook. She then served as the principal of a middle school that feeds into Inglenook. She described herself as lucky to have worked not only in the same district, but in the same feeder pattern for several years.

Happy at the middle school level, she did not initially plan to be a high school principal. The first high school principalship for which she applied, but did not get, was at a neighboring school. Because she was ambivalent about working at the high school, she was content to stay at her then current job. However, Inglenook High School later had a vacancy and Carol was invited to apply. She was appointed and began working at a high school for the first time in her educational career.

Transition to the high school. The principal prior to Carol at Inglenook High School had been there for five years and was also female. Carol said very little about her. She apparently had some sort of mobility problem, and so was not usually out among the students. Instead, she read the announcements every morning over the public address system so the students could “hear her voice.” In describing the confrontational approach
that some teachers initially had with her as new principal, Carol said that “I think she would yell a lot.”

In coming to Inglenook, Carol had worked with the high school students when they were in elementary and middle school and knew a large percentage of the parents, which eased the transition. She did not feel she had to “prove [her]self to the community as much.” She also explained that she felt comfortable with the curriculum aspect of being a principal.

Although Carol was comfortable with students and the curriculum, she described herself as having a “deer in the headlight look” for her entire first year. She stated that she struggled, and continues to struggle, with effective communication with a large staff to facilitate the entire faculty working towards the same goals. She explained she did not know any of the faculty members at the high school and they knew her only by reputation. The principal said, “I didn’t pretend that I knew high school or that I had been in high school.” She was willing to say, “I don’t know,” and then go find the answer to new questions. Carol used this technique as a tool to help her endure her first year at Inglenook, and seemed to be currently comfortable at the high school.

Approach to people. Carol’s approach to the community, students, campus personnel, and central office personnel were all discussed during the interview. Carol made an effort to know
members of the community. She was proud of the fact that many of
the parents at Inglenook knew her because she had been their
children’s principal when they were in both elementary and
middle school. Of her relationships with parents, she said, “And
so, um, some of the things that might have been an issue or
could have been an issue, were seen um, differently.” She made a
point of being outside at the end of the school day to greet
both students and parents as the students left campus. She said
that many parents would stop just to say “hello” as they passed.
The principal also made an effort to be present at sporting and
other events and stated that parents would also take those
opportunities to speak with her. However, she did say that “some
parents are just as crazy as can be.” In addition to working
with parents, Carol admitted that making connections to the
larger community, including civic groups and organizations, was
more of an obligation at the high school than it had been at the
middle school. She was sometimes frustrated by the volume of
invitations to community events she received but did not usually
feel she could decline them.

Although she was new to the high school, Carol was very
comfortable with the students. About her transition, she said,
“I was always okay with the kids and stuff.” In making decisions
for the campus, she said she tried to do what was best for the
students. In the same way that she tried to be visible for
parents, she also made concerted efforts to be available and visible to students on campus.

Carol expressed concern for the senior students who still had not passed their state math test and therefore would not be able to graduate. In general, she said she did not have very many teachers at Inglenook who were “really good with the knuckleheads, or the low performing kids.” The principal realized “those kids that are borderline, they always seem to hook up with kids that are bad influences.” As a result, she had restructured her administrative team so that one assistant principal dealt only with repeat ninth graders; the change seemed to be helping them be more successful during their second try as freshmen. She had also stopped the suspension of students for disciplinary reasons to help students be at school and in class more of the time.

As a person with a background in elementary and middle school, she struggled with the attitudes of many high school teachers. For her, few seemed to “really see that kid” as they dealt with difficult students. She recognized that students are still kids and was frustrated by teachers who believed that it was a “badge of honor” to fail students. She believed the typical high school teacher loved the content they were responsible to teach and generally worried less about the
individual student than did elementary and middle school teachers.

Discussing teachers, Carol said, “some of the teachers I enjoy interacting with more than others, obviously.” When faced with a teacher who yelled, she would invite that teacher to sit down and have a conversation with her about the issue. When a teacher came in to complain about a problem, she would often put that teacher in charge of the solution. For example, a teacher came to Carol and asked about the schedule for semester exams; the teacher was tasked with the responsibility of creating the schedule.

Carol was willing to be direct in her communications when necessary. As the leader of the campus, she stated it was important for people to “know what they’re supposed to do.” In coming to Inglenook, she said she had to be very specific at first about how she wanted certain things done. In dealing with one assistant principal whom she described as “very old school,” she also had to be directive with him in terms of disciplinary consequences.

According to Carol, her greatest struggle was with effective communication. She wondered aloud, “how do you really get everybody to know what’s going on, on the same page?” Especially at a large high school, this had been an issue for her. She encouraged communication from the teachers, and had
told them she did not want “surprises” sprung on her. She worked with teachers to brainstorm solutions to problems. For example, she had met with the science teachers to devise solutions for students who were still not passing the state science test for graduation. She also commented about teachers “that [I]’ll support them if it’s a good idea.”

Carol expressed frustration with central office in terms of politics and iniquities between schools. She said she perceived politics to be a greater concern at the high school and she handled politics mostly by keeping quiet and staying on campus. She also tended to sit by herself at district meetings. The principal told a story of how she had been invited to apply for a new doctoral cohort at the state university, which also included an invitation to the house of the director of the program. Over the next few days, rumors were rampant about who had and had not been invited and exactly what had been said. Until directly asked, Carol was silent about the meeting.

In addition, Inglenook is one of the largest high schools in its district and the principal felt that it was unfair that she received the same resources as some of the schools with half the student population. As an example, she said all high schools received 25 licensees for a credit recovery program regardless of the number of students at the school.
Professional growth and learning. In terms of professional
growth and learning, Carol spoke about her own learning as a
high school principal. Primarily, she stated that “every year, I
really look at ways to communicate better.” She was also willing
to learn from others and even stated that she might “hear some
things from [me], and think, oh, yeah, that’s a good idea.” In
moving to Inglenook High School, she had been forced to learn
about high school-specific items, such as course credits for
graduation. In addition, she had to learn how to manage many of
the same issues as at the middle school but on a much larger
scale.

