

FEMALE HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN RURAL MIDWESTERN  
SCHOOL DISTRICTS: THEIR LIVED EXPERIENCES IN LEADERSHIP

by

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ABSTRACT  
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This study explored the leadership experiences of female principals of rural high schools in a Midwestern state. The study sought to describe the leadership styles used by these principals to make changes within their schools. Qualitative methodology was used, and four female rural high school principals were interviewed during a series of four hour-long sessions. Transcripts of these interviews were then reviewed and themes identified.

The findings of the study revealed that the principals received informal mentorship and ongoing professional support and that the rural community required them to serve as community role models, effective communicators, and change agents who respected tradition. The effects of sex role stereotypes appeared through the rural communities' acceptance and application of the traditional androcentric definition to the high school principal position.

The principals favored a relational style of leadership coupled with care-focused decisionmaking. They expressed a need to care for the welfare of students and faculty and make changes that enhanced learning opportunities for their students. They sought to empower all stakeholders in order to foster collaboration that produced changes to improve student learning. They circumvented their communities' practice of maintaining

the traditional status quo by employing a “power with” instead of “power over” leadership structure.

This work is dedicated to the two lights of my life, Scott and Brian.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction to the Study

Public education has entered a new century, but inequities from the past century remain; one of these inequities is the low percentage of women who serve as public high school principals in the United States. Nationally, during the 1999-2000 academic year, 22% of public secondary school principals were female; in 2007-08, 29% were female (Aud et al., 2010). During the 2011-12 academic year, 14.5% of a Midwestern state's high schools were led by females; and only 10% of those high schools were designated as rural (Department of Public Instruction, 2012).

The 426 school districts in this Midwestern state are grouped into three categories: urban, suburban, and rural. Of those districts, 59% are rural, 37% are suburban, and 4% are urban. Forty-four percent of the 860,000 of this state's public school students attend school in a rural district (DPI, 2012). Students attending suburban districts traditionally score above both urban and rural students on the state accountability assessment and rural students score above urban students. Additionally, suburban districts have higher average household incomes than urban or rural districts; rural districts have the lowest household incomes (Norman, 2004). Poverty is most commonly found in urban and rural districts.

Rural districts face declining enrollments at a greater rate than either urban or suburban districts. Rural districts, especially those with low student population densities, expend more dollars on student transportation than urban or suburban districts. These districts also have higher debt, fewer teachers per student, and on the high school level,

fewer course offerings than urban or suburban districts (Norman, 2004). Urban, suburban, and rural districts are contextually different and function in different ways.

In many cases, female high school principals in rural settings serve in administrative positions such as district administrator, middle school or elementary principal or director of curriculum and instruction in addition to being the high school principal. During the 2011-12 academic year, 15 female high school principals in rural districts also held an additional administrative position simultaneously (DPI, 2012). Additional responsibilities place limits on the ability of these principals to adequately perform the tasks required for both positions. Starr and White (2008) cited this as one of the factors that prevents applicants from pursuing the rural high school principalship.

### **Statement of Problem**

As this state's high school principals retire or choose to leave their positions, school districts will need to recruit available secondary level administrators regardless of gender. Currently, females are underrepresented in the principalships of rural 9-12 high schools in this Midwestern state.

A number of factors may contribute to the low percentage of female public high school principals: low job application rates resulting in low interview rates, a perception that women are not suited for the position based on gender stereotypes (Oplatka & Atias, 2007), lack of support by those in decisionmaking positions (Eckman, 2004), or a backlash response by community members or faculty to women serving in a male-gendered position (Rudman & Glick, 2001). Women who hold the high school principal position may be seen by their faculty members, parents, and central office staff as lacking in competence simply because they are not male. "There is ample evidence in the

literature that women are subjected to gender-biased evaluations, with their performance on male gender-typed tasks often devalued and their competence denied” (Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs & Tamkins, 2004, p. 416). Consequently, this kind of evaluation limits the upward progression of female administrators through the administrative ranks. This is a loss to the individual who is denied entrance into a position that challenges her and a position that offers higher salaries and more benefits; it is also a loss to the students she may have positively impacted.

Although studies of experiences of females in building level positions have been done, few studies that specifically look at leadership experiences of rural female high school principals exist. A search for literature detailing the experiences of rural female principals in Midwestern states produced limited sources. A number of studies of multiple aspects of the female experience in educational administration were conducted and reported during the 1990s (Gold, 1996; Sachs & Blackmore, 1998; Fennell, 1999); nevertheless, much still needs to be done, particularly studies that specifically focus on building level leadership. “Research on the impact of gender on decision-making and other leadership practices is essential. Despite the growing numbers of women in administrative positions in schools, a lack of research exists regarding the experiences of women” (Giese, Slate, Brown, & Tejeda-Delgado, 2009, p. 2). More specifically, research about rural school leadership is limited as are data on the rural school leadership experience (Sherwood, 2001).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the leadership experiences of female principals of rural high schools in a Midwestern state.

The study also sought to describe the leadership styles used by these principals to make changes in their schools. Findings from this study will add to the research base that describes the experiences of women in the rural high school principalship. The findings from this research will provide information to women who are considering the pursuit of a rural high school principalship and to those decisionmakers responsible for hiring for those positions a more precise picture of the position and of the skills required to perform the job tasks. Additionally, the results of this research will capture a moment in time as a marker describing the conditions that currently exist for those women who serve as Midwestern rural high school principals. This marker can serve as a base level point for future research.

### **Rationale**

Although increasing numbers of women serve as elementary principals and middle school principals in this Midwestern state, the number of women serving as high school principals has not increased at the same rate (DPI, 2012). This pattern is repeated in rural districts. Interestingly, the perceptions and leadership styles of female rural high school principals in this state have not been studied sufficiently. Studies of the phenomenon are necessary to reveal the essence of the experience. Results from such studies could positively influence potential candidates to pursue the rural high school principalship.

### **Research Questions**

- How does the community influence the lived experience of female principals of rural high schools in the Midwest?

- How do female principals of rural Midwestern high schools describe their leadership styles and experiences?

### **Overview of Methodology**

Study participants were female principals who led 9-12 rural high schools, as defined by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI), in this Midwestern state. Rural is defined by the DPI based on data returned to the DPI by the United States Census Bureau and is based on a school's geographic location and community population attributes. The codes are created by the United States Census Bureau from school addresses in the NCES Common Core of Data files (M. J. Otteson, October 8, 2012).

For the purpose of this study, rural was defined as a town or rural area with a population of at least 2500 and located outside a metropolitan area. The experiences of female high school principals in urban and suburban districts are not included in the data; therefore, the study results are not applicable to other high school settings. Ten principals who met the selection criteria were contacted via email, but only four principals agreed to participate. Data were collected via one face-to-face interview with each participant and three subsequent phone interviews with each participant. Interviews with participants were recorded, transcribed and analyzed for major themes.

### **Limitations of Study**

The applicability of the results of the study to all female high school principals' experiences as building leaders will be limited because of the specific nature of the participant pool. The limited number of participants will also restrict any generalizations which can be drawn from the data analysis except in highly similar contexts.

Nevertheless, the study is still significant because the study provides data that currently

are limited in academic literature. Although previous studies have looked at female principals in urban settings, female principals of color, female principals' personal and academic backgrounds, and female principals' struggles to obtain a high school principalship, this study concerned only a specific Midwestern state's female high school principals in rural settings and their lived experiences.

### **Care-Focused Feminism and Relational Leadership**

The work of Gilligan (1982) in ethical development and Noddings (1984) regarding ethic of care forms the theoretical base of this study. Gilligan and Noddings are classified as care-focused feminists because their work focused on "the nature and practice of care" and considered deeply the reasons that females are the care-givers in nearly all societies (Tong, 2009, p. 7). Care-focused feminists also created theories about the reasons that certain characteristics and tasks are generally accepted as typically female and others typically male. Gilligan, for example, posited that females developed their ethical perspectives differently than males. Gilligan contended that women made ethical decisions based on the relationships and welfare of all persons impacted by their decisions, unlike males who exemplified Kohlberg's description of ethical reasoning based on the abstract concepts of justice and rules. Noddings agreed with Gilligan's generalized ethic of care. As described by Tong, "women and men speak different moral languages and that our culture favors a masculine ethics of justice over a feminine ethics of care" (2009, p. 167-68). Applying the ethic of care to leadership practices produces a leadership style marked by nurturing, capacity-building, and the sharing of power which may be viewed as relational leadership (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011), a leadership style that promotes "power *with* rather than power *over*" (p. 7-8).

## Summary

Previous studies, especially the work of Blount (1998), Eagly and Karau (2002) Eckman (2004), Eagly (2007) and Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) have noted the challenges females face in accessing leadership positions in the upper levels of educational administration, particularly the high school principalship. The influence of sex role stereotypes described in multiple research studies (Rusch & Marshall, 2006; Johanson, 2008; Ayman & Korabik, 2010) can negatively affect the perception of faculty and board members about the quality of a female high school principal's job performance. Eagly and Karau (2002), as well as other researchers, have applied role-congruity theory in studies to explain the limited number of females who serve as high school principals. Leadership styles that are attributed to gender (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Eagly, 2005; Scott & Brown, 2006) can be a positive addition to the high school principal position or conversely, be regarded as not suitable to the male-defined position. Further research into the rural high school principalship as experienced by females who serve in the position adds another layer of understanding and greater descriptive depth to an area of limited academic research.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

American women holding positions of power in public education has been, throughout America's history, a story of imbalance (Blount, 1998). This imbalance is particularly apparent on the secondary school level. In 1993, for instance, Lee, Smith and Ciocci stated that "American secondary schools are almost entirely headed by male principals, while women make up about half the teaching force in these schools" (p. 154). According to statistics (Aud et al., 2010), in 1999, females held 52% of public elementary principalships and 22% of public secondary school principalships. By 2007-08, those percentages showed some gains with 64% of elementary principals being female and 28.5% of secondary level principals being female. Rusch and Marshall (2006) state that "the inequities are baffling, in that women currently are the majority of candidates in administrative preparation programmes" (p. 231). These statistics describe a situation that has been created by a host of factors related to sex role stereotyping and the perceived value of female leadership styles.

Historically, an administrative position offered men the ability to earn substantially higher wages and gain greater respect from those within the profession and outside the profession (Blount, 1988). An ancillary argument is touted by Coleman (2005) when she states: "The feminization of the profession is related to its status. When teaching becomes a feminine occupation, men preserve their dominance and hegemony by moving to positions of leadership, leaving women as simple teachers" (p. 6). Extending this construct, in administrative positions that are perceived as requiring a

candidate to exhibit male personality attributes, such as the high school principalship, females have greater difficulty accessing such a position. Coleman (2005) adds that “one of the reasons why women are not favored as principals is the stereotype that women leaders are likely to be soft, indecisive, and generally unsuited to the demands of a role that is thought to require masculine qualities of decisiveness, assertiveness and dominance” (p. 17). Studies conducted by Wallin (2005) indicated that women have a greater chance of securing a central administration position than a high school principalship, especially in rural school districts, because the high school principalship is still defined by a male perception of physical size equals power, and power equals the ability to discipline:

The high school principalship is still hallowed ground on which few women are invited to tread. In fact it seems to be easier for a woman to move into a central office position than it is for her to become a high school principal. Notions of physical size and perceptions about discipline still epitomize the stereotype of the high school principal. (p. 151-52)

### **Factors Affecting Representation of Women**

The factors that may create the small number of female high school principals in rural Wisconsin have been identified through research studies in multiple school districts throughout the United States. These factors include lack of support or sponsorship, limited access to networking, perceived lack of ability and the general acceptance of stereotypical gender-based requirements of the position.

