To Climb or Not to Climb: The Probing of Self-Imposed Barriers that Delay or Deny Career Aspirations to be an Administrator in a Public School System

Janet M. McGee, Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Research, Technology, and Leadership, University of Central Florida

Abstract
Throughout history, women have faced numerous career barriers. Although significant progress has made it possible to break through the 'glass ceiling,' there remains a disproportionate percentage of women at the higher educational administrative positions, specifically the superintendent and high school principal roles. This study will look at one aspect of climbing a career ladder: self-imposed barriers of the journey to rise to an administrative position in public school systems.
This study examines the commonalities and differences between and among gender specific Florida administrators. The study explores administrators at the educational levels: elementary, middle school, high school, and district office, more specifically at administrative positions of superintendents, assistant superintendents, principals, and assistant principals within the Florida public school system. Common themes were extracted from the participants' responses. These themes were used to develop recommendations that schools and universities may implement in order to continue fostering the upward progression of women within education. Acknowledging differences and recognizing barriers, while learning to balance personal and professional career roles will make that climb on the career ladder easier for leaders that wear heels.

Introduction

According to the YWCA (2007) Women's Leadership Initiative, "A career ladder can be climbed in heels." This study examined one aspect of climbing that career ladder: self-imposed barriers of the journey to rise to an administrative position in public school systems. *Barriers, glass ceilings*, and *broken ladders* are all terms associated with obstacles women have encountered while trying to attain top management positions, and have been researched and studied extensively over the last thirty years. In the early 1990s, aspiring women viewed the barriers to the superintendency as external blockage. Derrington and Sharratt (2009a) reported on a study conducted in 1993 surveying women in Washington State who aspired to hold or already held a superintendent position. These researchers further reported that the women in their study perceived the barriers as "institutionalized and rooted in societal practices, such as gender-role stereotyping and sex discrimination" (Derrington and Sharratt, 2009a). Fourteen years later (2007), administering the same survey, Derrington and Sharratt found women still encountered barriers to attaining the superintendency but now the top barrier was reported as self-imposed. The respondents in this 2007 study defined self-imposed barriers as "the failure to attain the superintendency or the decision to avoid it because of family responsibilities" (Derrington and Sharratt, 2009b). As Derrington and Sharratt point out, "recognizing a barrier… is the first step

toward overcoming it" (2009a). To climb or not to climb seems to be the question women are now addressing. Aspiring women are recognizing that they have a choice when to climb the career ladder and "the climb" depends on how much and how fast they want to advance. Hence, are there glass ceilings and broken ladders, or have women moved to winding roads with more control over their choices, and/or inviting pauses on the climb up the ladder?

Background

In 1992, women held 87% of teaching positions in elementary schools (K-5) and 55% in secondary schools (6-12) (U. S. Equal Opportunity Commission of Elementary and Secondary Staff Information 1995). In the 1993-94 school year 40% of women in education held administration positions, with 34.5% holding positions as principals of an elementary or secondary school. Although the teaching profession is predominately female, and administrators, superintendents, assistant superintendents, principals, and assistant principals, are usually selected from within the teaching staff, males have held the majority of administrative positions (Curphey 2003). Mertz (2006) reported a male dominance pattern in administrative positions, particularly at the secondary school level. However, another recent study (2006) conducted by Roser, Brown, and Kelsey (2009) reported the opposite to be true in the state of Texas. They reported a higher number of female principals in Texas (Roser, Brown, and Kelsey, 2009). The Texas Education Agency (TEA) verifies that women have been the dominant gender in school administration in the state of Texas since 1998 (ASK TEA 2010). Gotwalt and Towns (1986) reported that women held 55% of elementary administrative positions, 12% of the junior high schools, and only 6% of highs schools during the 1930's. Roser, Brown, and Kelsey (2009) supported these findings by indicating women in Texas held 73.5% of the elementary administrative positions, 41.3% of junior high positions, and 29.8% of high school positions. Roser and colleagues' study demonstrates that women are increasing in numbers in administrative positions and are the more prevalent gender in the elementary administrative positions. According to the Wisconsin State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Elizabeth Burnmaster, "Getting more women to enter administration, especially considering becoming high school principals is a critical issue…a high school Principalship is considered a key steppingstone to becoming a superintendent" (interviewed by Anne Davis, reporter for The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, 2003). Later studies (Curphey 2003, and Glass and Franceschini 2007) report a rise in women superintendents across the nation from 12% in 1990 to 13% in 2003 and 22% in 2006.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2006-2007), the state of Florida has the fourth largest teacher and school administrator population. The state of Texas has the largest with California following. In the state of Texas, women make up 55% of the administrators and in the state of California 58% of the administrators are women. The state of Florida reported 60.6% women administrators beginning the Fall of 2008 school year. Although the gap between the percentage of female teachers and female administrators has narrowed, two areas are significantly lagging the percentage of women to men principals at the secondary level

and the ratio of female teachers to female principals versus the ratio of male teachers to male principals. According to the Data Report of 2008, in the state of Florida, there are 48.5 female teachers for every female principal compared to 16.6 male teachers for every male principal (Education Information and Accountability Services 2009). There has been little change in this ratio over the last six years. Florida has fewer school districts (sixty-seven), many with a large number of public and charter schools, and more school administrators with the majority female. Pennsylvania, the state with the sixth largest teacher population (majority female) has 504 school districts. Compared to Florida, Pennsylvania had fewer administrators; majorities were male with only 20% of the superintendents and 25.7% of the secondary principals, female. Could it be that smaller school districts make it harder for females to advance, or does Florida do a better job with encouraging female advancement? Personal experiences as a Pennsylvania a teacher and administrator, for thirty-two years has caused me to question if there were unrealized, self-imposed barriers that hampered my rate of climbing the administrative ladder. Have the females in Florida discovered a way around the barriers and are there lessons to be learned?