Carol discussed at length the possibility of entering a
doctoral program. She had been invited to apply for the program
at a large state university in a nearby city, but had declined
to apply. She had also been accepted in to the doctoral program
in her own city during the same year she obtained the position
at Inglenook. She explained to the person who invited her to
apply recently that she was not interested because she was not
sure she wanted to be a superintendent and she did not want to
make the drive to attend classes. She had not entered the local
program because of the time and stress that would come with
being a high school principal; she did not believe she could do
both things well at the same time. However, the idea of “the
whole intellectual piece” of pursuing doctoral work was
appealing. She was intrigued by the idea of working with a cohort of other professionals to discuss and debate ideas about education.

*Instructional leadership.* Three themes were evident in the conversations with Carol, including use of data, high expectations, and a strong curricular approach. In general, the principal reflected on data for individual students and used the information to track student growth on the state tests. She was strategic in determining the grade level of students who failed during their ninth grade year so that they might not count at all for the *No Child Left Behind* measure of adequate yearly progress. Inglenook had also implemented summer programs for ninth graders who failed their classes in the hope that they would be able to catch up to their age level peers and graduate on time.

In addition to test data, Carol discussed brain research and believed that a person’s brain grows the most during adolescence. She expected teachers to use this data in order to better understand student behavior and why teenagers sometimes acted like “idiots.” Finally, she believed she was able to make a difference for students, but that often improvements were in areas that were not formally measured by tests or numbers. She said, “How do you really make a difference, um, at the kid level, where it reflects, where it reflects on the data that’s
presented?” For example, she was proud of the fact that since her arrival, there were fewer substitute teachers at Inglenook on a daily basis and believed that as a result, classroom instruction was improved.

The principal was in the process of working with teachers so they would increase the rigor of the coursework at Inglenook without increasing the number of failing students. She was frustrated with the progress so far. After a discussion on the topic, a teacher said to her, “so I don’t understand...do you want us to pass more kids, or have more rigor?” In an effort to increase awareness and teacher effectiveness, she had been holding conversations with every teacher about his or her strengths and weaknesses as a teacher, including failure rates. While she admitted the meetings took time, she felt they were being effective and were therefore worth the effort.

She believed that in schools where students performed well on the state test, students also had passing grades in their classes. She anguished over the fact that out of 650 students who came from the middle schools, 150 of them had failed the eighth grade level state test in math. At the high school, however, teachers were expected to “bring them up to grade level” so they could graduate. She also believed, generally, that interventions at the lower grades were not genuine and that failing students were simply passed on to the high school.
Because of this concern for failing students, Carol told her faculty they were “going to focus on three things this year: instruction, instruction, instruction.” She met at least every other morning with campus supervisors for special education, and also stated she “just really still tr[ies] to spend a lot of time in classrooms.”

Carol spoke of other specific curricular issues she was attempting to address. At Inglenook, there was a form of small learning communities where the ninth graders were grouped together with a set of teachers who were sensitive to the needs of new high schoolers. In addition, she worked with science teachers to improve science state test scores at the sophomore level. She described changes she made to students’ official grade classification based on the curriculum of the class. She said, “So I took it [grade level classification] from a curriculum standpoint.” For instance, if students were taking mostly junior level classes, even if they were missing one or two credits, she would change the grade level to eleventh grade.

In summary, Carol believed the toughest job for a modern high school principal was “making that shift to instruction.” However, she believed she was well-suited to the task because of her time as an elementary teacher, curriculum leader, and middle school administrator. She stated that those individuals who came to the principalship after having been instructional
coordinators were more likely to pay attention to the curriculum in the classroom and that “the instructional piece” came more naturally to them.

**Issues of gender.** At the end of the conversation about gender, Carol said “you don’t really think about it in that manner; you just do what you do.” However, throughout the discussion about the meaning of gender for the female high school principal, many of Carol’s responses were negative. She explained “Texas historically has been the good ol’ boy system,” and that it had taken time for women to “break into” that system. Although education was a predominantly “female field,” she did not think educational administration had been a female field. She stated the first females to become secondary principals were “just good ol’ gals,” and were “still part of the good ol’ boy system.” She meant that they were women, but they still led schools in the same ways as men. She believed that only recently had the high school principalship started to change, arguing that “you can’t do it that way anymore.” Although she was the second female principal at Inglenook and five of the current nine high school principals in the district were female, she still felt “you always have to try harder if you’re a female.” In a large neighboring district, most of the principals were men.
Carol discussed several perceptions of female principals she believed existed. She said if there were major discipline problems on campus, then the community was more likely to be “harder on” a female principal than they would be on a male principal. She had difficulties with the head football coach who was in place when she arrived, stating that he was a “real traditional guy” and she believed he would have preferred the principal to be male. However, she had a good working relationship with the current coach. She said “women tend to be more emotional than men,” and that if a woman ever happened to show emotion, then it could cause problems for her. In addition, she felt the dress code standards for female and male principals were different. She said a man could wear dress slacks and a nice shirt with a tie and be seen as “dressed up.” As a woman, however, she was expected to wear heels and a suit, which she did not see as practical because of the discomfort and the amount of walking she did on a daily basis. She also stated that the support of family and friends was critical to the success of a female high school principal.

Carol discussed examples where she was not necessarily treated negatively, but was treated differently because she is a woman. She described community events where she had been invited to attend a meeting of the Women’s Club, but not the Rotary Club. Of the superintendent and a board member, she said, “And I
don’t want to play golf with them, but I’ve never been invited to play golf with them.” She said it would never occur to these men to invite her. Our interview took place during the college football bowl series games, and she said the football coach might have asked her if she had watched the game if she were a male.