### **Lack of Sponsorship and Access to Networking**

Previous studies (Eckman, 2004; Gosmire, Morrison & VanOsdel, 2010) of factors that limit female candidates from serving as high school principals identified the lack of male sponsorship of female candidates coupled with the inability of females to enter into the informal male networking systems that give male candidates an advantage over female candidates, especially for high school principalships, as a significant factor. “Although some women benefit from male encouragement and attempt to advance in the field through established male networks, others lack that sponsorship and must create their own compensating support systems” (Nogay & Beebe, 2008, p. 601). In Eckman’s qualitative study of male and female high school principals, a male high school principal commented, “It’s not an objective system where the best person gets to the right places. It’s still a good ol’ boy network, with all kinds of favoritism, demonstrated in all kinds of ways” (2004, p. 197).

Interestingly, in a survey of female high school principals (Giese et al., 2009), networking was not seen as a benefit by the respondents in securing their current administrative positions. Female teachers generally do not benefit from the largesse of male administrators. Van Eck, Volman and Vermeulan (1996) describe the reason that this occurs:

Traditionally educational institutions have a horizontal structure with very few people at the top and large numbers of practitioners—men and women teachers having the same status. Despite this theoretical equality in hierarchy and pay, there are differences in power and esteem. These are caused and sustained by opportunities and rewards which are distributed semi-informally. . . Those who

allocate these rewards are usually male. . .who tend to reward those who are most like themselves, that is to say other men. (p. 407)

A teacher in search of an administrative position needs to advertise his/her skills. Having personal contact with administrators is important because the administrator can vocalize his/her support and thus help the candidate gain an interview and perhaps ultimately an administrative position.

### **Assumed Lack of Ability**

Another factor that seems to limit women's access to high school administrative positions is the belief that females lack the ability to effectively deal with high school discipline issues. This particular factor is extremely troubling because it rests on traditional cultural stereotypes of women. Rusch and Marshall (2006) note that "despite the research, despite decades of affirmative laws and policies, men, or women who lead using traditional male-oriented approaches, invariably are selected for sponsorship or available administrative positions" (p. 231). However, research done by Oplatka and Atias (2007) makes a distinction between male and female principals' perspectives regarding leadership and school discipline:

Sex role socialization seems to be sufficiently strong to make each principal adopt leadership styles that are on par with social expectations of his/her gender. Thus for example, women principals attached great significance to caring and emotional understanding, while men principals focused on assertive modes to handle misconduct in school. (p. 56)

Unfortunately, research shows that some women believe that they, indeed, are not qualified for a management position. According to Van Eck et al., (1996), "Women

teachers rarely believe they have a chance of being appointed to a management position. This can be attributed to stereotypical ideas and expectations that women themselves hold, as well as of those who recruit and in the school in general” (p. 407). Bosak and Sczesny’s (2008) study of self-ascribed fit of females to leadership positions noted similarly that “it follows that women who have internalized the traditional female gender role may be less attracted to leadership roles, and therefore be less likely to strive for promotion into such positions” (p. 683). Women who have been inculcated with the belief that certain jobs are done better by men than by women will often not apply for jobs that are traditionally held by males, thus, following the behavior rules established by society through sex role stereotypes.

### **Sex Role Stereotypes**

School boards and superintendents may fail to recognize females as viable candidates for high school principal positions simply because the candidate is female. Rusch and Marshall (2006) reiterate this point:

There remains a substantial degree of sex-role stereotyping that limits the perceived fit of women for certain administrative positions. These perceptual biases may be causing school district leaders and board members to fail to identify highly qualified candidates who don’t look like their predecessors. (p. 229)

Ayman and Korabik (2010) expand on sex role stereotyping arguing that “according to the social structural perspective, different outcomes will be attained by men and women leaders under certain conditions. This is because men are attributed higher status and privilege and they are more likely to be in leadership roles that are congruent

with their sociodemographic gender” (p. 159). Conversely, females in traditionally male positions, such as high school principal, could be perceived as less than competent leaders based solely on context. Johanson (2008) reiterates a similar point in his description of the results of a study that asked participants to identify the leadership skill level of faces: “Perceptions of leadership were positively correlated with masculinity and negatively correlated with femininity. . .the stereotypical view of leadership as masculine is still present and strong in our society” (p. 788). Ryan, Haslam, Hersby, and Bongiorno (2011) note that “research has demonstrated that the experience of female leaders is very different from that of male leaders” (p. 470). In addition, female leaders receive less favorable evaluations compared with their male counterparts even for identical behavior” (p. 470).

Johanson (2008) further notes that “men emerge as leaders more often when the measure of leadership is task-related (or is unspecified); however women emerge more frequently on social measures of leadership” (p. 785). Trinidad and Normore (2005) define “task-related” as leadership functions involving direction, goal-setting, and planning; whereas, “social measures” include relationship skills such as caring, support, and listening. Johanson’s (2008) findings support the role congruity theory described by Eagly and Karau (2002). McFadden, Maahs-Fladung, Beck-Frazier and Bruckner (2009) state that leadership is created through the will of the followers and that these followers’ perceptions are molded from personal experience which can be influenced by socially normative patterns of behavior: “Leadership exists to the degree that people believe it does, and that belief depends on how individuals, through their interactions, create the realities of organizational life and delineate the roles of leaders within them” (p. 117).

## **Role Congruity Theory**

In a well-documented study, Eagly and Karau (2002) discussed the application of the role congruity theory to female leaders. “Social role theorists argue that leaders occupy roles defined by their specific position in a hierarchy and simultaneously function under the constraints of their gender roles” (p. 574). Role congruity theory defines the acceptable gender roles to be played by males and females. Males, especially in leadership positions are expected to be forceful, aggressive and firm; whereas, women are expected to be gentle, collaborative, and caring. Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt (2001) defined these two role descriptions as agentic and communal. Agentic refers to the male attributes of leadership and communal refers to the female attributes. When a female leader exhibits the leadership characteristics of males or agentic characteristics, she is often perceived in a negative way. Eagly (2005) explained this phenomenon in detail:

People are unaccustomed in many organizational contexts to women possessing substantial authority that encompasses decision-making power and control over wages and finances. Not only do people doubt that women possess the appropriate competencies, but also they may resent the overturning of the expected and usual hierarchical relation between the sexes. Therefore, people may react negatively to such women, especially if they behave in a clearly authoritative manner. (p.466)

Eagly and Karau (2002) further claimed that the result of this phenomenon was that females were not viewed as acceptable candidates for certain leadership positions; and if they gained leadership positions, were often evaluated in a prejudicial manner. Scott and Brown (2006) concur with Eagly and Karau’s findings noting that “a series of recent

meta-analyses has demonstrated that gender differences do exist, to varying degrees, in leadership emergence, effectiveness, evaluation, and style, most notably when the leadership position is defined to be clearly masculine”(p. 231). Scott and Brown’s (2006) findings further support the existence of the prejudice against females who attempt to access male-defined leadership positions such as the high school principalship. Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt (2001) noted that:

Not only may gender roles spill over to organizational settings, but leaders’ gender identities may also constrain their behaviors in a direction consistent with their own gender role. Also the female gender role is more likely to be incongruent with leader roles than the male gender role is, producing a greater potential for prejudice against female leaders. Such prejudice could result in sanctions that affect leaders’ behavior. (p 786)

### **Gender Identities**

The masculine defined concept of the high school principalship often negatively impacts the perceived value of a female high school principal’s performance of her leadership duties. According to Gosmire et al. (2010), “researchers have confirmed this masculinized culture. . .there is an either-or paradigm, suggesting that female high school principals feel compelled to think and act like their male counterparts or to step outside of the practiced culture and risk abandonment and isolation” (p. 40). Rudman and Glick (2001) make a similar point when they describe the dilemma faced by women leaders: “They can enact communal behaviors and be liked but not respected or enact agentic behaviors and be respected but not liked. In either case, they risk being disqualified for leadership roles” (p. 744). What then is a female who aspires to the high school

principalship to do? This dilemma is not faced by male administrators in similar situations.

For those women who do gain entrance to high school principal positions, research has shown (Nogay & Beebe, 2008) that they very often prefer to engage in the job duties related to curriculum, learning, professional development and relationship-building rather than more managerial duties. This is not to say that they do not engage in discipline and fiscal management, but when surveyed, female high school principals reported greater satisfaction when working with aspects of teaching and learning.

Because the high school principalship has generally been defined through a male perspective, that is with an emphasis on management (Kaparou & Bush, 2007), this teaching and learning focus by the high school principal may be seen by faculty, staff, students, and school board members as out of place and perhaps not as valuable to the organization. Rusch and Marshall (2006) explain that clear gender bias exists in the expectations of administrative roles that have developed as a result of male dominance of upper level school administration. Fulmer (2010) defines “the practice of viewing the world and shaping reality exclusively through a male lens” as androcentrism (p. 81). Unfortunately, as long as males dominate educational administrative positions, the androcentric notions that assign value to the tasks engaged in by the high school principal will not change. Fulmer (2010) further contends the “one result of this singular male focus-perspective, is that much of the research in educational administration is not only devoid of issues important to women, but also deprives men from understanding how their cultural identity as males interacts with women’s cultural identity as females and the effect this interaction has on organizational dynamics” (p. 82). The stereotypes that

develop from this androcentric view can also keep females from pursuing ostensibly “male” leadership positions like the high school principalship. Eagly and Chin (2010) found:

The activation of cultural stereotypes inconsistent with widely accepted ideals of leadership thus can undermine leadership opportunity not only by eliciting doubts about stereotyped individuals’ leadership abilities but also by making them personally anxious about confirming these doubts and therefore wary about taking leadership roles. (p. 218)

Eagly and Chin’s (2010) observation suggests that females may choose not to apply for a high school principal position because they feel that they neither meet the definition of “high school principal” or that they will fail at the job.

If females fail to apply for high school administrative openings, the numerical discrepancy between males and females in that position will remain static or continue to grow. In a study conducted by Coleman (2005), similar findings about females’ views on accessing a high school principal position were reported:

Women were much more likely than men to put down their lack of success to their own short-comings. Of course some men did express doubts about their own abilities, but their doubts were more likely to be related to the actual experience of being rejected or to factors that they considered were outside their own control.