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the percentage of women administrators in the public school system of Florida, and to report on commonalities or differences that exist between and among the administrative positions held at each of the educational levels (elementary, middle, high schools, and district office). This report will then lead into an exploration of barriers, particularly self-imposed barriers perceived by women administrators in the state of Florida. Self-imposed barriers, for this study, are defined as a delay of or failure to obtain an administrative position due to a personal decision to delay or avoid the position because of family responsibilities, inflexibility to relocate, and/or family and motherhood influences. This researcher will identify themes and/or relationships that will lead to suggestions and/or recommendations to assist school districts and university leadership programs in promoting greater success for women.

Research Questions

The following research questions were explored:
1. To what extent, if any, is there a difference between the demographics: gender and educational level (elementary, middle, high school, and district office) in administrative positions within the state of Florida?
2. To what extent, if any, is there a difference between gender specific superintendents in relationship to the gender of second level administrators (principals and assistant superintendents and principals) within the state of Florida?

3. Is there a relationship, if any, between assistant superintendents and/or principals and assistant principals, wanting to advance and self-imposed barriers delaying their career aspirations?

Methodology
Design of Study
The design of the study was descriptive and comparative with two components. In order to explore research question one, it was necessary to report descriptive statistics comparing the variable gender with the variables of school levels and administrative positions within the state of Florida. Data were gathered from the Florida Department of Education and the individual school districts' websites (N=67). Data extracted from these websites has been reported in Table 1. In addition, for research question two, data were gathered from individual schools' websites that had a female superintendent (n=21). Table 2 displays the simple comparative ratios computed to explore question two. Both tables can be found in the results section of this paper. It is important to note that results are indicative rather than definitive.

The second component of this study explored research question three and utilized an eleven-question electronic survey to collect and analyze the perceptions or experiences of the female administrators regarding barriers, either self-imposed or external that delayed or denied an administrative position. The survey focused on districts in the state of Florida that had a female superintendent (n=21). Population percentages were reported for the demographic information, and then comparisons and connections were made and reported in the results section of this paper. Next, a sample of and summaries of respondents' original comments have been provided and do offer supportive evidence of previous studies, further extending knowledge on barriers women face while climbing the ladder, particularly self-imposed barriers.

Population and Sample Size
The population for questions one and two included all school districts' practicing administrators in the positions of superintendent, assistant superintendent, principal, and assistant principal in the state of Florida as noted on, first, the Department of Education website, then according to each of the sixty-seven school districts' individual websites. More specifically, in addition to all superintendents for each school district (N=67), only assistant, deputy, and area superintendents (n=212), along with principals (n=2,730) and assistant principals (n=3,733) in a public elementary, middle/junior high, and high school setting were included. Charter, private, vocational, alternative, and exceptional education school administrators were excluded from the population sampling.

Purposeful but nonproportional quota sampling was used to explore research question three. Therefore, the sample size of participants that were invited to partake in the survey component of the study were all practicing females in administrative positions (assistant superintendents, principals, and assistant principals) under the leadership of a female

superintendent. There were twenty-one identified school districts lead by female superintendents in the state of Florida, with ninety participants (n=90) in this study. Purposeful sampling was utilized due to the desire to reach a targeted sample in a short amount of time and proportionality was not the primary concern. It was not necessary to match the number of responses in each subgroup to the proportions of the population. Instead, the desire was to assure that even the smaller groups were adequately represented.

Data Collection
Email addresses for women administrators in each district were complied into a listserv for the twenty-one school districts with the targeted female superintendents. An explanation of the study, accompanied a voluntary participation request and an eleven-question survey was distributed via a personalized email. All invitees were guaranteed confidentiality of identities. It is important to note that participants completing the survey were already successful administrators. Therefore, the qualitative data was used to gain an understanding of the 'bigger picture.'

Survey questions one two, three, and six identified participants current position, years in current position, age range at current position as well as age when they achieved any former administrative positions. Questions four and five denoted time, which included the number of years they tried for current position and length of time they chose to delay applying or accepting positions. Questions seven and eight had to do with children and included the number of children at home and number of children under the age of eighteen, during current or previously held administrative positions, as well as total number of children, and age ranges. Question nine had two parts participants were supplied with a list of obstacles commonly encountered by women in their upward career mobility. Participants were to check all that applied, first within the past ten years and then currently. The last two questions, ten and eleven, were open-ended. In question ten participants were asked to explain if they had ever self-imposed a barrier and made a choice not to pursue or accept an administrative position. Question eleven asked if they had ever experienced a barrier caused by a family necessity (e.g. change in financial status, partner loss of job, divorce, head of household, death of a partner, etc.) that delayed their pursuit or denied them a promotion.

As previously noted, participation and completion of the survey was voluntary. Participants that completed the survey were given two options to return the survey, via email or via postal service to allow for a greater protection of privacy. As surveys were returned, data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet and later transferred into Statistical Package for Social Sciences, Version 18 (SPSS) for statistical analysis.

Results
Research Question One

To what extent, if any, is there a difference between the demographics: gender and level, (elementary, middle, high school and district office) in administrative positions within the state of Florida?

The current study explored differences between demographics of gender and levels (elementary, middle, high schools, and district offices), and of positions (superintendents, assistant superintendents, principals, and assistant principals) of public school administrators in the sixty-seven school districts in the state of Florida. The data presented here are the most current data as of Fall 2009 school year and gathered in January 2010.

Although the majority of administrators in this current study are female (68%), females are still the minority at the high school level in both the principal (34.1%) and assistant principal (45.7%) positions and at the district office level only in the position of superintendent (31.3%). Table 1 displays the public school administrators in the state of Florida by gender, levels, and positions. As noted earlier these numbers do not include charter, private, vocational, alternative, and exceptional education school administrators.