On a positive note, she believed women were more likely to focus on curriculum than on just the management of a school. She also said women were likely to be more sensitive. She stated that she spent time listening to a person’s problems, but sometimes she thought her approach should be more “cut and dry.”

Interestingly, Carol was not the first female principal at Inglenook. As a result, towards the end of her discussion on gender, she said it was difficult to tell which leadership elements were due to gender and which were due to personality and style. As an example, she said when she was forced to write up a teacher for doing something wrong, she felt badly about it, and wondered if a male principal would have felt the same way.

Management and leadership. Carol described activities that fit into the managerial category and ones that fit into the leadership category. As a manager, she described how “every little detail” could end up taking large amounts of time, and how she had to teach those that worked at Inglenook that she did not need to know every detail about every event. She said she
received about 150 e-mails each day and saw many of them as unnecessary. As an example, she said she did not need to be copied on an e-mail from a teacher stating the teacher would be out because her daughter was sick.

As the principal, Carol stated, “I really try to spend the majority of my time on instruction,” and as a result, she tried to do much of the paperwork that was required of her in the evenings and often took some of these detail items home with her. She perceived instruction as her primary responsibility but also realized the principal was still responsible for creating and managing the budget and for “stay[ing] on top of” programs like special education.

Some of her responsibilities blended the concepts of management and curricular leadership. She described a good principal as being able to document and follow through when a teacher was not performing to standards. In addition, she struggled with an assistant principal who was very “old school” and who did not seem to understand the connection between students being out of class and less learning. The core of these activities was instructional, but Carol’s approach was managerial.

For Carol, the one thing that had “changed everything, [was] accountability.” She perceived the job of high school principal to be more focused in instruction than it had been in
the past and stated that Inglenook would have been “seen as an excellent school” before the era of high stakes testing. The students were well-behaved and had few major discipline problems. However, their math and science scores were now “always on the borderline,” and so the school was not perceived as being quite as good. She said without an instructional focus, the scores were never going to improve; the old way of running a school was simply insufficient in the current situation.

In describing her leadership style, she said a great deal of time was required to do her job well. As an example, she described activities of the previous day. She was scheduled to visit classroom at another campus for two hours; instead, the visits took nearly five hours because of the principals’ discussions. In addition, working through problems on campus took time because she attempted to find out the background and “what’s really going on with [a] person.” She realized most issues were not “black and white,” meaning that solutions were often not clearly defined. In dealing with a group of teachers who came in to her office yelling, she said she was “not here to do battle,” and invited them to sit and talk with her in order to solve the underlying problem. Despite the fact that she stated that she struggled to be a good communicator, her descriptions of working with faculty showed she did have good communication skills.
Instructional leadership itself also took large amounts of time to do well. She said, “I just really still trying to spend a lot of time in classrooms” and working with teachers. For example, she said the second round of meetings with teachers about their failure rates would take three or four full days. As a result, she expected the assistant principals to deal with the daily details at the campus.

Summary. Carol seemed basically secure in her leadership, but at times unsure about how much or how far to push the faculty. She was still adjusting somewhat to the large scale of the high school setting, but obviously very much liked the students. Her natural inclination seemed to be to be tough on the campus and the faculty for the benefit of students, but she also made deliberate moves to be inclusive in her leadership style. She believed that gender had been a hindrance at times for women principals, but also continued to do her job well in spite of any adverse impact she might have felt.

Summary

The three principals involved in the study all seemed very “matter of fact” about their roles and jobs as principals, despite its challenges. They each had different career paths, but took relatively similar approaches to working with people, the curriculum, and leading their schools. Each principal used
an inclusive style where teachers were invited to collaborate to make decisions, but was directive when necessary as well. With respect to issues of gender, they all acknowledged ways in which it had affected them and others, but did not speak as if gender had been any type of real barrier for them.
Chapter Five
Analysis and Interpretation

The principals in this study conceive of gender, leadership styles, and their tasks as principals in different and sometimes contradictory ways. This study focused on understanding the ways in which the current context of large high schools and female leadership combine to create leadership experiences for three women principals. Swidler’s (2001) work on cultural repertoires was used as a framework for analyzing the similarities and differences in the stories of the three women. The context, as explained by the participants themselves, will be described in order to understand the background in which they make decisions and act. The areas of what principals do in terms of detail management and instructional leadership, how they do it in terms of leadership style, and the impact that gender has on their roles as principals will be addressed.

Cultural Repertoires

Swidler (2001) argued that individuals express differing views that are dependent on context and situation. The participants in her study were able to give different, and sometimes contradictory, views and interpretations of similar events. This study shows that perhaps the same is true for women high school principals.
For the women in the study, there were three areas where their actions and responses were on a continuum. The principals chose to act in certain ways depending on their backgrounds and the context of the situations. When speaking of gender, responses ranged from examples of how being female had affected them negatively, to how being female was just different, to examples of how being female affected them positively. Their actions as principals ranged from detail-type activities on one end of a continuum and instructional leadership practices on the other end. In terms of management style, the principals chose from a directive approach on one side of a continuum and an inclusive approach on the other side.

Context: Similarities and Differences Between the Participants

In order to understand some of the common context of the experiences of the women principals, similarities and differences with respect to their career paths, transition to the high schools, views on professional growth and learning, and approach to people are explained. Understanding what these women shared provides a background for understanding the three repertoires. Their experiences before becoming a high school principal and as they accepted the role of high school principal provide insight into the cultural repertoire from which they mobilize. Their views on professional growth and learning reveal
what they believe about their own development as leaders. Understanding their approach to people illustrates their leadership styles and values.