Women were much more likely to blame themselves for their failure to be appointed. (p. 10)

Specific belief patterns unique to females may influence the manner in which they view the high school principalship. Wojtalik, Breckenridge, Gibson Hancox and Sobehart

(2007) posited that specific gender-related experiences influence how female administrators view their capabilities and view their job priorities; that is, they develop a unique lens or perspective through which they view the world. This lens may inhibit some women from pursuing high school administrative positions or it may conversely afford female high school administrators a truly different way to prioritize the tasks inherent in the position. According to Wojtalik et al. (2007), “Because men and women are socialized differently, they acquire different self-concepts, different patterns of expectations for success, and different values and goals” (p. 46).

Multiple studies have established a definitive numerical discrepancy between males and females occupying the high school principal’s chair in public schools. These studies also articulate some of the causes of this discrepancy, and these causes include the existence of stereotypical, gender-biased practices and perceptions that create barriers for women who attempt to attain and sustain the position of high school principal. McFadden et al. (2009) note that “a new appreciation, new understanding, and greater empathy for this group will be gained by reexamining the experiences of women and acknowledging the importance of their leadership abilities” (p. 121). It is time to give credit to the value of female leadership approaches.

### **Leadership Style**

Researchers studying management styles and institutional organization note that the traditional hierarchical leadership structures of the past are beginning to be transformed into more collaborative leadership formats. Trinidad and Normore (2005) comment that “the differences in men’s and women’s leadership styles are important considering the trends towards flatter organizations, team-based management and

globalization” (p. 574). The change from an Industrial Age model of authoritarian leadership to a participative model of organizational structure requires someone who can lead as well as manage day-to-day operations. In a school setting, that means that the expectation of leaders is that they will set timetables and goals but also establish productive relationships with teachers, staff, parents and students. “In the realm of education, women in leading positions are expected to behave with sufficient authority to gain respect and maintain discipline, and with a large dose of caring and nurturing attitudes to fulfill gender role expectations” (Trinidad & Normore, 2005, p. 582-583).

Transformational leadership, a leadership style marked by optimism, mentoring, open-mindedness, and collaboration is often cited as a style practiced more regularly by women. Whether women leaders intentionally choose this style is debatable, but many of the characteristics of a transformational leader include characteristics that are more often exhibited by women leaders. “Women exceed men on overall transformational leadership . . . which entails mentoring behavior that is supportive of other people” (Vinkenburg, vanEngen, Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2011, p. 11).

Sherman’s (2000) study of female leadership in rural school settings expanded on the concept of a differentiation between male and female leadership styles while proposing greater value be placed on the female style of leadership:

The elements of leadership that most consistently inform a female administrative style include an emphasis on establishing relationships with others in an attempt to build community. . . .A difficulty arises not in the identification of difference, but in the recognition, legitimization and implementation of these preferred modes of leadership within current school leadership practice. (p. 133)

Because high school principals have traditionally been men who have led in ways that do not resemble the way women tend to lead, superintendents and school board members are not familiar with the relational leadership style employed by women. Consequently, female applicants who support and articulate this type of leadership may be viewed as a poor fit for the high school principalship.

Even though women characteristically lead in a way that seems advantageous for organizations today, the number of women occupying secondary school principalships still remains low. According to Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011), women are still poorly represented in the secondary principalship. . . one reason appearing over and over in the literature is that women do not want to lead the way their male role models lead” (p. 41). Additionally, research has shown that female administrators more often than male administrators base their decisions on best practices in instruction (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011).

### **Ethic of Care**

In the early 1980s, researcher Carol Gilligan (1982) came to think that Kohlberg’s Stages of Moral Development did not adequately represent the moral developmental stages of women. Gilligan argued that psychologists by “implicitly adopting the male life as the norm, had tried to fashion women out of a masculine cloth” (1993, p. 6). In fact, she contended that because Kohlberg had studied only the moral developmental patterns observable in males, studies on females needed to be done and the data needed to be analyzed to create a more complete picture of moral development. She stated in her book, *In a Different Voice*, that “my questions are about psychological processes and theory, particularly theories in which men’s experiences stand for all of human

experience—theories which eclipse the lives of women and shut out women’s voices” (1993, xiii). She further contended that when Kohlberg’s stages were applied to females, females as a general rule seemed to be less well developed morally than males especially when dealing with moral dilemmas requiring subjects to apply an ethic of justice.

Consequently, she conducted her own studies. According to Tong (2009), “Gilligan set out to prove that not women but the standards used to judge women’s growth as moral persons must be changed” (p. 164). After collecting data and analyzing it, she reported that females and males, in general, approached moral dilemmas using different reasoning and expressed this difference in reasoning as using “a different voice.” The two different approaches to moral reasoning were defined as the ethic of care and the ethic of justice.

The ethic of care refers to “women’s emphasis on connections and relationships [which] leads them to develop a style of moral reasoning that stresses the wants, needs and interests of particular people” (Tong, p. 164). The ethic of justice refers to “men’s emphasis on separation and autonomy [which] leads them to develop a style of moral reasoning that stresses justice, fairness, and rights” (Tong, p. 165). In general, the female subjects rationalized their decisions based on what Tong refers to as “a human relations problem” (p. 165); whereas, males tended to base their rationalizations on the rights of those involved. Binns (2008) echoed Tong (2009) in stating: “. . . behaviour is governed not by the masculinized norms of formal equality and universal justice, but by the feminized principles of equity, complementary, reciprocity, friendship and care” (p. 602). Eagly (2005) contended that this female approach to reasoning could make positive

contributions to changing the nature of leadership positions that had been traditionally defined from the male perspective.

Nel Noddings (2010), another care-focused feminist, described ethic of care as needs-based and relational. “Human beings are born from and into relation; it is our original condition” (p. 390). Noddings further stated that care-focused ethical reasoning is most often associated with female reasoning and decisionmaking rather than with male patterns of reasoning and decisionmaking:

As an ethical orientation, caring has often been characterized as feminine because it seems to arise more naturally out of women’s experience than men. When this ethical orientation is reflected and technically elaborated, we find that it is a form of what may be called relational ethics. (1988, p. 218)

Relational ethics then, by Noddings’ definition, involves a relationship between people. Leaders who recognize that they need to understand the needs of those for whom they are making decisions practice ethic of care reasoning. Further, these leaders practice what Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) term as relational leadership: “Relational leadership is about facilitating the work of others” (p. 10).

In Fennell’s (2002) study of power structures in public schools, she noted that “power relations affect all aspects of our lives. Recently there has been a call for principals to decentralize power in schools and increase participation in school decision making by teachers, students parents and community members” (p. 95). This decentralization can be achieved through the practice of relational leadership.

Basing her understanding of decentralization of power on Blase and Anderson’s (1995) concept of “power with” (p. 14), Fennell (2002) further explained that this type of

leadership perspective required the “development of positive, collaborative working relationships” (p. 99). Earlier work by Hartsock (1983) and Kreisberg (1992) reframed the definition of power as resting not in a leader’s ability to control, command or dominate followers but instead to collaborate and cooperate with followers to meet organizational goals.

Multiple studies have established a definitive numerical discrepancy between males and females occupying the high school principal’s chair in public schools. These studies also articulate some of the causes of this discrepancy, and these causes include the existence of stereotypical, gender-biased practices and perceptions that create barriers for women who attempt to attain and sustain the position of high school principal. McFadden et al. (2009) note that “a new appreciation, new understanding, and greater empathy for this group will be gained by reexamining the experiences of women and acknowledging the importance of their leadership abilities” (2009, p. 121). It is time to give credit to the value of female leadership approaches.

### **Rural School Leadership**

There are 426 school districts in this Midwestern state, and 59% of these districts are considered to be rural (Norman, 2004). Nearly all of these rural districts include a 9-12 high school. Rural high schools are not smaller versions of urban or suburban high schools; they have, instead, a unique context influenced by the community and by tradition. Ewington et al. (2008) described the context of rural schools as being highly influenced by community expectations and values. The community views the school, especially the high school, as an extension of itself. Additionally, this study noted that there can be a gap between the community’s belief about how the high school should

function and the high school principal's ideas about the management of the high school. The political nature of this disagreement can negatively impact the ability of the principal to lead successfully. Further, funds for rural schools are often limited, reducing the depth of curricular offerings for students and lack of professional development training for faculty and administrators. In this state, school funding is based on student enrollment and property values. Rural districts enroll fewer students and generally have lower property values; this results in lower expenditures per student.

Wallin (2005) noted that often female administrators in rural districts face the negative effects of tradition and conservatism from the community; a community attitude of "things have always been done this way and so they shall always be done this way" (p. 136) prevails that supports patriarchy and androcentrism. To professionally survive, a female administrator has to be aware of the prevailing community values and support those values while leading her school forward into the future. In rural communities, the high school is perceived as the center of the community and what occurs at the high school is perceived as representative of the community. Therefore high school sports and activities are as important to the community as are the school's curricular offerings (DeYoung, 2002). This emphasis on sports over teaching and learning in a rural high school remains a perspective associated with males in the high school principalship.

Robinson-Hornbuckle (1991) studied female administrators in rural school districts and found that they recognized the need to operate within the traditional context of the community even when, in doing so, they were discriminated against. Additionally, the women supported a collaborative leadership style but often used a hierarchical

structure when making decisions. Few participated in established female networking opportunities but met on a regular basis with male colleagues from surrounding districts.

In a study of rural principals' leadership styles conducted by Schuman (2010), both male and female principals cited examples of gender bias in their districts. Further, they also stated that the expectation in their districts was that the high school principal position was reserved for males only. Sherman (2000) cited similar findings expanding on the influence of the community and its belief patterns:

Century-old patterns of male dominance have solidified a number of beliefs about women that both men and women accept and which limit women's access to school administration. Although perceptions of women's physical strength are often more positive in farming and fishing communities, many still assume that the strength of character which encourages discipline and order is a male characteristic, resulting in men being more appropriate administrators. (p. 135)

S. J. Hite (1994) studied the sociological factors that influenced female administrators' ability to access positions in rural districts. The study results indicated that females faced unique barriers because rural communities maintained a very traditional view of male and female roles. Dunshea (1998) concluded that a rural setting increased the likelihood that a female administrator would face discrimination on the job. Rural communities favored males for administrative roles because males were larger in physical size and more likely to be able to handle difficult leadership tasks including student discipline. A barrier for women but not for men was marital status: being divorced or single limited a female candidate's ability to access an administrative position (Ewington et al., 2008).

## **Conclusion**

Females gain access to the high school principalship at lower rates than do males. Research has shown that factors such as sex role stereotyping, lack of sponsorship and access to networking opportunities, prejudicial perspectives about female job performance in the traditionally male-defined position, and the lack of value placed on leadership styles that are not generally task and management oriented contribute to this phenomenon. Those women who serve as rural high school principals in Midwestern rural school districts have a unique vantage point from which to describe the experience of leading a high school from the traditionally male-defined principal's chair.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methods**

The purpose of this study was to describe the lived experience of being a female high school principal in a rural Midwestern school district. The information gained from this study may inform hiring committees and potential female candidates for the position about alternative leadership styles and the impact that the rural community has on female high school principals' leadership experiences. This information may increase the interest level of females in applying for a high school principalship and offer hiring committees an insight into a different perspective of the historically male-defined high school principalship.