Table 1. Public School Administrators in the 67 School Districts/Counties in the State of Florida by Gender, Levels, and Positions

Position	Female	Male	Total
Superintendent	* 21	46	67
Asst. Superintendent	80	65	145
Total Number at District Office	101	111	212
Elementary Principal	1324	426	1750
Elementary Assistant Principal	1020	295	1315
Total Number at Elementary	2344	721	3065
Middle/Junior High School Principal	278	262	540
Middle/Junior High School Asst. Principal	574	473	1047
Total Number at Middle School	852	735	1587
High School Principal	*150	290	440
High School Assistant Principal	*627	744	1371
Total Number at High School	777	1034	1811

Note: Numbers do not include charter, private, vocational, alternative, and exceptional education school administrators.

Note that 76.5% of the female administrators are at the elementary level. Research (Glass 2000; Gupton and Slick 2007; Hickey-Gramke 2007; Hoff and Mitchell 2008) suggests that the most likely career path to the superintendency is through the high school Principalship. Hickey-Gramke (2007) noted there is an "aggressive recruitment of high school principals to become superintendents, although two thirds of the nation's schools are elementary where many women lead." This current study supports an existing connection between the high school level administrators and the superintendency position. Female high school principals comprise 34.1%

while female superintendents comprise 31.3%. Therefore, if high school principals are on the fast track to a superintendent position, female high school principals, in the state of Florida, have a lower probability of achieving a superintendent position, one of three. Interestingly, there is a slightly greater than a two to one ratio of male to female superintendents in the state of Florida.

Research Question Two
To what extent, if any, is there a difference between gender specific superintendents in relationship to the gender of second level administrators (principals and assistant superintendents and principals) within the state of Florida?

To explore if there was evidence of a gender bias of district superintendents towards the number of male and female assistant superintendents, principals, and assistant principals employed within their districts, comparative ratios were calculated. There was no indication that there is a significant difference of gender of second level administrators between male or female superintendents. Table 2 displays ratios by gender of the superintendent compared to the gender of second level and positions of administrative staff. There was however, a two- to-one ratio of female assistant superintendents employed with male versus female superintendents. One possible explanation for this could be because male superintendents are the dominate leaders in large school districts in Florida. Larger school districts required more district office administrators (assistant superintendents).

Table 2. Public School Administrators in the 67 School Districts in the State of Florida by Gender of Superintendents and Gender of Second Positions and Levels of Administrators by Ratio

Male Superintendents (46)	Female	Male	Female Superintendents (21)	Female	Male
Positions			**Positions**		
Asst. Superintendent	1.4	1.1	Asst. Superintendent	0.7	0.7
Principals	26.4	15.0	Principals	25.7	13.7
Assistant Principals	33.3	23.8	Assistant Principals	32.8	19.8
Levels			**Levels**		
Elementary Principal/AP	34.2	11.2	Elementary Principal/AP	36.7	9.7
MS/Jr. High Principal/AP	13.5	11.7	MS/Jr. High Principal/AP	11.0	9.3
High School Principal/AP	**12.0**	***15.9**	High School Principal/AP	**10.8**	***14.5**

Of the six largest school districts in Florida, five were lead by male superintendents and each had the largest percentage of female assistant superintendents.

Research Question Three

Is there a relationship, if any, between superintendents, assistant superintendents and/or principals and assistant principals, wanting to advance and self-imposed barriers delaying their career aspirations?

The second component of this study examined a targeted sample of women administrators (n=90) in the state of Florida under the leadership of women superintendents. Through an electronic survey, the researcher was able to identify and probe barriers, particularly self-imposed barriers that resulted in delaying or denying the attainment of an administrative position by this targeted group of leaders. Section one of the survey offers insight concerning the demographic characteristics of the participants, while section two examines the barriers or obstacles women in administrative positions may experience on their way up the career ladder.

In section one, the majority of respondents were principals (51.1%) (n=46), with 34.8% (n=34) assistant principals and the remaining 11.1% (n=10) either superintendents or assistant superintendents. The majority of respondents have been in their current position for an average of four to six years (41.1%) with the next highest group averaging one to three years (31.1%). Interestingly, but not surprisingly, the majority of respondents (62.2%) were forty-five years of age or older, with 24.4% in the fifty-five to fifty-nine age range, while forty-five to forty-nine and fifty to fifty-four were equally distributed at 18.9% each. The two lowest groups were the end-points of the age range thirty to thirty-four at 5.6% and sixty plus years at 4.4%. Questions four and five in the survey denoted time; when respondents were asked how many years they attempted to achieve their current position or a similar position before they were hired, 68% of them stated it took one year or less. This implies that most of the respondents do not have difficulty pursuing their desired position, they may only actively pursue a position when they know an opening will be available, or when they are ready to pursue it.

In section two, the top concern for women administrators was the balancing of careers and raising children. In general, the majority of respondents (43.3%) already in administrator positions reported they had no children at home. An almost equal amount of women administrators (42.85%) had school age children, either six to ten years of age or eleven years and older, of which the later was the higher of the two responses at 30.0%. A small minority (13.85%) had children younger than five living at home. Table 3 displays these results more specifically, by administrative positions and age range of children living at home. Since the respondents were able to identify all administrative positions held before the current position and report age specific number of children at home at the time of each position began, the percentages reported will not equal one hundred percent due to multiple answers.

Table 3. List of Administrative Positions Held by Participants and Percentage of Age Range of Children at Home

Positions Held	None/NA	11 + Yrs	6-10 Yrs	0-5 Yrs	Combo 6+	Combo 0-10	0-5/11+
Superintendent/Assistant	60.0%	30.0%	10.0%	-	-	-	-
High School Principal	57.1%	21.4%	7.1%	-	14.3%	-	-

Middle School Principal	54.5%	18.2%	-	18.2%	9.1%	-	-
Elementary Principal	47.1%	20.6%	2.9%	11.8%	2.9%	14.7%	-
High School Assistant Principal	44.0%	24.0%	4.0%	8.0%	8.0%	8.0%	4.0%
Middle Assistant Principal	39.1%	26.1%	-	13.0%	-	8.7%	13.0%
Elementary Assistant Principal	41.2%	17.6%	7.8%	9.8%	11.8%	5.9%	5.9%

Predictably, district administrators (60%) and high school principals (57.1%), were the largest groups that reported having no children at home and the only administrators who had no children younger than five years of age. Respondents that have been assistant principals at any level and/or elementary principals have had more children living at home than secondary or district level administrators during their leadership positions. Furthermore, responses for question eight indicated that the presence of children did not cause 75.6% of the respondents to delay their career growth.