Career path. Similarities and differences with respect to the principals’ career paths are summarized as follows:

- None planned to be a principal,
- All had backgrounds in curriculum,
- None obtained the high school principalship on the first try,
- Non-traditional paths to principalship through elementary schools for two of the three, and
- Only one had a formal mentor and role model.

None of the three principals planned to be a principal. For Belinda and Ann, they did not even plan to be teachers, and Ann did not plan to have a career outside the home at all. Carol stated that she had no initial plans to be a principal. However, all three of them ultimately ended up as high school principals. Mentors, a desire to continue improving curriculum implementation, and a love of students are what seemed to push them into the field of educational administration. Their experiences reflect the ideas expressed by Ortiz (1982); she found that mentorship mattered when entering the principalship, and that women tended to stay in the classroom setting longer.
All three principals had a background in curriculum, whether it was at the elementary, middle, or high school level. Ann developed this interest on her own as she learned about how students acquire a second language and then about how students learn to read. Belinda and Carol both served in the capacity of “curriculum coach” where they worked with other teachers to improve instruction; however, Carol did this job before becoming an administrator and at an elementary school and Belinda did this job as an administrator at the high school level. In addition, Ann and Carol both worked at elementary schools for long periods of time, and both said that one of the main differences between elementary and high school teachers was that elementary teachers teach children and high school teachers teach content. Both principals seem to have carried this notion with them as they began their work as high school principals, and were actively trying to find ways to get high school teachers to care about students as individuals.

When discussing getting the job of high school principal, none of the three women obtained the first position for which they applied. The older two of the three principals were asked to apply for their positions after being turned down when they first applied; for Ann, it was at the same school, and for Carol, it was at a neighboring school. Belinda came to the principalship after not getting a secondary education job at the
central office level; however, the former principal of Hill Valley did get the job leaving a principal’s opening for her to take.

Only the youngest principal, Belinda, spoke formally about a mentor and role model, who was her former principal at a middle school where she had worked. Ann described a man from a grant organization as her “mentor,” but this was late in her career, and this person did not inspire her to be an administrator. Ann did, however, describe a conversation with an experienced administrator with whom she worked while still a teacher. This person convinced her that school leadership was definitely about curriculum, and this conversation encouraged her to apply for her first assistant principalship.

Finally, it appears that the youngest of the three principals, Belinda, had the most “traditional” path to the high school principalship. Although she was female, she was a coach, and all of her experience was at the secondary level. She worked as an academic dean, but this was still an administrative position at the high school.

In conclusion, all three women took different paths to the high school principalship. The findings concur with those of Shakeshaft (1989b); she found that women principals were likely to have curriculum experience and that they needed at least some encouragement to enter the principalship. However, they all had
ambivalence about their careers as teachers and principals at some point. It is impossible to tell if their reluctance and ambivalence are due to their gender conceptions or their conceptions about the role of high school principal itself; it is likely both forces are at work.

In addition, all three principals had leadership roles involving curriculum and instruction responsibilities before accepting the role of high school principal. Two of the three were “tapped” to be principals of their schools after initially failing at getting a high school principalship; the third woman was the only principal who had someone she considered as a mentor early in her career. All of the principals needed a catalyst to enter their current positions.

At the time of the interviews, all three seemed content in their jobs, and their words gave a sense that they were doing what they felt they ought to be doing. No participant made comments about regretting entering the high school principal or about actively seeking another job.

Transition to the high school. Similarities and differences with respect to the transition to the high school are summarized as follows:

- Challenge for two of three without high school experience, and
- Two of three invited to apply by the superintendent.
The transitions to the high school had been a challenge for Ann and Carol, the two without high school experience. Belinda said the transition was smooth because she had worked not only at a high school before, but at Hill Valley High School itself. Ann and Carol struggled with the scale and volume of a large high school, but found joy in working with students, a familiar task for them. These two principals also said they took time to learn specific skills related to high schools, such as course credits for graduation and state rules for athletic and extracurricular competitions.

Ann and Carol had also each been invited to apply for their current positions by the then superintendent. Hoff and Mitchell (2005) also found that many women principals are individually selected as talented by their superiors. The implication, then, is that they were recognized as strong principals who would be able to manage the challenges at each campus. Ann took over a school that had been divided by the actions of its former leader, and Carol followed a leader who was generally described as someone who “yelled a lot,” implying that she had a loud personality, if not a strong one. One principal, Carol, was not the first female principal at her campus. Ultimately, all three principals seemed to have survived the transition to new positions and were now leading.
Professional growth and learning. Similarities and differences with respect to the professional growth and learning are summarized as follows:

- All saw selves as learning principals,
- Two of three interested in doctoral programs, and
- Two of three had little discussion of formal staff development for teachers.

The three participants saw themselves as learning principals. Each said they were aware they did not yet know everything, and that they needed to continue learning in order to continue to improve. Their statements are similar to the findings of Tabin and Coleman (1993) who found that professional growth and learning was important to principals. In terms of formal learning, one principal, Belinda, was about to begin a doctoral degree program, and another, Carol, had been accepted into a program but had not yet started. Andruskiw and Howes (1980) found that advanced coursework facilitated identity formation; the same might be true for Belinda and Carol. Ann discussed her growth in terms of what she was learning from the person who collaborated with Grover High School implementing a large grant the school received; while it was not formal coursework, she said that it was helping her to be a better principal.

With the exception of Ann, there was little discussion of formal staff development with teachers. Ann was planning to give
an inservice the following month about specific teaching strategies to improve student vocabulary. Carol discussed individual meetings with teachers, but said nothing about formal, group meetings where the teachers were taught something new. Belinda said almost nothing about teacher learning, and only mentioned a book study that she had conducted with the assistant principals.

The principals seemed to understand that their own learning would be ongoing, but did not generally translate this concept to the teachers in formal ways.