Data were collected via interviews with four female principals who led 9-12 rural high schools in a Midwestern state. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed to determine the themes that emerged and to ultimately describe the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of being a female high school principal in a Midwestern rural school district. The results of the study define the high school principalship from a female perspective and may provide potential female candidates and hiring committees a revised picture of the position, a picture that is not male-defined. The following questions were answered through the study:

- How does the community influence the lived experience of female principals of rural high schools in the Midwest?

- How do female principals of rural Midwestern high schools describe their leadership style and experiences?

### **Research Design**

A qualitative research approach guided this phenomenological study, a type of narrative study that describes the experiences of multiple subjects under the same life conditions or phenomenon. “Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon. . . . The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence. . .” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). A qualitative research approach supports the value of the participants’ perspectives. It is from these perspectives that data are drawn and themes become apparent. Patton (2002) stated that “one of the strengths of qualitative methods is the inductive, naturalistic inquiry strategy of approaching a setting without a predetermined hypothesis. Rather, understanding and theory emerge from fieldwork experiences and are grounded in the data” (p. 129). Through interviews of rural Midwestern female high school principals, common themes from their experiences emerged.

### **Participant Selection**

Purposeful sampling, choosing participants who have experienced and understand the phenomenon, was used (Creswell, 2007) to identify a group of four participants who led 9-12 rural Midwestern high schools. Creswell (2007) suggests interviewing three to ten participants. The small number of participants allowed the researcher to collect thick, rich, detailed data from which themes were determined.

The researcher chose prospective participants from a Midwestern state's Department of Public Instruction (DPI) demographics database. The DPI uses the US Census Bureau's locale codes to designate a high school as rural. These codes are based on a school's geographic location and population attributes. For this study, rural was defined as a town or rural area with a population of at least 2500 and located outside a metropolitan area. Using the DPI's demographic/enrollment database, the researcher applied the database's grade level and principal sort options to create a list high schools serving students in grades of 9-12 and their principals. The list was then filtered using the option of gender of principal to create a list of 9-12 high schools led by female principals. The high schools listed were then compared with the DPI list of rural districts in the state. This produced a final list of ten females who led rural high schools during the 2011-12 academic year. The ten female principals were contacted via email to request their participation in the study. A letter of invitation (see Appendix A) to participate was attached to the email. The letter noted the researcher's graduate student status, the rationale for the study, the participant's role in the study, and the risks and rewards of participation in the study. The participants contacted the researcher via email if they agreed to participate. Initially four respondents agreed to participate. The six remaining principals who had not responded were contacted again by email requesting their participation. No responses were received from the six principals. The researcher did not attempt to contact the six principals further deciding that additional contact could be construed as coercive or annoying. Additionally, based on the researcher's experience as a rural high school principal, she determined that contacting these six principals via hard

copy letters sent through the postal service would prove fruitless. In her experience, hard copy letters often were not read or acknowledged due to constraints on her time.

Through email, the researcher acknowledged the four participants' agreement to participate and arranged the first interview session with each. The researcher sent, via United States Postal Service, two copies of the UW-Milwaukee Consent to Participate form for the participant to read and sign. The researcher collected one signed copy of the form at the beginning of the first interview.

### **Interview Process and Protocol**

Four interview sessions were scheduled with each participant. To gain the depth of discussion necessary to collect thick and rich data, the interviews were scheduled for 60 to 90 minutes in length. This time structure varied based on the progress of the interview session and the time limitations of the participant. The collection of data took place during October and November 2012.

The initial interview took place face-to-face at each participant's school office. During the initial interview, the researcher reviewed the purpose of the study, the rewards and risks of participation, the time commitment for the participant, and the style of questioning that was used in the interviews (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2007). The participant was also reminded that she could leave the study at any point in time and choose not to answer specific questions; however, any data already collected would become part of the study analysis and results. At the completion of the first interview, the researcher established the date, time and setting of the three future interview sessions. At the request of the participants, the subsequent interviews were conducted through phone conferences. The participants favored this setting because the interview could be more

easily rescheduled if the principal's daily schedule had to be changed to accommodate unexpected events transpiring in her building. The phone conferences may have provided the principals an additional level of privacy because no one in the principals' office areas was aware that the interview was being conducted. This increased level of privacy may have contributed to the participants' level of openness with the researcher. Of the sixteen pre-scheduled interview sessions, five were rescheduled.

The first interview was conducted to both establish rapport between the participant and the researcher and collect data. The researcher collected data about the participants' background and training and her journey to the principalship. The second interview focused on how the rural community impacted the principal's leadership experience. The third interview focused on leadership style. During the fourth interview, the participant was asked to share two examples of initiatives she had been proud to accomplish in her building. The fourth interview was also used as closure; that is, to address topic areas needing further discussion or topic areas that appeared unexpectedly during the interviews.

Interviews were done in a semi-structured format. Each interview began with a series of open-ended questions that mined the participants' experiences and perceptions of the topics contained in the research questions. All participants were asked the same initial questions during the interview; however, the researcher posed additional topics and questions based on a participant's responses; these were explored and became part of the collected data (Patton, 2002). Two participants chose to contribute additional opinions during the interviews. These thoughts concerned the lack of preparation of young incoming principals and the career background of female board of education members.

### **Data Collection & Analysis**

Data were collected through audio recorded interviews. The researcher used an interview protocol form to add supplemental notes during the interviews. All participants were asked prepared questions but follow-up questions were also used. The codes were then determined based on commonalities of themes expressed throughout the interviews. Qualitative researchers use a coding system to organize raw data and thus make the data meaningful (Patton, 2002; Glesne, 2011). The coding process followed the methods described by Normore and Gaetane (2008): The transcripts of the interviews were read by the researcher to get an overall sense of the whole, read again and memoed by the researcher to identify emerging themes, and then reviewed to remove redundant themes and further clarify themes. Identification of the codes within the written transcripts was done by hand, utilizing a color-coding system (Patton, 2002). This produced specific and clear categories.

### **Credibility and Integrity of Analysis**

Credibility of the study and integrity of the analysis of the data depends on specific factors: “rigorous methods for doing fieldwork, the credibility of the researcher, and a philosophical belief in the value of qualitative inquiry” (Patton, 2002, p. 552). Reinharz (1992) recommends that researchers complete multiple interviews of a subject. Generalizability of the findings was tempered by the researcher’s understanding that generalizing a particular to all contexts at all times is not possible from qualitative studies (Guba, 1978) because the data are drawn from a specific context.

### **Ethical Considerations and Confidentiality**

Although demographic data about the participants and the schools they lead were collected, participants' names were represented by pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. Additionally, the community, school district and state from which the data were reported have not been specifically identified. All recorded conversations and written transcripts remained in the custody of the researcher throughout the study and were made available to the participant whose statements were recorded. At the end of the study and the researcher's successful completion of the doctoral program, the recordings and transcripts will be held by the researcher for a period of five years and then destroyed. At the beginning of the study, participants were informed through the introductory letter, the Informed Consent Form, and before each interview that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time and rescind their consent to participate; however, data already collected would remain part of the study. There were no foreseeable risks for participants.

### **Limitations**

This particular study does have limitations. The results cannot be generalized to all female high school principals because participants were drawn from rural settings in Wisconsin. The small number of participants limits application of the results of the study to the larger female high school principal population.

Because the researcher served as the data gathering instrument for this study, the applicability of the results is limited. As noted by Hatch (2002), "Even when mechanical devices are used to support qualitative work, data take on no significance until they are processed using the human intelligence of the researcher" (p. 7); therefore, the researcher

brings a level of subjectivity to the interpretation process and limits broad generalizations being drawn from the results.

Interpretation of the data by the researcher can be influenced by biases and beliefs the researcher brings to the study. It should be noted that the researcher is female and served as a rural high school principal in the Midwest for a period of five years. Having experienced many of the situations described by the participants, the researcher tried to listen carefully and with an open mind to the descriptions and feelings expressed by the participants instead of dismissing the uniqueness of these expressions because of the similarity to her own experiences.

The presence of the researcher as a representative of a large urban university may also have influenced the responses of the participants. It is possible that the participants may have felt some inhibition in sharing certain experiences or using certain language that did not meet a standard they assumed was expected by the researcher. The participants may have wanted to maintain an image that showed them to be as capable and knowledgeable as principals in other settings, particularly urban settings.

### **Summary**

A phenomenological qualitative study was conducted to describe the experiences of female high school principals leading rural high schools in the Midwest. Female leadership of high schools has been studied previously, but a focus on female high school principals in rural school districts in Midwest and their lived experiences and leadership styles has not been explored specifically. Information gleaned from this study may add to the research base as well as inform district stakeholders and decisionmakers about the female perspective of leadership. Data were collected through participant interviews and

were coded by theme and analyzed. Participants provided triangulation analysis by reviewing the findings and the researcher's analysis. Confidentiality was maintained through the use of participant pseudonyms and by restricting any personally identifiable information in the final published document.

Chapter 4 provides a presentation of the specific themes that emerged from the study interviews. These themes include the influence of the rural community on the principals' leadership experience, the influence of gender on their leadership experiences, and the principals' descriptions of their leadership styles.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Data Analysis**

Through a series of four hour-long interviews with four female high school principals in four rural Midwestern public school districts, data were collected and analyzed to determine the principals' perceptions of 1) the influence that the rural community has on their leadership experience; 2) their recognition of the influence of their gender on their experiences as high school principals and 3) their predominant leadership style. This chapter begins with an introduction of each participant and an explanation of the grade structure of the school she leads, the community in which her school is located and her journey to the high school principalship. The chapter then describes the themes that appeared from the interviews: the rural community's influence on the high school principal, gender impact, and the leadership style utilized by the principal. The theme of rural community influence will be further defined through the principals' perspectives on their support networks, their communities' expectations of the role of the high school principal, and traditions and change. The theme of gender impact presents examples of sex role stereotyping. Finally, the leadership style theme is illustrated through communication and change, collaboration, instruction-focused decisionmaking and care-focused decisionmaking.

### **Participants**

According to the Department of Public Instruction of a specific Midwestern state (2012), during the 2011-12 academic year, there were 25 rural high schools led by females. Of these, only ten high schools were configured to include only grades 9-12.

The other 15 female principals served as principals of a middle school or elementary school in addition to their high school positions.

### **Andrea**

Having been born, raised, and attended school in the rural community she currently serves as high school principal, Andrea, 50 years old, referred to herself as “the hometown girl” during her interview. Her road to the high school principalship did not begin until after she married, had three sons, and decided that working in the office of a local dairy did not meet her need for self-actualization. She completed her undergraduate degree as a part-time student at a nearby university. For her, timing and the needs of her family coalesced to create a scenario that was advantageous to beginning her educational career:

An opportunity came, actually within the district, then, while I was student-teaching: a part-time position teaching in the high school English department.