The final table, Table 4, represents question nine of the survey: barriers that women administrators perceived they commonly encountered in their upward career paths. The respondents were able to select and comment on all barriers that applied to their current position and positions held within the last ten years. These common barriers were ranked using the respondents' answers for currently experiencing, from highest to lowest percentage. Politics/'Good Ole Boy' Network (37%) was the number one barrier respondents reported within the last ten years and currently it ranks second (26%). Family Anxiety (29%) is currently number one.

An important finding is that these women administrators seem to have recognized barriers and are finding ways around them. All of these common barriers indicated a moderate to small decrease in percentage of occurrence. These barriers will be further discussed in the following Discussion and Implication section of this paper.

Table 4. List of Obstacles Respondents Perceived They Encountered Currently, and Within the Last Ten Years

Barrier Type	Currently	Within last 10 years
Anxiety/Family	29 %	34 %
Politics-Good Ole Boys Network	26 %	37 %
Lack of Network	14 %	26 %
Lack of Confidence	13 %	21 %
Job Location	13 %	16 %
Child Care Issues	13 %	17 %
Employers Negative Gender Attitudes	11 %	16 %
Lack of Assertiveness	10 %	17 %
Spouse's Career Conflict	8 %	11 %
Reluctance for Risk	7 %	18 %
Desire to Start Family	6 %	6 %
Lack of Peer Support	4 %	14 %
Lack of Family Support	3 %	6 %
Lack of Motivation	2 %	8 %

The remainder of the survey, questions ten and eleven, were open-ended and revealed several interesting connections. These connections were developed into five interrelated themes. Each theme will be examined in the discussion section that follows. As stated previously, it is important to note that the small sample size of survey respondents does not permit definitive conclusions, but rather discussion will be more suggestive in nature.

Discussion and Implications

The discussion that follows is meant to "tell the story" of a targeted group of successful women administrators in the state of Florida that will add to the existing body of knowledge of how women climb or not climb the ladder to an administrative position in a public school system. Previous research, current study comparisons, connections, and respondents' comments are intertwined in the following five themes. These themes are connected to self-imposed barriers.

Theme 1
Women start into administration at a later age; choosing to raise their children first and find balance between career and family responsibilities.

According to Hirsh and Jackson (1990), "women are interested in promotion before having children, and after the children had matured." One successful and respected area superintendent who moved up through the ranks said it best:

> I made a decision early on in my career as a teacher to delay pursuit of an administrative leadership role until my children were grown. I wanted to be available to parent them, so I waited until they were in college. I did however; complete my masters degree, educational specialist, and doctorate degree while I was raising my children. My husband was my personal support system.

Some women enjoy staying in the classroom longer while raising their children because schedules, hours, flexibility, and time commitment work in favor of their families. Others respond:

> I chose to remain in an Assistant Principal position, close to my home for an extended period while my youngest child was very young even though I was offered several positions during that time. Once he completed elementary school, I began to accept positions upward. Education combines well with various stages of child rearing. I might have pursued some other career interests such as law had I not elected to have a family.

> I chose to remain in classroom while my children were small. It is difficult to put in the hours necessary for an administrative position when you have small children at home.

> I obtained my certification in Ed Leadership over the course of several years when my daughter was a toddler. Once she entered elementary school, I started

the district process to enter the Assistant Principal pool. I waited until my daughter was in middle school before completing district process to be Principal.

The current study supports this theme the majority of our respondents began their administrative careers later in life. Those moving on to be principals were more than likely to be in their late thirties (thirty-eight or thirty-nine) or early forties and have been in that position for four to six years. A study completed by Eckman (2004), reported "females delayed their careers due to family responsibilities." McCreight (1999) confirmed, "Women enter the superintendency later in life, compared to men, due to marriage and family responsibilities." McCreight also noted that 36% of women enter the superintendency after the age of forty-six compared to 14% of men (McCreight1999). The findings in the current study imply that the more responsibility of the position (assistant principal to elementary principal to secondary principal to district offices), the less likelihood of children being in the home. This could mean one of two things a) these women never had children or b) these women have grown children who are not currently living at home and have entered the administrative system only after they have raised their children. The majority of administrators that had children at home are most likely to have school age children by the time they achieved a given rank. The following respondent comments on the additional responsibility placed on a high school principal, particularly a female high school principal.

> As females pursuing administrative positions in the field of education, you sacrifice your family in numerous ways, especially if you are a high school principal. You must have a supportive husband who understands your commitment and the time that it takes to make school/students successful. It is a major sacrifice, but rewarding!

Women administrators, in the current study, perceived the number one obstacle, commonly encountered by them currently (29%), as well as within the last ten years (34%) to be personal anxieties about being both a wife/mother and career woman. Aspiring women are choosing to raise their families before entering into administration, or they are finding better ways to achieve both. According to the current study, lack of family support is currently perceived as being a barrier by only 3% of respondents, down from 6% over the last ten years. Women may be learning to ask for family help and to share the responsibility of raising children. Are wives/mothers/career women, recognizing that raising children does not have to delay or deny a career? The presence of children did not cause 75.6% of the women in this study to delay their career growth or entry into an administrative position or an increased rank. Respondents reply:

> Early in my career, my children were more important to me than my career and I made a conscious choice to postpone my career advancement. Great decision, by the way!

As a principal, I believe I had achieved a delicate balance between career and family demands and did not choose to pursue positions that would have compromised this BALANCE.

Have women administrators discovered they have more control and choices over their careers and families? Have aspiring women found the sense of "balance" they were looking for, enough to make this a self-imposed barrier that can be overcome at the time they choose?

Theme 2

Women plan ahead, increasing confidence of being prepared prior to seeking administrative positions.