Approach to people. Similarities with respect to the principals’ approach to people are summarized as follows:

- All three stressed importance of community visibility,
- All three had similar approaches to students, including
  - Concern for failing students,
  - Concern for underserved students, and
  - Concern for systems within school that discouraged students, and
- All three showed respect for teachers and a desire for shared leadership.

There were similarities in how all three principals approached the individuals and groups with whom they worked. With respect to the community, all three principals spoke of the importance of being visible and available to parents and outside
individuals. They attended sporting events and other extracurricular activities partly so the community could see and speak with them. Each principal recognized that community perception mattered and worked with the constituencies in different ways. All three principals gave the impression that working with the community and parents was simply part of their job, and they integrated these tasks into the many things that they did each day as a principal.

Each principal also gave specific examples of interactions with parents and the community. Ann invited a difficult alumni association to work with her so she could make decisions without backlash from the former students of Grover High School, some of whom were quite influential in the community. Carol continued to capitalize on the fact that many of the parents knew her because she had been their children’s principal when they were at elementary and middle school. Belinda stated that she had a helpful, yet not overly interfering community.

There were also commonalities among the three principals in their approach to students, including a concern for failing students, a concern for underachieving students, and a need to build personal relationships with students. Each principal had supports in place to help failing students, including offering computer classes for course recovery, test preparation, and the ability for students to redo failing assignments. Ann and
Belinda also made efforts to challenge students who had ability but were not working to their potential. Finally, all three principals believed in the importance of building relationships with individual students and were finding ways to encourage the teachers to do the same. The findings related to caring for individual students are similar to those of Ortiz (1982) and Shakeshaft (1989b).

The principals spoke of systems within large schools that discouraged struggling students. The two principals who had spent time at elementary schools also worked with teachers to help them pay attention to students as kids and individuals, instead of just teaching the content of science or math. Only one principal, Belinda, actively sought the input of students in a formal way through a Principal’s Advisory Committee; the other two principals solicited information from students in more informal ways through hallway conversation and brief discussions.

In their dealings with the faculty, the principals all showed two ways in which they worked with teachers and others on their campus: a sense of respect for teachers, and a desire for shared leadership where the principal listened to the input and ideas of the faculty. However, each principal also said she was ultimately responsible for everything that happened on campus and for the success of the students. As a result, they said
there were times when they would need to be directive with the faculty, telling them what needed to happen and then following up with the teachers to ensure that it did.

The principals’ approach to the faculty are congruent with the findings in other studies. Shakeshaft (1989b) found that women often used an inclusive style of leadership. Strachan (1999) described women leaders as engaged in consensus-type decision making. Finally, Coleman (2003) found that all principals, regardless of gender, used styles that included caring and an awareness of individual differences.

All three principals expressed frustration with what they saw as undue interference by central office and individuals who did not understand the daily functioning of schools. Each principal gave examples where she felt the need to say or do something differently from what she really wanted because of politics. The women in the study were doing the best they could to improve their schools within the parameters and constraints that had been set at the district level.

Summary. The descriptions above show the commonalities among and differences between the backgrounds of the principals, their views on professional growth and learning, and their approach to the people in the learning community. The descriptions provide a context for exploring the repertoires
related to gender, instructional leadership, and leadership style.

**Gender Repertoire**

The discussions related to the impact of gender were mixed in all three cases. The principals could describe ways in which being female was a hindrance, ways that it was a benefit, and ways in which it was simply different. The drawing below illustrates the continuum.

![Gender Continuum](image)

When speaking of “times past” and earlier leaders, they were more willing to say that the first secondary women principals faced challenges. For instance, Belinda described the experience of her mentor principal, explaining that the mentor had to fight battles not fought by male principals around the same time. Belinda also said that people from “certain generations” were more likely to have issues with the fact that she was a woman principal. This view is consistent with the work of Shakeshaft (1989b) and Ortiz (1982) where the authors found that women faced difficulties and barriers in school administration due to gender.
When asked about the role of gender in their own leadership, the women all gave examples of a negative impact. Ann did not believe that a woman would be hired as a high school principal, and Carol described the “good ol’ boy” system where men were more likely to get top positions. Belinda and Carol both stated they need to prove themselves as competent because they are women. They spoke of struggling with athletic coaches, of a perception that they might not be “strong enough” to lead large high schools, and of not being included socially in the same ways that male high school principals were included.

They also said that there was a concern that they would be seen as too emotional in their leadership style. In addition, Belinda said that public perceptions might be different even when a man and a woman handled a similar situation in similar ways. She argued that if a woman handled a situation by responding in way “x” and a man responded to the same situation in way “x,” that the women might be perceived as being too tough or mean but that the man’s actions would be accepted as appropriate.

All three women saw positive aspects of being a woman principal. The each viewed themselves as more sensitive to the personal side of leadership. As a result, they each described circumstances where they had taken the time to listen to a person before making a decision or passing judgment. Since they
attended to the affective domain, they implied they were more attentive to the individual student as a human being than a male principal might have been. Coleman (2003) and Tabin and Coleman (1993) also found that women tend to have nurturing styles when working with others.

While all three principals stated that they “never thought about” the impact of gender, they all could give examples of how gender had affected them and others. Although Ann said she did not believe a woman would be chosen as a high school principal, she also said she believed a woman could get ahead if she “worked hard.” Carol said standards of dress were different for men and women. Belinda said her style was interpreted as “rough” where a man’s might not be.

The women, however, were willing to offer alternate explanations for the different ways they led. They mentioned personality and experience most frequently. The women in the study said it was possible the differences in how they had been treated might be related to their own personalities more than it was because they are women. The two principals who came from the elementary level also strongly believed that their experience as elementary school leaders shaped the way in which they now led at the high school level.