That fit my aspirations perfectly at the time because my kids were young. So I had the position for several years, and then another colleague within the department wanted to switch jobs to part-time so that she had more flexibility to run her new bookstore. So that’s when I became full-time in the English department.

Andrea continued teaching high school English for 21 years while, at times, pursuing an administrative degree at the urging of her male principal. She emphasized that she had not really considered pursuing an administrative degree when she first started earning additional credits, but her principal’s urging made her think twice especially because the leadership program fit her family’s lifestyle and needs:

At that time, I was just getting credits and not really applying them to a degree per se. I did, then, go after the administrative license through the educational leadership program. I could pick and choose what instructional site I attended, when I attended, and the number of courses I took in what order. So choosing that program was really family driven, to be very honest. Also, at that point the DPI (Department of Public Instruction) was planning to change licensing requirements, so I did push to finish the degree.

Andrea credited her male principal for encouraging her to pursue administration when she was taking courses to meet her teacher licensing renewals. She later completed her administrative practicum under this principal. She also noted that she received mentoring from a variety of administrators within her district as she made the journey to the principalship:

The mentoring had just a lot of informal conversations. Our district has had frequent administrative turnover. I can count, at least while I was teaching, five different principals that I had in a short amount of time, several different curriculum directors, and three different superintendents. Every other year there was a major administrative change. When I was taking courses in an administrative program, I would connect with various administrators that I had worked with for guidance. I did my practicums with the principal and the curriculum director.

Fate and timing, not career planning, brought Andrea to education and later the principalship. The flexibility of her undergraduate and graduate programs supported her expressed need to put her family's welfare first. Her first administrative position was

assistant principal/activities director in the school where she was teaching. She served in that position for five years until she was appointed principal when the principal left to take a new position elsewhere.

Andrea was promoted to her position directly by the board of education when the previous principal, who was female, left for promotion in a different district. Andrea had been the assistant principal/athletic director prior to taking on the duties of principal:

The board was very kind to me because when the high school principal that I worked with took on another position and the high school principalship became available, they certainly could have posted the job. Instead, I assumed the position. I did not have to apply for the position. I don't think there was a perception by our board or the administration that a female couldn't do the job because my predecessor was a female.

Andrea, however, felt that if she had not been promoted directly by the board to the position, she might not have been hired for the position because she was "within the community and having close ties, and if the district is looking for new, fresh ideas that may not come from the girl who's been the local girl within the community the whole while."

Andrea leads the only high school in her rural school district. Her student population in the fall of 2012 stood at 375 students in grades nine through twelve. Although the high school population has been larger in past years, nearer to 400 students, Andrea noted that a large group of sixth graders are currently in the pipeline. As is typical in most Midwestern rural school districts, Andrea's students reside on family farms or in small villages within the school district's boundaries.

Andrea described her community as rural and agricultural but added that the influence of the agricultural community on the high school was lessening as the nature of agriculture changes in the area:

I do believe that a lot of school functions were often planned around the farmer. For example, parent conferences needed to extend late because we needed to make sure that those who milk the cows were able to come to conferences after milking. The district had the mindset that it was all rural, rurally based and needed to accommodate a farming schedule. I do think that is starting to transition because we don't have as many sole family farms that are within our district as in the past. Many are becoming large industrial farms.

Although the nature of the farming tradition has changed within the geographic borders of the school district, Andrea did note that many students earn money working part-time in the agricultural industry and in businesses related to agriculture. She did admit that because of the rural high school setting, "the school becomes, sort of, the entertainment, if I can call it that, for the weekend." She explained that during basketball season, the gym is filled with spectators watching the basketball team play regardless of the quality of the play of the home team or the opposing team. The spectators include parents and students but also grandparents and community members who do not have children either on the team or in the school. This type of community support translates into a commitment by community members to volunteer their time and their money to support sports, clubs, and activities in the school. Although this community support can be perceived as positive; at times, community support of traditions can create problems for the high school principal.

**Barb**

Married, 50 years old, and the mother of one adult daughter, Barb grew up in Northeastern Wisconsin. Before taking her first administrative position, she taught high school chemistry, molecular biology, and physical science for eleven years. Her first career choice, however, was nursing. Living near a major university, she had considered enhancing her LPN certification by completing an RN degree:

I was a nurse and there was a time in my life when I was either going back to school to finish my RN or continue with my teaching. I couldn't find a position when I moved to a city with a large university; teachers were a dime a dozen around that area. It just so happened that right before I signed up to begin my RN degree, I got a call from an area school district. They knew I was a science teacher waiting to get in, so that is where the road really split.

She admitted to often wondering where she would be now if that call had never come but readily identifies herself as first and foremost a teacher. "In my heart, I am always an educator. What I like most is when you're a teacher, you're helping someone feel better and grow."

Before sitting in the high school principal's chair, Barb worked at the Department of Public Instruction overseeing the design of science questions for the state graduation test and then served in an area school district as the director of assessment and research. With her husband living on the east side of the state and she on the west side of the state, she joined her husband when her daughter graduated from high school. She became an associate high school principal in a suburban district near the state's largest metropolitan area:

What made me go into administration? I always was a systems thinker, seeing things from the bigger principles. As a teacher, I did a lot of staff development and implemented a lot of best practices. I never really was a sit-back type of person. I also saw where some of the practices at the administrative level were not effective, and it frustrated me as an educator. While I thoroughly enjoyed teaching students, I also knew that I do have a calling for organizing and initiating collaborative work. However, I never thought about being a principal until I had a lot of experience under my belt. Because of all of my experiences, I am the kind of principal I am today. I find it very surprising when some of these young people who've only been teaching two, three or five years at most want to be a principal. They may be able to fill the role, but there's a big difference between being effective and filling a role.

Although Barb had no specific career plan to eventually become a high school principal, she clearly recognized and believed that many years of teaching and leadership experience were necessary for someone to perform the job effectively.

Barb's experience with mentors was slightly different from that of Andrea because Barb had access to mentors in all of the varied positions she held throughout her career. The mentoring she received, however, was not provided through a formal process. She noted that her mentors had been predominately female:

I was mentored in lots of different capacities because each unique position I had provided a different mentorship. When I oversaw a science curriculum project as a teacher, my district director of instruction helped me learn how to collaborate with the people around me and bring people together as a team. When I worked

for the DPI, I was working with administrators, and they helped me understand the politics of things. When I worked as the director of assessment and research, my supervisor was the director of instruction. She took me under her wing and showed me different things. Each of these experiences, while it wasn't a formal mentorship, blessed me with people who felt it was necessary to share their experiences and give me a greater opportunity to expand and define my role, learn, and grow.

In her principal position, Barb mentors her faculty members in the same way. She helps them to move beyond their previously defined roles.

Because Barb had not considered searching for a high school principalship, her application for her current job was the result of being asked to apply for the position. A colleague who was a member of the district administrative team contacted her to urge her to apply:

I'll be honest; when I was recruited for this position, I did not apply for it initially. Someone called and said I want you to apply. They knew I was kind of interested in the job, but I really didn't have my resume in. I got called, and they said the position is going to be closing in a week; and we notice your resume isn't among our applicants. We want you to put your resume in. I felt pretty good about that.

At the time Barb applied for the position, she had previously taught, worked for the DPI, been a district-level director of assessment and research, and an assistant high school principal for a suburban school district. She did not feel that she had faced any gender based barriers to accessing the principalship. However, she did share that when she took the job, she was concerned that her faculty, staff and the community would

believe that she was “given” the job because of her husband’s position and influence in the geographic area as the president of a local post-secondary institution:

So when I got the job, people felt that she got the job because of her husband, or she got the job because of whatever. So I didn’t have a lot of credibility even though I had demonstrated it in the resume and in the interview. After about eight months, they started to see that it wasn’t about who I knew; I had what it took to be a leader.

She admitted, though, that her husband’s influence could have been an advantage to her access to the position:

Part of me believes that the networking that I have as well as my husband had, they knew that, if they got me here, my husband would be more committed to stay in this part of the state. It’s an interesting dynamic. So, I think I did have an advantage.

Barb leads a “unified” high school which draws students from multiple K-8 districts within the high school attendance area. Her student population in the fall of 2012 totaled 1134 students in grades nine through twelve. The parents of her students either worked on small hobby farms or in industrial manufacturing positions in nearby metropolitan areas:

This is a bedroom community. It’s not like a city or town where you have the school at the center of local housing with a downtown. It has a few shops here and there, but mostly rural, native rural addresses. Many of my students’ parents are graduates of our high school. So they stay in the community to live. So it’s a very close knit community.

Leading a unified high school was a unique experience for Barb at first because she did not quite understand the governance process in a district with one school building:

It's an interesting dynamic when you are a "one school" school district, and you have a superintendent. At first, I thought he was like the superintendent of the high school. If he was the superintendent of the high school, what am I doing here as the principal? So I was a little fearful that I would be micromanaged because of that dynamic.

Barb realized that her fear was unfounded because her superintendent is good "at not overstepping his boundaries."

Whether male or female, the high school principal, by the very nature of the job, faces long hours and a heavy level of stress. Two of the study participants mentioned this negative aspect of the position and its effect on them; Barb was one of these participants. Although Barb is satisfied with her job, she stated that she definitely plans to retire at age 55 and never return to education again:

It's a fourteen hour a day job, and if you believe otherwise, you're kidding yourself. Now there are people out there that make it a ten hour day or an eight hour day job; I don't know how they can get their school to the excellence and standards that's expected of a public high school. Doing that and building collaboration—I have a phenomenal school with great support—it still takes me minimally twelve hours a day. I'm exhausted.

**Connie**

The youngest of the four participants at age 38, divorced, and having no children, Connie spent nine years teaching high school English, coaching cross country, serving as prom advisor and participating “on a million committees.” In December 2011, she successfully defended her doctoral dissertation. After leaving the classroom, Connie served as an assistant principal:

The administrative position I think was intriguing to me because it was broader in scope. I think I struggled a little bit with being confined to the classroom at times and that’s why I did get involved in a lot of things because I liked the wider set of eyes that you got to look at things through.

Her desire to pursue an administrative degree developed over time and through conversations with her building administrators who were very supportive. As an assistant high school principal, Connie observed the leadership styles of two high school principals whose leadership styles were vastly different. Connie credited one of the two principals with preparing her to become an effective high school principal:

I think part of what prepared me in only that three year window was the second principal who I worked for; he was very willing to let me do anything I wanted almost. Knowing that I wanted to be a principal, he also took his approach with me that it was his job to kind of prepare me. And that’s something I think I’ve kept as I’ve worked with my two assistant principals.

Timing and circumstance played a key in her ability to get her first administrative position as an assistant principal in the building where she had been teaching:

The timing was good in that an assistant principal opening was available just as I finished my degree. So I interviewed for that and was offered the position. I operated under two different principals, two very different styles and approaches. I learned lots.

When Connie did eventually apply for a high school principal position, it was at the urging of others. She had no desire to leave the assistant principal post because she really loved it and the school she was working in:

I loved being an assistant principal where I was. I didn't have any desire to leave. The year that I accepted the position here, I didn't apply for any other job. I wasn't looking. People were telling me that you really should do that. I basically said well, whatever, I don't really care. I interviewed twice, and they called me the next day and offered me the job.