" Proving that women are good enough has always been the ceiling through which women glimpse the medusa of success – only to be turned to stone through self-doubt" (Helliwell 2004). Hoff and Mitchell (2008) referring to Barbero's 1999 study stated "women need a strong self-concept if they wanted to overcome barriers in advancement." Women at times may experience conflict between their own high standards and expectations of themselves as a leader and their own critical assessment of their performance (Gardiner, Grogan, and Enomoto 1999). In the current study, respondents named "lack of confidence" as the fourth highest barrier they perceived within the last ten years (21 %) and currently (13%). Although there appears to be a current decrease in encountering this barrier, it is still a concern for some of the respondents who commented:

> I had the sense when I was younger that I had to prove myself. I needed to wait to get 'enough' experience. Now, I realize that I could have done this job or applied for other positions much earlier, but as you know, there are obstacles-real or imagined.

> Many women I know feel they are not qualified for the position of principal even when they are more qualified than men applicants are.

> Two principal positions were advertised. My principal, at the time, and another mentor encouraged me to apply, but I did not apply, because I felt insecure. I needed more time as an assistant principal first.

The findings of this current study supports those of other researchers that state that often "women delay entry into administration to be 'super-prepared' before applying," and they enter with greater professional preparation (Hoff and Mitchell 2008; Spencer and Kochan 2000). Education and certification is no longer an external barrier for women. According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics (2009), for the year of 2007-2008, females earned 58.1% of the master's degrees, and more specialist and doctorate degrees than the males did. Hoff and Mitchell's 2008 study reported that women administrators (61.14%) in Maine had completed the requirements for administrative certification and earned advanced degrees in far greater numbers than men (5.21%) earned (Hoff and Mitchell 2008). Responses

from the current study support the importance women place on their degrees and preparedness. These comments represent views of other respondents as well:

> I waited to return for a master's degree until after my children were in high school.

> I am hoping to work on my doctorate while raising my young daughter. This will also allow me time to decide if this is the path, I want to pursue.

> I wanted to complete my doctorate degree prior to applying for an area superintendent position.

> I stayed an assistant principal and I am not currently seeking a principal position due to starting a doctoral degree. I am in a wonderful school with a good working administrative team and taking on my own school would delay my doctoral work.

Another study conducted in 1990 supported the finding that women have more experience in the classroom than men administrators stating that three-fourths of women versus two-thirds of men had more than five years of teaching experience before entering administration (Schuster and Foote 1990). Eckman's study (2004) found males moved out of the classroom quicker than females. The females in her study spent an average of 10.9 years as classroom teachers, with a range of three to twenty-three years, while the average length of teaching for the males was only 7.8 years with a range of five to fourteen years. Respondents wrote:

> A school opened where the previous principal was advancing to a county level position. The school was large and consisted of high socio-economic student body. I did not feel up to filling those shoes. I had worked mostly in low socio-economic schools.

> I wanted to gain more experience before I moved on.

During 2007-2008, in the United States, the gap in years of teaching experience for females and males entering into a Principalship has narrowed, female principals had 14.3 years of teaching experience while males had twelve years (U.S. Department of Education 2009). Furthermore, the average years of experience between female and male principals has narrowed. In 1994, males were in principal positions double the years of females: males 10.3, females 5.6 with a difference of 4.7 years. Ten years later (2004) males had 9.1 years of experience and females 6.3 years with a difference of 2.8 years. Females are still gaining, in 2008 the average years of experience for males were 8.2 and females 6.8 with a difference of 1.4 years (U.S. Department of Education 2009). It is interesting to note that while female principals have gained 1.2 average years of experience, males have lost 2.1 average years of experience. According to the recent statistics and the narrowing of both gaps (years of experience in the classroom and in the administrative positions) there is a likelihood that women are entering into administration a little sooner than ten years ago. Could it be as women administrators gain knowledge and experience and complete their degrees their confidence grows stronger? Is self-confidence a self-imposed barrier?

Theme 3

Busy women raising families and completing degrees lack time for "social networking" circles that men already are accepted in.

Theme 3 has four interrelated components that show the complexity inherent to this theme.

- **3.1:** *Exclusion from professional networks; can impede women from achieving career advancement.*

First, in this current study the number one barrier our women administrators commonly encountered within the last ten years was politics (37%). Presently politics (26%) is the number two barrier with lack of professional networking third (14%) (See Table 4). According to Eagly and Carli (2007), "social capital is even more necessary to manager's advancement than skillful performance of traditional managerial tasks." Furthermore, women lack social connections, which can impede their advancement. Eagly and Carli (2007) noted how time-consuming it is to build a valuable network, and for women it addsextra demands, especially if they have a family. Networking is usually done outside the work hours. Many times women are not invited to attend the outside "networking events," (e.g. sporting event, golf, and/or poker game). Hoff and Mitchell (2008) note that "if the network exists (which may be largely hidden, but have no visible effects), it may serve as a disincentive and keep those on the outside (mostly women) from entering or trying to advance in leadership." Several survey respondents wrote:

> I had a male assistant principal who discouraged me. Then the new superintendent (woman) has opened many opportunities for new administrators helping to lessen the network of the good ole boys in our district.

> Being a female administrator has its challenges. There have been times when I have had to choose between being politically correct to gain acceptance into a good ole boy network or to be true to my philosophies and beliefs. Only in the last year due to an outstanding new superintendent (woman) have I felt fully confident that my ideas/beliefs could be expressed without repercussions. I have strong values, and while I did not intentionally impose a barrier, I realize I have stayed true to my convictions and it has created barriers.

> I have been passed over so many times in the last ten years that I have given up! I have three years until retirement, and it is just not worth it.

Gardiner, Enomoto, and Grogan (2000) noted that the mentioning of "networking" most often "refers to the 'old boys network'—an invisible network of sponsorship whereby older professionals groom younger versions of themselves for leadership positions" (p.188). Survey respondents wrote:

> I did not fit the 'good ole boys' scenario and would not comply with their form of politics. I was never allowed to be an administrator at any level. I applied for over seven years for various administration positions and was in the top three

repeatedly. The last time I applied I told the superintendent that I knew I would not get this job too because of who I was and that I didn't play the same games he did. I did not apply again but instead ran for the superintendent's job and I was elected!