A mixed view of the impact of gender was also found in the literature. The girls in Proweller’s (1998) study were not
conscious of the influence of gender on their decisions and lives, as were the counselors in the study by Gold and Hawley (2001). Coleman (2007) found mixed views on gender held by secondary principals in England. The administrators in Hoff and Mitchell’s (2008) work also reported varying perceptions of the role of gender in their lives.

In conclusion, when asked, the women could express ways in which their gender affected their leadership. However, none of these women seemed willing to accept their gender as a barrier that kept them from achieving their goals. Each woman seemed to accept the difficulties as part of the challenges that they would face, but not as challenges that would stop them.

Several possible explanations for the range of responses on gender exist. Instances where the principals discussed gender as a hindrance might be attributed to the stories of others or to their own experiences as educational leaders. They found it acceptable to speak of gender discrimination in general terms. They even spoke in specific terms of their own discriminatory experiences when they had still been able to get what they wanted or needed.

All three principals were aware of the fact that they were women, and accepted the idea that their gender perceptions shaped their leadership at least nominally. However, these were also three confident, competent principals. If they had accepted
gender as a limitation, then it would have meant accepting a limitation to their own leadership. Their responsibilities as high school principals were tremendous; they simply did not have time to concern themselves to allow being treated differently become a barrier. 

As a result, gender was not at the forefront of their identities because they saw themselves as school leaders first. The leaders chose to acknowledge their identities as women when it was not in conflict with their identities as principals. When the two identities matched, however, they could admit ways in which being female shaped the ways they experienced the principalship. In some cases, that meant that they valued certain attributes - empathy, sensitivity, and a collaborative style - that these women perceived to be “female traits.” Whether the traits can be attributed to being female or being high school principals is unclear.

Daily Activity Repertoire

The principals engaged in activities that ranged from the very detail oriented to those that addressed broad curriculum and instruction concerns. As they told their stories, the women described what they did as principals on a daily basis. While some of the activities could be considered as management activities, the majority of the discussion centered around
instructional leadership. The emphasis on instructional leadership reflects the daily pressures related to student success as measured by No Child Left Behind. The drawing below illustrates the continuum.

All three principals gave examples of activities that would be classified as management. The participants mentioned the creation of an annual budget and discussed working with custodial and office staff to ensure the school ran smoothly. Each described how she had learned to manage large athletic programs with many coaches, in addition to band programs and other extra-curricular activities.

The three principals had much in common with respect to curriculum and instructional leadership. These areas included views about the importance of classroom teachers and the role of the principal, the use of data to make decisions, and the importance of taking care of special education students. There were also areas where only one principal spoke about an idea related to instructional leadership.

Again, the research supports the idea that principals’ work is primarily about improving instruction. Ortiz (1982) found that women tended to focus on students and instruction.
Sergiovanni (1995), while recognizing the need for management, also argued for a model of the principalship based in instructional leadership. Fink and Resnick (2001) described a model that teaches principals how to be instructional leaders on their campuses. Finally, Gupton and Slick (1996) and Strachan (1999) made a case that modern principals are required to know about instruction.

All three principals discussed accountability measures related to No Child Left Behind in various ways. They each anguished over students who were not passing the state test for graduation. In addition, each of the three schools missed federal standards in at least one area during the previous year. Missing standards for multiple years leads to sanctions and the possibility of a state reconstitution and control of the school, a bad thing for schools and principals. Ensuring that special education students and English language learners were successful is part of meeting the federal standards. Each principal mentioned pressure from both central office and the media to improve student performance as measured by state tests.

Being an instructional leader on campus was a top priority for all three principals, and all three held on to that responsibility as their own. First, they all knew that teaching matters. This was shown by the importance that all three leaders put on spending time in the classrooms observing instruction. In
addition, the principals made time for individual conversations with struggling teachers. They gave specific, constructive feedback from their classroom visits and would make return visits to determine if weak teachers were improving. As for their relationships with their assistant principals, two leaders, Belinda and Carol, spoke of working with one assistant principal who dealt primarily with curriculum. With this exception, the impression was given that the role of the assistant principals was more managerial in nature.

All of the principals used data to some degree, although Belinda did not discuss its use as much as did Ann and Carol. For Ann, finding and using data to make decisions seemed very much a part of what she did on a daily basis as a principal, and she gave many examples of how she used information to both make and support her decisions. Carol also spoke of data, but was less formal about its use than Ann. Belinda used data to identify underachieving students and for determining the appropriate test for special education students, but it did not seem to be as strong of a tool as it was for the other two participants.

All three principals worried about their students who were receiving special education services in specific ways. There was a general concern about their progress, but most of the focus was on which test each student would take and would the student
be able to pass it. Special education students are now included for federal accountability standards, and each principal wanted to be sure the campus met the increasing standards. Ann was working to redesign the way in which special education students were served so that they would be included in more meaningful ways into general education classrooms. Both Carol and Belinda had rosters of all of the special education students and were working with the academic dean or educational diagnostician to ensure that students were taking the correct exam.

The range of activities is best explained by the perceptions of the principals about how they believed they should spend their time. The daily management of schools must occur (Sharp and Walter, 2003). The school must be cleaned, budgets must be created and spent, and student schedules and grades must be maintained. These activities are considered routine on a high school campus, and so they are afforded little thought when they happen without incident. The women experienced these activities as part of their roles as principals, but unconsciously considered their managerial responsibilities as part of their jobs.

In contrast, concentration on curriculum and instruction at the current level in high schools is relatively new and is incredibly complex. The responsibilities placed on principals to ensure student success on state tests is high. Central office
expects all students to succeed, as does the media. Since special education and English language-learner success is also included in *No Child Left Behind*, principals are attending to these populations in new ways.