Connie's high school houses grades nine through twelve, and the fall 2012 student population totaled 860 students. The student population became more diverse in recent years; however, many students' parents graduated from the high school their children currently attend:

I have about 12% Latino/Hispanic in my building and a small percentage of other minorities. I would say probably a good portion of our kids are just run-of-the-mill middle class. A lot of their parents grew up here, went away to college or to get some additional training, and then returned here and stay in the community. A lot do blue collar work. We have a lot of commuter families. Because of our community's location, we do have a number of families that choose to live here and commute to larger cities for work.

Connie did note that there are some families still involved directly in agriculture as owners of family farms that have been the property of the family for generations.

Connie has been in her position for six years, enjoys her job, and even though she has certification as a superintendent does not plan to leave the high school principalship for some years. She did agree with Barb's perception that the position is extremely time consuming:

I love being a high school principal. But my problem with it is that it is so time consuming. I hate to say it, but I probably failed at my marriage because of my job. I don't have kids, but I do want kids. I don't know how people do it [the job] who have all those things. I mean I love what I do. I love being around kids, being in classrooms, and the challenge of moving things forward.

She estimated that she rarely leaves her office until 7:00 or 8:00 most nights; and if there is a game or activity on a particular evening, she may not leave until 10:00 pm or later, returning to her office by 7:00 the following morning. Although she has two assistant principals with whom she shares supervisory duties, both males with young families, she said that often she takes the night duties so that they can be home with their wives and children.

### **Darlene**

Darlene was born and raised in Iowa and earned her administrative degree at Western Illinois University. At age 47, she is married and the mother of two elementary school-aged children. During her teaching career, she taught business education to seventh – twelfth graders. In total, she has held administrative positions for 15 years, returning for two years to the classroom before reentering an administrative position:

I finished my degree, and my first administrative position was dean of students. I enjoyed it but missed teaching. I went back to the classroom for two years. In the second year of that I was given the chance to be activities director. I fell in love with that position. Later, I was able to become activities director/assistant principal, and I filled that role for eight years. When my principal left the district, I moved into that position.

She applied for her current position because she felt that the community and the school district “was a good place where I could grow and flourish and be challenged and successful at the same time.” Unlike the other three study participants, Darlene knew she wanted to be an administrator very early in her career, so she began her administrative degree program three months into her first teaching job:

I hold a firm belief that it’s my duty to be a servant-leader. I realized this during my undergrad years because I slide naturally into leadership positions whether it’s in athletics, in the classroom or any other situation. So, I started my graduate program three months into my first teaching job.

Having made the decision that she was destined to serve in a leadership position, she did credit a male principal for encouraging her to continue to pursue administrative positions. Darlene identified the high school principal in the district in which she held her first administrative position as dean of students as her mentor: “When I was dean of students, I felt the principal took me under his wing and taught me a great deal. Even after I left that district, I remained in contact with him.”

Although Darlene did not feel that she faced any barriers to accessing her position, she did say, “I did not necessarily have their [board of education] backing when

I made the move to my current position, but I have shown them that I have the ability to do the job.” She added, however, that her relationship with the board is “evolving and becoming more positive.”

Darlene leads the rural high school with the smallest student population which in the fall of 2012 was 257. Her ninth through twelfth grade students come from three communities which Darlene described as evolving for a variety of economic and social reasons:

The families in our community are struggling economically. My building has a 37% free and reduced lunch rate. The largest local employer formerly had a lot of management positions and that’s very much changed to factory type positions—far more blue collar than white collar employees. We have a large portion of retirees and the elderly, but we are gaining more young families who want to have their small children attend school in a smaller community. A lot of young families want to get away from large metropolitan areas located near us.

Agriculture still plays a part in the lives of some of Darlene’s students’ families.

She expressed concern about the impact of agriculture on her students:

I don’t know if all of my rural community prioritizes education. So, I’m trying to hold true to my own beliefs and at the same time understand their need to have their children be home working on the farm. Sometimes the needs of the agricultural community come before the needs of the educational community.

The number of females who applied for these principal positions was not investigated in this study; however, past research suggests that females were hired for high school principalships at a lower rate than males. Some research, especially the work

of Blount (1998), Coleman (2005) and Ayman and Korabik (2010) suggested that females have been denied access to these positions based on their gender. Of the four principals interviewed, all felt that they had equal access to their positions. They did not report any examples of barriers to their ability to access their positions. Table 4.1 provides a summary of the participants' backgrounds and experiences.

Table 4.1 Summary of Participant Demographics

	Age	Marital Status	Children	Teaching Experience	Content Area	Prior Adm. Experience	Current Position
<b>Andrea</b>	50	Married	29, 26, 23	21 years	English	5 years	2 years
<b>Barb</b>	50	Married	22	11 years	Chemistry Biology Physical Science	10 years	3 years
<b>Connie</b>	38	Divorced	None	9 years	English	3 years	6 years
<b>Darlene</b>	47	Married	10, 4	10 years	Business Education	13 years	2 years

### **Rural Community Influence**

The themes that emerged in the participants' comments about the rural community's influence on their jobs included the existence and quality of their support networks and the principal's role within the rural community. All four participants agreed that their communities generally supported high quality education, favored established school traditions, and expected students to be treated fairly. Describing their communities as rural, all of the principals also stated that their communities were conservative and favored the status quo; changes in the management of the high school or traditions related to extracurricular events were often met with opposition from community members. Nevertheless, all of the principals believed that community members valued the education their students received at the high school when that

education was seen as readily applicable to their students' future success in post-secondary education or in the job market.

### **Support Networks**

None of the principals experienced a formal mentoring process when they entered the high school principalship; however, each was able to describe colleagues who support them currently on an informal basis. Although all of the principals said that they participated in regular meetings with principals in their geographic areas, the majority of these groups were comprised of male principals. Two of the principals in the study noted that they felt initially inhibited to verbally participate in the meetings because all of the other members of the group were male.

Andrea described receiving support from various administrators through multiple informal conversations:

As an assistant principal, I observed the principal's time management, and we spoke informally about different building concerns and issues. Until you truly live the position, you really don't get it.

Andrea continues to use the administrative team as a sounding board, and she also found that her superintendent was approachable, a good listener, and supportive.

Another source of support for Andrea comes through monthly meetings with the principals of high schools within her athletic conference. She is the only female principal among the ten schools represented. Having been the athletic director previously, she was comfortable contributing to the group discussions when the topic was sports; however, she tended to say less about other topics. She admitted to "teasing" the male members when they neglected to acknowledge that there was a female in the group:

Our last email from the group was addressed to Gentlemen and that was it. So I sent a correction back adding “and Lady.” I think last year I was not very vocal in the group because I was new, and I wanted to just see and watch the group dynamic. Last year there was a focus going on with sports, and I was knowledgeable because I had been an athletic director, and I knew what was going on. At that time, I spoke up. So, this year they are accepting of my opinion.

Similarly, Barb meets with high school principals in her athletic conference monthly to discuss multiple and mutual areas of concern issues. The group consists of two females and six males. Barb leads the meetings this year, a task that rotates alphabetically among the group annually. Barb did not describe any tactics she needed to employ, because of her gender, to participate equally with the males in the group.

Connie noted that she still kept in touch with the principal who mentored her prior to her taking on the high school principalship, but she added that she also speaks with principals in her athletic conference. She estimated that she spoke with two of them nearly every two weeks and sometimes more frequently. She did not feel that they were her mentors, but just “strong” colleagues she trusted who supplied a fresh set of eyes to look at issues with which she struggled. The principals in her conference meet once monthly, and the group is composed of eight members. Two are female, and the second female was added to the group during the 2011-12 school year. Connie stated that she is more comfortable speaking at the meetings now than she was initially:

I’m pretty bold as it is, I think. So let me give that disclaimer, but with that said, it’s a loud group of building leaders who have strong personalities.

Comparatively, there's no way I'm even close. So you get your point across, and you're heard in other ways. So it's just your approach and your strategy. I know that how I approach a topic isn't to get louder because I can't get louder than six men; I just can't. But I can use other approaches. Phrasing it in the form of a question or lowering my voice or when all of a sudden there is a pause I say, "Have we thought about this?"

Connie and Andrea both experienced a feeling of not quite fitting into the predominately male membership of their respective conference principal group meetings. To compensate, they both created strategies to make their voices heard.

Darlene commented that in her current position, "I feel I did receive guidance from a former district administrator that is retired and still in the community." Additionally, although Darlene attends monthly meetings with the high school principals in her athletic conference, she felt that, at present, she had closer relationships with the principals she knew from her previous athletic conference:

We've moved conferences. I have a longer relationship with my previous conference principals. I just have not networked in my current conference as much. So, I do definitely have mentoring relationships locally.

In summary, all four principals agreed that they had been mentored by female and male administrators informally before becoming high school principals and in their current positions. None of the principals participated in formal mentoring programs specifically designed by their district or any professional organizations. All of the principals mentioned that they attended regularly scheduled meetings with high school principals from districts in their athletic conference. Two of the principals described a

need to develop specific strategies to be included equally in the predominately male membership of those conference groups.

### **Role Model and Visibility**

All of the principals stated that their communities expected them to be visible at school and in the community whether they resided in the community or not. This visibility meant that the principals were essentially “on the job” at all times, serving as role models. As role models, the principals realized that their behaviors and the behaviors of their family members needed to meet the expectations of community members and fit the professional role of high school principal.

Andrea was born and raised in the community that she serves; however, she did not choose to live in the community as an adult. She did strongly state that she must maintain a certain level of decorum when she is in the community:

Definitely a role model . . . careful of what I say, what I do. I certainly want it known that the school district leadership supports the community. So, yes, I will be at the community picnic serving food, I'll go to the gas station to put gas in my car, and I'll visit the local stores. I'm okay showing up there in jeans, but at the same time, I don't think I should be schleppy-looking. I don't think I should be sitting in the bars and overindulging. I just think that I am a role model for the community and the students. You don't ever get to just separate yourself from the job. I've talked about that with my family. Now my son has returned from college and is living at home, and some of his college behaviors, like sitting in local bars, reflects on me as the principal. I can't tell him what to do, but he

recognizes that his behavior could be negative for me in my position. We need to respect the position and the role we play.

In a small rural community, it is difficult for the principal and her family members to hide from public view even when she is not “on the job.” There is also an expectation that the principal should participate in community events and organizations:

I think the expectation is that I am a visible supporter of co-curricular activities.

So, yes, I’m very visible at the home football games and the home activities. I’ll go and support our teams at tournaments. Although we have a local Lion’s Club, I didn’t join because I don’t physically have enough time to do that. I will attend the club’s fundraising events. I’m not a member of the local church because my family and I attend a different one; but if the community church has a bake sale, I’ll stop in and buy something.