When I started to apply, I was told often, "That job's for a man." I was even told I was the number one pick, but because I was a woman I could be passed over for now, because I would still be on the list in a few months and the man who they hired would not be. We all know these statements are illegal, but if you say anything, you will never get a job.

I was not hired and informed that I was 'not the right fit' but I was never sure what that meant. African American female administrators are even more of a minority in our district. Most of the ones that are hired are placed in the high poverty schools. Perhaps this is where we fit?
I knew that someone had already been 'chosen' for it even before the interview process.

Politics within the district was the cause of the principal position not being made available as initially indicated.

- **3.2:** *Women reluctant to relocate; may reduce their career advancement opportunities.*
    Second, it is important to examine networking and geography. Professional social networking involves expanding to include contacts beyond the employing district and having the ability to go where the 'good' administrative positions are. Ryder (1994) reported that only five percent of the women were willing to relocate to further their careers. Their primary reasons for not relocating were marriage and their children. Therefore, women aspiring for an administrative role, working in a small district with many years of service, reluctant to move, will find it difficult to advance because openings will be scarce. Women working in larger districts have a better chance at advancement (Ramsey, 1997). In the current study, job location was tied with lack of confidence and childcare issues for fourth place in the list of barriers commonly encountered by women administrators. One respondent wrote:

    Waited until my children were a little older and stable in their schoolwork before
    completing my Masters Degree. I chose schools to not apply to due to the location
    and distance away for my children's schools.

Other research (Edson, 1988; Grogan, 1999; Hoff and Mitchell, April 2008; Spencer and Kochran, 2000) supports that women are less likely to relocate. Even within district, women administrators are reluctant to move because of how hard it was to achieve a level of comfort in their current school and or new school was too far from family's home. Survey respondents commented:

    During my third year as principal of my current school, I was asked to consider a
    transfer to a different middle school, larger population, and different location. I

requested that I not be moved, reason key stakeholders and leadership team in current school were retiring, second assistant principal changes and didn't feel that it was best of me to leave. In addition, I love my faculty/staff and we are one big happy family/community.

I chose to only apply for positions in this district due to family constraints. The only barrier I felt I faced was that we had only 10 elementary schools therefore there were few opportunities for advancement in this district.

At the beginning of my search for an administrative position, I did limit my search to the county I reside. This probably did impede my entry by a year.

If women had stronger networks beyond the employing district, would it boost self-confidence and open greater opportunities?

- **3.3:** *Once 'in' an administrative position, women still feel isolated.*

The third interrelated component is best illustrated by Gupton and Slick (1995) who quoted a female elementary principal as having said, "Even after women have obtained administrative positions, they are not afforded the status or the respect given their male colleagues" (p.10). Current survey respondents shared that perception:

I really think women do not move into administration because they are not mentored or encouraged and once they get in, they are once again on the outside. I am the only woman, last hired, working with five men in administration. Most are polite, but rarely if ever include me unless they need work done or everyone is going. In the three years I have been here, I am the 'go to' person when they want something done but have only been invited to lunch twice by the male administrators unless everyone was going. If they pair off, I might as well not exist. There is no one to hang out with, no one to go to training with, no one to discuss ideas with. You have to always watch what you say and hope it wasn't misinterpreted because you are a woman and the men just don't get how you communicate. When you try to communicate like a man, they think you are upset. You are very isolated. You are assigned all the duties no one else wants like bus duty, which means your day is the longest. They say women aren't in high school positions because of fights, but they don't hesitate to give you the duty that would require you to break up fights. If it is about safety, why are you on the last shift at the prom or homecoming? Why are you at the buses in the dark without other adults? Why are you one of two administrators on campus and he is in his office? It is just an excuse.

I have seen the good ole boys network at play; however, with hard work and focus I have not had this impact on my goals.

Norma Winter's book (2008) *A Woman in a Man's World: The True Story of a High School Principal* recounts various issues of gender bias she faced as the first female principal of a high school in West Virginia (Holleran 2008). During an interview with Kelly Holleran (2008), a reporter for the *Charleston Daily*, Winter stated, "Being a principal of a junior high or high school in West Virginia was pretty much a man's job three decades ago." Norma talked about her experiences when she became principal of Lincoln Junior High School in 1974, and stated that her colleagues were taking bets on how long she would last. She tells about how the school football coach and his assistant resigned during football season because they "couldn't work for a woman." She persuaded them to come to her home, and she talked them into staying and giving her a "trial run." They stayed throughout her time as principal. Her family did not support her and her mother told her she should stay home and raise her children. School officials could not stop Norma Winter from applying or accepting an administration position because she met all the requirements: at least three years of teaching, a master's degree, and a principal's certificate (Holleran 2008). Norma did advance in to the administrative role, but was isolated by her peers, which would suggest an external barrier. However, Norma's ability to conquer and overcome suggests isolation once in the position may be a self-imposed barrier. A respondent wrote:

> I interviewed for years. Kept practicing and interviewing. I was not going to give up. I finally got my Principalship when a new Superintendent came (50 years old).

- **3.4:** *Women need mentors (female and male) for support; women need to be mentors to support.*

The last component of this theme emphasizes the importance of mentoring. Current survey respondents stated:

> I was never mentored and only encouraged after 10 years in my career. I knew more than the AP's about our school, its parents and the kids but never encouraged because I was a woman. I didn't know that at the time.

> Even as an Assistant Principal I have never been mentored or even told to go to specific trainings. My principal has never had a career counseling or goal-setting meeting with me. My own area director told me, "He should have hired me sooner.