Carol and Ann both had extensive experience at the elementary school and said that they learned the importance of success for individual students there. Belinda had only worked on secondary campuses, but she also spoke of ensuring that each child experienced success. Because of the instructional demands on principals, leaders are now being chosen for their instructional leadership abilities. As a result, it is understandable that their focus would be instructional concerns.

*Leadership Style Repertoire*

The principals described a wide range of approaches when discussing their leadership styles. On one side, each discussed examples and values of inclusive leadership where they worked with the school community to make decisions and lead. On the other side, each woman gave examples when she had used a directive approach where the person involved did not have a choice about how to respond. Coleman (2003) also found that all principals use a variety of styles as they lead schools. The drawing below illustrates the continuum.
For the principals, there were times when they had to be directive in their leadership style. Ann described herself as “running a tight ship” and was willing to hold students and teaches accountable for their actions. She was willing to fire coaches from their coaching positions if they were not successful in the classroom and would give specific directives to teachers who were not following policy. She also expected students to fulfill their obligations as students to be successful.

Although she did not give specific examples, Belinda said that were times when teachers “just have to do” what is being asked of them. She described herself as organized and as a person who “got things done.” She also discussed the importance of instructional monitoring, which meant going into classrooms to ensure that instruction was appropriate and rigorous.

Carol’s natural communication style was very direct, and she would use it when necessary. Upon her arrival at Inglenook, she had to explain to faculty and staff how she wanted things done. In addition, she said that there were times when people just needed to do the right thing. She met with teachers about their failure rates; she implied that the teachers were told at these meetings that their classroom practices needed to change
if their failure rates were too high. She had been directive with an assistant principal about discipline consequences for students and was willing to document teachers who were not meeting standards.

In contrast, each of the principals in the study really seemed to believe they were supposed to be inclusive leaders that worked with teachers collaboratively to create a school that was beneficial for students. Ann kept referring teachers back to the grade policy committee when asked about failing work done by students. She invited parents to school to discuss issues at both the elementary and high school. She also worked quickly to heal the rift at Grover created by the previous principal.

Belinda spoke the most about her inclusive leadership style and said she was more effective when she was inclusive than when she was directive. She told her faculty that they would make big changes and meet high accountability standards together. In addition, she did not believe she could have a direct impact on instruction as a principal; instead, she needed to work with instructional leaders on campus. She depended on their instructional leadership in specific content areas. She detested reprimanding an entire group when only one or two teachers were at fault and made an effort to work with difficult personalities.
on campus. She also had a student committee that gave her advice and made suggestions for the school.

Carol met individually with classroom teachers to discuss failure rates, and would give responsibilities back to teachers who complained. One of her current projects was to increase the rigor in classrooms; she was doing this by having conversations with groups of teachers to increase acceptance of the concept. She described working with science teachers as a group to improve science instruction. She, like Belinda, made efforts to work with difficult teachers.

Many of the issues, however, seemed to be a combination of inclusive and direct styles. For example, Ann was direct in telling a group of teachers to use a collaborative approach to solve a problem. She directed a group of teachers to work together to determine if and how a benchmark exam would count towards students’ grades. Carol wanted the science teachers to devise an effective intervention for failing students, but directed the group process so it not only occurred, but was effective.

The three women principals pulled from the manager-leader continuum almost on a constant basis. The skills they used were determined by the circumstances of the situations in which they found themselves. These women gave the impression that in order to be effective high school principals, they needed to be able
to be both collaborative and directive, in addition to knowing when to use each leadership style.

It is perhaps a combination of the principals’ personalities, which include gender and background, and the circumstances of modern high schools, that determine the repertoire from which these women lead. Their backgrounds have made them knowledgeable about curriculum, and all three have strong, confident personalities. In addition, they all were able to describe the ways in which being women shaped their views of school leadership.

The principals were all under pressures from their central offices to improve student performance as measured by the state test. As an example, each principal worried about students in special education. The test performance of these students is measured separately under No Child Left Behind; under the older state system, special education student performance is aggregated and included with the performance of all students on campus. In addition, they each expressed a sense of responsibility to the students themselves to help them be successful; all three schools had (expanding) programs to help students in danger of not graduating, both because of lack of credits and failure on the state exam. The three women brought their prior experiences and viewpoints to the role of high school principal, and were using those experiences to do the job.
on a daily basis. The pressures from the media, central office, and the students themselves forced them to find the most effective long-term approach for student improvement.

A New Kind of Principal

At the outset of the study, the question was asked, “what does it mean to be a woman high school principal?” As the study evolved, the question was refocused to examine ways in which gender and the current context interact to produce specific experiences for three women principals.

Prior to coming to the principalship, all three women had backgrounds in curriculum. Ann was a successful elementary school principal, Belinda worked as an academic dean in charge of instruction at the high school, and Carol was an elementary curriculum coordinator and middle school principal. At least for these three principals, a curricular focus seemed to be important for them as they obtained and did their jobs as principals. I believe that the fact that all three principals had curriculum backgrounds points to the importance of the high school principalship. Because of the high standards where “no child is left behind,” high school leaders must have the skills to ensure that all students learn, regardless of income level, ethnicity, disability, or English ability.
Possibly, candidates who previously would not have been considered ideally suited for the principalship - women or persons with elementary experience - are now being encouraged to lead high schools. The stereotypical older model of principal is one of an ex-coach who interacts well with students, parents, and the community, and who can maintain discipline, safety, and order on campus. Today, that type of high school principal will simply no longer do. It is hopeful that we are returning to a conception of principal that hearkens to a prior era where principals were chosen as "principal teachers." That kind of principal was expected to be an expert and a resource to the other teachers on campus.

In addition to a curriculum background, all three women had what they saw as strong personalities. Ann had turned around an elementary on the verge of failure by demanding improvements and excellence from the teachers. Belinda described herself as motivated and competitive. Carol displayed a "no nonsense" attitude about herself and the work to be done at Inglenook High School. The principals perceived these qualities to be positive assets.