Feeling that “how the school operates sits on my shoulders,” Barb explained that because she is the first person to receive communication from the community about issues at the high school, she recognized that her role as perceived by the community is that she is the person most responsible for what happens at the high school on a daily basis. Unlike Andrea, Barb is not originally from the community she serves. She also does not live in the community but does do things in the community on occasion. When in the community, she feels that she is being watched and judged by community members:

I live outside the community, but when I am doing things in the local community I feel all eyes are on me. I love going to rummage sales and flea markets; it’s just kind of fun. We have a cabin up north and a lot of times I’ll just go look for

things to throw in the cabin or whatever. I don't do that around here, even though there are a lot of cool little places because I feel I have an image to maintain.

Barb clarified that being a professional educator was like being in other professions like medicine or law; these professionals aren't seen at rummage sales.

Barb's perception of appropriate behavior for a professional educator may not be the community's perception; nonetheless, Barb articulated the expectation that in the community she is a role model. Moreover, she is the human representation of the high school experience:

I think as much as I don't like it, I think the role I play in the community is how this school operates sits on my shoulders. Even though I have a district administrator and a director of instruction, the bottom line is the experience a student has here sits on my shoulders. The community sees me as having the answers for everything, so I get the call first. I guess I'm viewed as the one person in charge of every high school students' experiences while in the building and the experiences of community members when they come into the school for various programs.

Connie saw herself fulfilling multiple roles as the high school principal.

According to Connie, the high school principalship is a highly political position; and the principal serves as the spokesperson for her building:

You are a public relations person. People don't know the good things that are going on in your building unless we are finding ways to get that out in our community and toot our own horn so to speak. I am a resource in the community, so I am constantly making connections. I'm kind of that figure in the community

too that is service-minded and giving back to the community. As high school principal, you don't go anywhere without being recognized as the high school principal, whether you like it or not. I could be in Kohl's, and someone will say hello to me; I respond out of courtesy because they know me as the position but not as a person.

Connie is a member of the local Rotary Club and the local fund board.

Participating in these groups adds considerable time to her workday, but it also gives her the opportunity to show her commitment to the community and membership becomes a way for her to network. There are, however, certain expectations of Connie's behavior when she is in public:

When I'm out in the community, I act and behave like the principal. Because I don't live in the community, when I'm home, I can go to the store and not worry about do I have make-up on, is my hair done, am I dressed well enough? If I lived in the community, I would have to worry about all those things just to go out to the store.

Connie echoed the feelings of Andrea and Barb that being the high school principal required that she maintain a level of professionalism in her attire and behavior when in the community but not on duty. All stated, though, that this expectation was never explicitly directed to them by community members.

Unlike Andrea, Barb, and Connie, Darlene lives in the community she serves, and her children attend school in the community. She and the other study participants all recognized that serving as a role model in the community was part of their jobs. Darlene

felt that her community expected her to be professional at all times and to serve as a resource for multiple stakeholder groups:

I think I am a representative of the school and the faculty. I think I am a resource for parents, businesses and law enforcement. I believe that there's an expectation of my being professional all the time, taking pride in my appearance, being seen at community events, being seen at church, being active in my church, being seen at community functions and supporting my community. I'm expected to be the leader in the minds of the community and take ownership of everything that happens in my building.

Because Darlene lives in the community, she cited some expectations, such as membership in a local church, that were not mentioned by the other participants who may participate in churches or community activities in the communities in which they actually reside.

### **Tradition and Change**

The principals clearly recognized that traditions established by the community over a period of years had an impact on how they responded when those traditions needed to be changed. The principals presented possible changes to the public slowly and had to build a high level of credibility with the public before changes could be accomplished.

When asked by the researcher whether community traditions had ever clashed with a decision she had to implement, Andrea responded:

The high school softball team was playing their games in the village park adjacent to our campus. Some of our parents were bringing coolers of beer to these high

school sponsored games. That was really frustrating [to me]. Why did they think that was okay? But [to them] it was okay because that is what they do at that site [the village park] normally. So we just needed to make it clear to our parents that it's not acceptable . . . this is a high school event. They just thought it was okay, the cultural acceptance of having a drink at the park. So that was difficult, but we needed to make it clear to our parents that no, it's not acceptable.

Andrea recognized that the community allowed alcohol consumption at the local village park; nevertheless, she was personally frustrated that these parents were unable to recognize that the village park became a school setting during school sponsored softball games. The parents did comply with the school's request to abstain from alcohol consumption, but Andrea had to respect the community's tradition and communicate that drinking in the park was not wrong, in general, but only unacceptable in the specific school setting. "I laid it out logically, and at first the parents were taken aback; but, then, they did accept it."

When attempting to make changes in the high school, Barb said that "strong communication—thorough and consistent" was necessary to change traditions. She also commented that the staff and community need to be participants throughout the process of planning and implementing the change. She did not feel that the traditions and values of the community had negatively impacted her when she needed to make decisions:

I think what makes this a great place to be for me as an administrator is that the values that this community has and the expectations this community has is what I value in terms of education. We maintained high standards while sustaining traditions, so all of my decisions were things that seemed to be aligned to the

community as a whole. In fact, we made some significant changes to our grading system, and the key was bringing people along in the process.

Including community stakeholders in decision-making and sustaining traditional educational goals valued by the community, Barb has been able to implement changes in her building.

Connie described her community as rural and traditional. Many families have lived in the area for multiple generations and many of her students' parents attended the high school. Having attended the high school, many parents prefer to keep traditions in the high school as they knew them. Connie also commented that the school board, like the community, has a long history of maintaining the status quo:

We have school board members who have served for twenty plus years. There is a tremendous amount of history there that you want to honor and at the same time you want to work to shift the thinking to take a big step forward. How do you do that without offending?

Connie stated that she had learned to propose changes to tradition by creating credibility with community members through ongoing communication before attempting to challenge the tradition:

If I ever challenge those really strong traditions, I need to make sure I have that credibility with the community to build an understanding of okay here's why we're doing it [making the change] because otherwise I think that it can really backfire on you.

One of the changes Connie attempted to accomplish was to change the rule governing male membership on the homecoming court. Traditionally only members of

the football team could be considered for court membership. Knowing that the community valued this tradition, Connie stated that, “I think those things [community traditions] that as a leader you probably have to look at from that political lens and that causes me to maybe take a different type of approach with it because of the context I’m in.” She, therefore, talked informally with the football players and members of the other male sports teams to consider changing the tradition in coming years instead of presenting the change to the community at large. She did note, however, “In my previous district, I would not have had to have done all that. It would not have been nearly the political issue there that it is in this district.”

When reflecting on her early years as the high school principal, Connie suggested that in retrospect she probably did not consider the traditions of the community enough when trying to make changes:

I think early on, I was a little too progressive. This is a very traditional community; I mean very traditional. So my ideas of equity and social justice were not easy for some people to accept. Special education was very traditional here. It didn’t matter if you were a student with special needs; you were put away in some little classroom with other special education students. When I changed that policy right before the school year ever started, things blew up. I look back and I think I should have done that a little differently.

Now Connie is more likely to bring together representatives from multiple stakeholder groups to consider the positives and negatives of making change.

Referring to her attempts at changing tradition as “somewhat of a tightrope,” Darlene struggled with the community’s traditional views on discipline when she decided to implement a new discipline system, Positive Behavior Intervention System (PBIS):

I at times have difficulty convincing parents that my decisions regarding discipline are the most appropriate. Some of them still support more of the eye-for-an-eye, tooth-for-a-tooth type of thing. I find myself arguing that type of mentality at times. So, our move to PBIS required us to do some fieldwork with the implementation of that framework. We had to have conversations with the parents and share that the old way of doing things wasn’t effective. We reached out to those who we knew would support us.

Using effective communication and including stakeholders in decision-making became a strategy that Darlene employed to bypass the traditional views of the community and implement a program that benefits students over time.

### **Gender Impact**

Research conducted by Blount (1998), Eckman (2004), and Wallin (2005) showed that historically females have held fewer high school principalships than males. Blount contended that those facts were the result of discrimination and an acceptance by school boards of a stereotypical perspective of the characteristics of high school principals: male, large in stature, autocratic leadership style. Some researchers have proposed that females generally fail to gain access to the high school principalship because they do not meet that stereotypical ideal. Among the participants in this study, however, none felt that their access to the high school principalship had been limited due to their gender. Nevertheless, three of the four principals reported times when they felt they had been

treated differently than a male high school principal would have been treated. Two of the four agreed that having a venue and the time to meet with other female principals of rural high schools would be advantageous to them on a personal and professional level.

### **Sex Role Stereotypes**

Andrea, having been appointed to her position by her school board, did not feel any discrimination in accessing the position due to her gender. She did admit, though, that a female was effective in the position previously, and the school board “recognized that the leadership was in place and was working.” In that sense, the school board did not consider her appointment a risk because she was female. Stating that her “family’s first,” she did not have any plans to leave her position because she liked it; it fit the needs of her husband, children and extended family.

Similar to Andrea, Barb did not feel that her gender inhibited her ability to access the high school principalship. However, she very clearly stated that because her husband was prominent in the community, she felt that many people perceived that the “job was handed to me because of my husband.” She said that during the first six months in the position, she had to prove that she was hired because of who she was and the skills she possessed.

Facing no particular limits to earning the position of high school principal, Connie was encouraged to apply for the position by her colleagues, successfully navigated the interview process and was hired. She did concede however that her age and stature presented some problems for her when she first took the job. Following an “older gentleman who had been here forever,” and who had used a very traditional management style, she was quite different:

I'm five foot six. I'm blonde. I'm a fairly, comparably pretty young woman. I was thirty-two when I accepted the job. I think all those really, there was a mindset maybe, or there were barriers whether I realized it or not that I had to overcome to get to this point.

She felt she overcame those barriers by building trust and credibility with her faculty and the community.

Darlene applied for her job and went through a standard interview process to access her job. Although she did not feel any gender related barriers during the process, she freely admitted that the school board did not support her hiring based on her skill set. She, however, now has the support of her school board based on her successful job performance.

Andrea felt that "there's a distinction made when you're a female." She went on to explain a conversation she had with a male staff member regarding a group of male students misbehaving in the cafeteria:

One of the male teaching staff members came and mentioned that he thought it was perhaps because of the female principal that some of our students were acting differently. He said that he told them they were acting like jerks and if they had a male principal they wouldn't be doing this. It really did get me thinking about that like why, why would they act differently with a male, I'm not sure. I guess I really don't think about. I didn't ask him to expand more on it [his comments]. I just sort of shrugged my shoulders.

In this situation, Andrea recognized the influence her gender had on the students, their behavior and the perceptions of the male teacher.

Proud of her accomplishments in leading her building to make student-centered changes through collaboration and capacity-building, Barb did say that, at times, her gender causes some individuals to treat her in ways that she believes these individuals would not treat a male principal. She described an incident she had with the mother of a student:

She [the mother] was very bullyish. Maybe she thought she could kind of push me around a little bit. I don't know if she would get that way with a male. I didn't allow that to happen [change her decision], and she wasn't really happy with me.