Tripes (2004), states that "Women administrators need support and a sense of connection with others who understand the world in which they live" (2). It is important to provide role models, especially at the superintendent and high school principal levels, because this starts the networking process (Hickey-Gramke, 2007). President and CEO of Autodesk, Carol Bartz stated, "I advise women to build a personal mosaic of experts and guides that will cover each of the areas where they need specific information and advice. Someone, who's good at office politics,

someone who's a good time manager, and so on" (Wellington and Catalyst, 2001, p.22). Eckman (2004) noted in her study, "Seven of the eight females indicated that they had considered educational administration only after someone encouraged them to apply for a position or to enroll in administrative certification programs." One of their participants noted, "I never saw myself moving into administration until my mentor suggested something for me." Gardiner, Grogan, and Enomoto (1999) stated, "One of the critical mentoring needs of women is for extensive encouragement and confidence boosting." Current survey respondents wrote:

> Had a strong mentor who served as my district level supervisor when I was a classroom teacher. She encouraged me to move to the district level. From there I returned to the school base as an Assistant Principal for instruction and then when our principal was elected superintendent I was selected as principal.

> I believe having a female Superintendent helped me in attaining my current position. In years past, the ex-football coaches received the principal positions.

Norma Winter, in her interview with Kelly Holleran, stated that she had a supportive male principal (Holleran, 2008). Norma's experience indicates that men can be good, encouraging, mentors for women. Since high school administrators are predominately male, and women need more encouragement to be high school administrators, male administrators are important to the mentorship of women at the high school level. Women, experiencing work/life balance can share strategies, mistakes made, advice on time management, and gender dynamics. Unfortunately, there are too few women in higher-level positions. Gardiner, Grogan, and Enomoto (1999) pointed out "women who are mentors may themselves be struggling for survival." Male administrators at top-levels can be effective advisors helping women with management, office politics, and networking systems: not only for the inexperienced but also women at peer level. According to Eckman (2004), mentoring for males is usually more informal and often leads to job opportunities or contacts. Females need more connectedness and formal mentoring. Gupton (2009), stated networking is not just for job advancement. Networking should be used "to learn, to share, and to maintain professional friends" (Gupton, 2009). Thus, encouragement and mentorship are important and could help women climb the career ladder quicker, but could it be that aspiring women will still climb when they are ready? Are women too busy balancing other responsibilities to develop stronger networks, or is this a self-imposed barrier?

Theme 4

Once aspiring women choose to seek a leadership position; willingly recognize the barriers that can be self-imposed, they move quickly up the ladder.

> *The fishermen know the sea is dangerous and the storm terrible, but have never found these dangers sufficient reason for remaining ashore.* Vincent Van Gogh

The current study validates courageous women administrative leaders in the state of Florida's public school system. Barriers still exist but most of the women found that many of the

barriers were accessible. Women in this study learned to balance personal and professional lives. Although anxiety/family was identified as the number one barrier commonly encountered, an impressive 75.6% of the respondents did not delay their career growth due to the presence of children. The majority of women had supportive immediate and extended family. The women in this study are older, wiser, and more experienced. When the majority of these women believed they were prepared and able to balance family and career, they had no difficulty pursuing their desired positions. Recognizing the challenges, demands, and sacrifices they were able to choose, face, accept, and/or overcome those barriers influencing their careers within their chosen time frames. These aspiring women recognize they have a choice, and it all depends on how much and how fast they want it. Respondents wrote:

> No barriers or delays the current principal fostered my moving into leadership.

> I have received all positions I have applied for in my county. The district focuses on leadership for all leaders. My superintendent is a female and an excellent role model for all.

> I did not delay at any point in applying for advanced position. I knew I wanted to obtain a position as a principal in my district. I applied as soon as I was qualified.

> No Barriers. I did not face any problems or denials. Very fair.

> I interviewed for a principal position at least one year sooner than I had planned due to spouse's loss of job. I really wanted more experience as an Assistant Principal but finances pushed me to go ahead.

Conclusions

This study reported on commonalities and differences between and among gender specific administrators, educational levels, and positions held by administrators in the state of Florida. Next, the study examined barriers; particularly self-imposed barriers perceived by a purposeful sample of the women administrators invited to partake in this study. In the state of Florida, women have made significant strides in finding balance between family and careers. Moreover, there are lessons to be learned. If women recognize and are aware of the external barriers, they will soon realize that they have some control over those barriers. If women remain unaware or choose not to share the responsibility of those barriers, those barriers can become self-imposed. Participants in this study commented more than once about how things changed in their school districts after the appointment or election of a women superintendent. As more and more women rise to higher positions, with better understanding of balancing family and career, more problem-solving strategies and support, can assist future generations of female administrators. This study, not only adds to the already existing body of knowledge about women leaders in public school systems, but also offers the following recommendations and suggestions for school districts and educational leadership programs at universities:

1. School districts and universities can strengthen partnerships by sharing the responsibility of developing mentoring programs that will encourage experienced administrators, including retired administrators, to advocate for inexperienced female leaders.
2. Since males dominate higher-level administrative positions, it is imperative to encourage men to mentor not only new, inexperienced administrators but to be supportive of female peers that may be struggling due to limited numbers of same gender members.
3. Bring importance and awareness of excluding to including and isolation to connection, willing to make compromises by opening social networks, especially after hours that will embrace females as well as males.
4. Conduct workshops, offering strategies for both men and women to understand differences in gender specific needs with emphasis on effective communication.
5. Create purposeful internship programs by evaluating current programs and reflecting on school administrators and interns' needs.
6. Create ownership and acceptance of responsibilities by strategizing for family support systems and teaching women leaders where to look for or where to go for help.
7. Brainstorm possibilities of 'shared leadership' programs that will help women administrators balance personal and professional lives.
8. Create programs that will help women build confidences, ensure preparedness, and encourage open-minds when considering relocation for promotion. Teach that is okay to move out of comfort zone.

The women administrators in this study learned they had a choice to control self-imposed barriers. They had a choice to climb, when the time was right for them, or not to climb, until the time was right for them. They are women who can climb a career ladder in heels.