In their current positions, each principal showed strong leadership. Ann was relentless in her pursuit of student success yet was aware of the politics at the campus. She accepted the ultimate responsibility for improving student performance at
Grover High School. Belinda seemed to be the least strong of the three principals. Despite the fact she was willing to give away her power as the instructional leader, she also went to sleep at night knowing that the success or failure of Hill Valley High School rested on her shoulders. Carol knew that student progress on the state exams was her responsibility as well; as a result, she was doing everything that she knew how to do in order to improve classroom instruction at Inglenook High School.

Underlying the leadership styles of all three principals were the pressures of state and federal accountability. While each school was meeting state standards, each of the campuses was not meeting federal standards in at least one area. As a result, the principals spoke of pressures from central office and from the community to improve test scores. For the principals, however, community and central office perceptions were secondary to knowing that if students were unable to pass the exams and their classes, then they would be unable to graduate from high school. At each school, too many students were not able to obtain a diploma.

In conclusion, schools are still structured in much the same ways that they have been for years, with individual teachers teaching groups of students who then earn credits towards graduation. The length of the school day and school year also has not changed. However, the number of credits required to
reach graduation continues to increase every few years and students must also pass a state exam in order to graduate. The expectations for pass rates on the state test put additional pressures on the principals and school as the standards rise annually. Schools are much the same, but what must be done with the same time and resources has increased. The women in this study are responding as best they can to the increasing pressures. In fact, it can be argued that at a minimum, principals with their skill set are required to meet the difficult demands of modern schooling.

Recommendations and Implications

Recommendations to practitioners and to those who prepare principals can be made related to the three repertoires. In terms of gender, practitioners should be cognizant of the ways in which their identities as women affect the ways in which they live their lives as principals. For others, it is important to be aware of how gender stereotypes – even unconscious ones – shape the ways in which they interact with women leaders. For example, there are women who enjoy playing golf and might want to be asked to join male leaders on the golf course.

Because of the importance of curriculum and instruction, new principals must be prepared in these areas. Individuals aspiring to the high school principalship should be
knowledgeable about best instructional practices for students in a wide variety of settings, to include English language learners and students in special education. Since many of these persons have only taught at the high school level, they might need to purposefully seek out information about how students learn to read and do math. It is also important that principal preparation programs, at a minimum, remind aspiring principals of this information, and at most, offer coursework related to instructional strategies.

This study offers much in the way of how these women practice their leadership. They were determined in their approach to working with students and faculty, yet were also inclusive in their decision-making processes. Personally, I believe that because the high school principalship is so difficult, these leaders need a great deal of confidence. As a result, specific training – either before or after ascending to the principalship – in collaborative leadership might be necessary. All three principals discussed the negative impact of a previous principal who led in a dictatorial style. In addition, these women genuinely wanted to include their teachers as they worked to improve student performance on their campuses.

While the study provides valuable insights about the nature of the modern principalship for women, there is still much work to be done. The study only includes three participants. It is
difficult to know to what extent the experiences of these women is common for women high school principals and principals in general, and to what extent their experiences are unique. Because the study included three women, it is also difficult to know if the findings related to curriculum and leadership style hold true for men in the modern high school principalship as well.

In addition, more research is needed as increasing time passes since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act. The impact of the legal context on the ways principals lead their schools, especially at the high school level, is not yet fully known or understood. Will the experiences of these principals become considered normal or mere anomalies?

In addition, America now has a new president with a new agenda. If the rules change again, what will be the effect on schools? It is interesting to wonder if schools will continue to change in the same direction, go back to the way that they once were, or shift in an entirely new direction. Finally, how will principals of the future cope with the “major anxiety of their people in their time?”

Personal Epilogue

Conducting the research was immensely enjoyable for me. Prior to visiting their schools, I only knew one of the
participants. Even with her, I had only brief, passing conversations. Getting to know these women as principals and as people helped me to learn about the kind of principal I want to be. I do eventually aspire to the high school principalship, and will take their lessons with me as I do my job as a middle school principal and as I (hopefully) move to the high school level once again.

One principal, through her words, reminded me that I need to be courageous in my leadership. She seemed at times to give away her power as the instructional leader on campus, which I believe limited her effectiveness. My background is mostly at the high school level. As a result, I am actively seeking to learn about the details of classroom instruction. In addition, our conversations reminded me that I must accept full responsibility for student success, even if I am not the one doing all of the direct teaching.

The courage that these women exhibited while leading their campuses towards positive change was amazing. In thinking of one of the principals, especially, I think, “I want to be like her when I grow up.” She is absolutely clear about what she wants for her school, and the steps that need to be taken to get there. She has not only a vision, but an implementation plan. Because of her love of students – and her commitment to their
success – she is willing to be persistent in her dealings with faculty when pushing for improvements in the classroom.

Ultimately, I hope that I can do as well at leading my campus as they do with theirs. Living life as a principal is immeasurably difficult, and these women conduct themselves with passion, determination, and love for their students.
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Curriculum Vitae

Kimberly J Baxter is currently the principal of a middle school in a large school district in El Paso, Texas. She served as a middle school assistant principal and a high school assistant principal for five years. Before entering administration, Ms. Baxter taught high school social studies courses.

Ms. Baxter has been recognized as Assistant Principal of the Year for Region 19 by the Texas Association of Secondary School Principals. She is also currently serving on the Board of Directors for the Texas Association of Secondary School Principals, a position she began in the fall of 2007.

Ms. Baxter earned a Master’s Degree in Educational Leadership and Administration from a Texas state university. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Government and History in from the University of Texas at Austin.

This dissertation was typed by Kimberly J Baxter.