References

Curphey, Shauna. 2009. Women Scarce in School Systems' Top Jobs. *Women's eNews*, Run Date: September 9, 2003, http://wwww.womensnews.org/article /archive (accessed December 1, 2009).

Davis, Anne. 2003. Female principals remain scarce. *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel,* (Milwaukee, WI.) , July 28, 2003. www.highbeam.com/DocPrint.aspx?DocId=1P2:6204055 (accessed December 1, 2009).

Derrington, Mary Lynn, and Gene Sharratt. 2009a. Female Superintendents: Breaking Barriers and Challenging Life Styles. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*. 75, no. 2 (Winter): 8-12.

Derrington, Mary Lynn, and Gene Sharratt. 2009b. Self-Imposed Barriers: What does it take for female leaders to move beyond the limits they set themselves to reach the superintendency? *The School Administrator* 66, no. 8 (September). http://www.aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=5622 (accessed February 15, 2010).

Eagly, Alice, H., and Linda L. Carli, 2009. Navigating the Labyrinth. *The School Administrator* 66, no. 8 (September). http://www.aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=5622 (accessed February 15, 2010).

Eckman, Ellen Wexler. 2004. Similarities and Differences in Role Conflict, Role Commitment, and Job Satisfaction for Female and Male High School Principals. *Educational Administration Quarterly*. 40, no. 3 (August): 366-387, 9.

Fauth, Gloria. 1984. Women in Educational Administration: A research Profile. *The Educational Forum*. 49, no. 1 (March): 65-79.

Gardiner, Mary, Ernestine Enomoto, and Margaret Grogan. 2000. *Coloring outside the lines: Mentoring women into school leadership.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

Glass, Thomas E.,and Louis A. Franceschini. 2007. *The state of the American school superintendence: A mid-decade study.* A study commissioned by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA). Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Education, 2007.

Gotwalt, Norma,and Kathryn Towns. 1986. Rare as they are, women at the top can teach us all. *Executive Educator* 8 no. 12 (December 29): 13-14.

Gupton, Sandra Lee, and Gloria Slick. 1995. *Highly successful women administrators: The inside stories of how they got there.* California: Corwin Press, Inc.

Helliwell, Charles. 2004. Women in Leadership: glass ceiling or glass mirror? *Management Issues*, July 20,2004. www.management-issues.com/2006/5/25/opinion/women-in-leadership-glass-ceiling-or-mirror-.asp (accessed February 15, 2010).

Helgesen, Sally. 1990. *The female advantage*. New York: Doubleday.

Hirsh, W., and C. Jackson. 1990. Women into management: issues influencing the entry of women into management jobs. *University of Sussex: Institute of Manpower Studies (IMS)*, *Report,* Brighton (United Kingdom): 158.

Hoff, Diane, and Sidney Mitchell. 2008. In Search of Leaders: Gender Factors in School Administration. *Advancing Women in Leadership Journal* 27 (April). http://advancingwomen.com/awl/awl_wordpress/in-search-of-leaders-gender-factors-in-school-administration/ (assessed December 9, 2009).

Holleran, Kelly. 2008. Early female school principal details obstacles she had to face; Administrator says she had to work harder to be accepted." *Charleston Daily Newspaper*, (April 1, 2008). www.highbeam.com/DocPrint.aspx?DocId=1P2:15617897 (accessed December 10, 2009).

Irby, Beverly, and Genevieve Brown. 1995. *Women as School Executives: Voices and Visions*. Austin, Texas: The Texas Council of Women School Executives.

Logan, J. 1999. An educational leadership challenge: Refocusing gender equity strategies. *American Association of School Administration* 22, no. 4.

McCreight, Carolyn. 1999. Female Superintendents, Barriers, and the Struggle for Equity.Report. *ERIC Document Reproduction Service* No. ED432041.

Mertz, Norma. T. 2006. The Promise of Title IX: Longitudinal study of gender in urban school administration, 1972 to 2002. *Urban Education*, 41, no. 6 (November): 544-559.

Polka, Walter, Peter Litchka, and Sheryl Davis. 2008. Female Superintendents and the Professional Victim Syndrome: Preparing Current and Aspiring Superintendents to Cope and Succeed. *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership*. 6, no. 4 (October): p293-311.

Ramsey, Krista. 1997. Domestic relationships of the superintendency. *The School Administrator*, 54, no. 2 (February): 23-26, 38.

Roser, Valerie, Michelle Brown, and Cheryl Kelsey. 2009. Principal gender as related to campus size, level, and academic rating. *Advancing Women in Leadership Journal*, 29, no. 10 (July 30), http://advancingwomen.com/awl/awl_wordpress/ (accessed December 10, 2009).

Ryder, Marie. 1994. Women in educational administration. *Thrust for Educational Leadership*, 23, no. 7 (May/June): 28.

Schuster, Daphine, and Tom H. Foote. 1990. Differences abound between male and female superintendents. *The School Administrator*. 47, no. 2 (February): 14-16, 18, 19.

Sharratt, Gene, and Mary Lynn Derrington. 1993. Female superintendents: Attributes that attract and barriers that discourage their successful applications. Report. *ERIC Document Reproduction Service* No. ED362941.

Texas Education Agency. 2008. Statistics for administrators in state of Texas. ASK TED Database, http://www.askted.tea.state.tx.us (accessed January 8, 2010).

Tripes, J. 2000. Redefining the voice of women administrators. *Advancing Women in Leadership*, 16 (Spring). http://www.advancingwomen.com/awl/spring 2004/TRIPES.html (accessed February 10, 2010).

U.S. Bureau of the Census. February 21, 2008. http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/eeoindex/page_c.html? (accessed October 29, 2009).

U. S. Equal Opportunity Commission of Elementary and Secondary Staff Information. 1995. http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d08/tables/dt08_004.asp (accessed October 29, 2009).

Whitaker, K.S, and K. Lane. 1990. What is "a Women's Place" in Educational Administration? *Education Digest.* 56, no.3 (November): 12-15.