Although Barb identified the mother's attempt to intimidate her as gender based, in explaining an incident from her past, she did not recognize the impact of her gender on obtaining a job position:

When I was working as the director of assessment and research in a certain district, the director of instruction, who was my good friend, decided to step down from her position. She recommended that I fill her position. My district administrator told me that I would be a perfect fit. There was, however, another person in the district who had come to our district from the outside and was director of technology. The district administrator gave him the director of instruction position. The district administrator told me that he had wanted to give me the position but was afraid that I would leave the district in a few years to live on the east side of the state with my husband. He didn't want to have to replace me in the position in just a few years, so he gave it to the male applicant.

Barb adamantly stated that her district administrator's decision was not a "sexist thing," but was about her being married. The district administrator's rationale turned on the sex role stereotype that married women will leave their jobs in order to live where their husband's job is located.

Barb further commented that males did not process situations in the same way as females in the leadership arena or when dealing with students. She had noticed that when she is talking with and observing male high school principals, "it's more like a sports mentality; they liken their jobs to being on the football field. It's about winning and not about the process of getting there, but just about getting there." Likening the connection and support of male high school principals with each other to "a good old boys' club," she further commented that she did not hear this "we're going to this because we're going to this" autocratic attitude from female principals.

Connie believed that she had been treated differently than a male principal would have been treated when dealing with parents on discipline issues:

The most glaring times have been in situations where I had discipline issues with children whose parents were movers and shakers in the community. Their sons or daughters make poor choices, and the parents, particularly the men, have been condescending or even, at times, trying to be intimidating. My perception is it's related to my gender.

Connie added that people think that the high school principal role should be filled by an older more experienced male. She gave an example of what she meant citing it as a classic:

I'll get salespeople through here all the time. The office will radio me to come out, and I can't tell you how many times I've shaken the salesman's hand and they say, "Really, you're the principal?" So that tells me that I don't fit the classic stereotype of what a high school principal is supposed to be.

Connie was the only participant to interact in the social dynamic used by many male administrators to network and support each other. She stated that she felt that her gender and her job conflicted because she was not able to golf with her male principal colleagues:

I think you know that you go out, shoot a few holes of golf, have a couple of beers, and all of a sudden you're talking shop. Things get decided, there are lots of discussions, and there's camaraderie. I think as a female, at times, you get left out of those social circles. It's a role [high school principalship] that is still for the most part dominated by a lot of men. If you're ever going to crack that you better find a way to fit into that social circle so you can be accepted.

She started golfing two years ago and enjoys it; however, she admitted that her "primary interest was probably driven more because of the opportunity to be on a social level with my male colleagues," thus experiencing the career advantages of her connection with the male principals.

Darlene claimed that she had not experienced any situations or interactions as high school principal when she felt that she was treated differently than a male principal would have been treated. She did, however, agree with the other principals that females lead differently than males generally do. "I think men are more end focused. In other words, the end result of the task; whereas, women have a tendency to put more thought

and time into the process and the journey you might take with your constituents to get to that point.” Men, she felt, saw the route to the end result to be less important.

### **Female-Focused Professional Conversations**

Currently, all of the principals have established venues, usually designed based on their athletic conference membership, which provide an opportunity for them to converse about their experiences and concerns in the high school principalship. However, because of the low number of female principals in the researched districts, the female principals do not have the experience of conversing on a regular basis with female principals of rural districts throughout their state. If a system could be designed that would create greater opportunities for female high school principals from rural districts to converse on a consistent basis, the study participants believed they would benefit from such a system.

Andrea saw benefits in being able to speak with other women sharing her role. “I think it would be cool. If you have common perceptions, common values with others and then just have a place to touch in.” Although inundated with information about leadership on a regular basis, Andrea noted that none of it was focused on a female perspective; being able to participate in conversations, even Twitter or blog, would be an effective way to share the female perspective.

Barb discusses issues with her district’s director of curriculum and instruction who is female and who asked her to apply for the high school principalship. Barb felt that the director was a good source for a female perspective of situations that her male associate principals could not supply. In one instance regarding the behavior of a female student, Barb followed the advice of the director in deciding not to expel the student even though her associate principals strongly recommended expulsion. “I definitely saw there

was a gender difference in the way the guys were looking at it versus the way we girls were looking at it.” Barb added that being able to talk with female high school principals would be positive because “we’d bounce ideas off of [each other]. I think females are a little bit more conversational about issues and resources than guys. I find myself able to process certain things differently than when I look at processing with a male.”

Having other female high school principals in her athletic conference, Connie is able to access a female perspective on building leadership on a fairly regular basis. She noted that “there’s a certain camaraderie and empathy that pervades our experiences.” Trying to talk with a male colleague about being a high school principal while being a wife, mother, and running a household, she thought, would be difficult and unproductive. “A male cannot empathize to the degree that a female [in the same position] can.”

Darlene felt lucky to have access to female principals in two neighboring districts. She said that she talked with one of them on a regular basis because she had known her previously and was comfortable sharing her thoughts with her. Darlene did not think she would participate in a more extensive network of female high school principals in rural districts; she was satisfied with her current networking options.

### **Leadership Style**

The principals described their approach to leadership as collaborative and instruction-focused. Although each principal defined collaboration in her own way, collaboration included valuing the ideas of the faculty members and community, listening to multiple voices, working with stakeholders to solve problems or promote new programs that were directly connected to improving learning or instruction and building capacity among their followers to create leadership from within the organization.

Further, they reported that thorough and ongoing communication with all stakeholder groups was necessary to create changes to benefit student learning. All of the principals also used the term “nurturing” to describe their approach to interacting with stakeholders. One principal used the term “transformational” when describing some aspects of her leadership style; while two of the principals said that collaboration and nurturing gave their faculty and staff the ability to continue initiatives without having the principal present. Additionally, all reported that they believed that because they were female, they approached leadership in a nurturing or mother-like manner. Although not directly mentioned by the participants, their statements did expose their use of care-focused decisionmaking and elements of relational leadership.

### **Communication and Change**

Andrea discovered that making changes in a tradition-bound rural high school required ongoing and honest communication with the community to avoid misunderstandings and reduce opposition to changes in the status quo. When Andrea made the decision to change the high school registration from onsite to online, she had to communicate well and educate the parents:

This August was our first time doing all online registration. Our families were given the instructions through a mailing. It instructed them to practice with an online tutorial on the school website. Our families who are computer savvy were very excited. We had people calling us saying that they absolutely loved the new process. Then on the flip side, we had other families that weren't so sure about what to do. So we still ran an onsite registration day but held it in the computer

labs for families who needed help. We had an aide with them to help them through the process.

Andrea believed that without adequate communication with parents and making accommodations for those parents who needed help, the “new” process might have caused a negative response from the community.

Having previously worked in large suburban and urban school districts, Barb was surprised that her students’ parents wanted a different level of communication from the school as compared to parents in the urban districts:

When I came here, I realized that we have a school messenger system that sends calls out; and when I worked in a more urban school district the need to use that was very rare. It was only used under emergency situations and once in a blue moon. It just didn’t seem effective. Here we use it regularly because parents request to be informed and things like that. So that has changed my communication of things because they do want to be on top of things.

Barb believes that her ability to communicate effectively on a one-to-one basis with parents and the community is important to create community support of her job performance:

I return my calls and my emails before I leave the office for the day. People get heard. They know that I will call them, get back to them and listen to them. Sometimes they don’t agree with what I’m doing, but I have to say to them that I respectfully disagree with their perspective. In general, taking time to listen to their concerns is what’s important. They need to be heard.

Barb is confident that the educational goals she supports are those supported by her community. Consequently, she does not perceive any community backlash to proposed changes as long as she communicates well and often with stakeholders and is able to show how the change aligns with community's overall desire to maintain high standards.

When Connie and her faculty decided to propose a change to the academic ranking system traditionally used at the high school to a more equitable "Laude" system, she knew that she would have to prepare the community and the school board through an extensive use of high quality communication and explanation before the system could be approved:

How do you bring them along in their thought processes? There are so many things that have to be considered. I have to play the middle ground of we're not entirely getting rid of class rank right away. I have to give reassuring words to the parents and the community. I'm politicking to help people, to persuade them that the new way is actually better than the old way. So, we did focus groups. I talked with different parent groups. I talked with middle school parents because their kids will be affected by this. I know our superintendent has poured a lot of energy into bringing the school board along on this. We had a districtwide grading committee whose members were able to share their thoughts. All of those things play into getting us to the point at the end of the month where we'll actually make the proposal to the board and ask for action on adopting the new system.

Connie's approach to making a change in the traditional class ranking system included extensive planning, clear and thoughtful communication, and a recognition that the value of the current policy needs to be honored.

As the principal, Darlene communicates openly and often with parents and other community members:

They expect me to be approachable, twenty-four seven. They expect good customer service. They expect me to return their phone calls, tell them the whole story with honesty and openness.

Darlene credits excellent communication with the community for the recent passage of a building referendum to update technical education facilities in her building.

Rural high school principals are "captives of their environment," (Goldring, Huff, May, & Camburn, 2008, p. 337). They must function within the context of the tradition-bound rural community. The four rural principals served the community as change agents who confronted the dilemma of honoring tradition but still making changes for the benefit of students by effectively and openly communication with their communities.

### **Collaboration**

Andrea described her leadership style as collaborative. She also commented that she strove to collaborate with her fellow administrators so that they could work in unison to accomplish goals for the district instead of just securing funds or programs for the high school:

I want to collaborate with all of teachers involved so that I can do the best for the school. I also want to collaborate with our students, parents, other administrators and even within our larger area with conference area schools and our CESA.

As an example of this, she said that she supported the establishment of a 4K program in the elementary building even though it might restrict some funds for the high school budget. Although Andrea labeled this as collaboration, it would be more accurate to describe this as an example of cooperation.

To effectively collaborate, Andrea believes that she must be a good listener and consider all options before making a decision. When asked by the researcher to explain a situation when she used collaborative leadership, she spoke about planning and applying for Carl Perkins funds:

I think of our CTE (Career and Technical Education) department. Our business education department was solely in charge of the Perkins' funding. Our business ed. teacher received all the money because she was doing all of the paperwork. I wasn't quite so happy about that because the money should be for all of the vocational departments. So, I somewhat told them that they were all going to work on the planning and paperwork.

Although Andrea directed her CTE faculty members to work together to prepare the application for Perkins funding, her leadership style was authoritarian not collaborative. In the end, Andrea realized, with the input of her FACE (family and consumer education teachers), that before collaboration could take place, more information gathering and planning time by each individual department in CTE was needed.

Andrea did concede that at times and in certain situations, she had to make decisions without collaborating with anyone. These decisions included emergency situations and discipline issues.

Unlike Andrea, Barb described her leadership style as “not like one leadership style.” She alternately identified her style as transformative and collaborative:

I would describe my leadership style as transformative in the sense of trying to bring people together and transform and collaboratively sharing the nature of leadership. But it still needs to have somebody understanding the big picture of things and then getting people underneath of each component and kind of assuring that we’re moving in the right direction.

Barb added that one of her goals was to offer ways for her faculty members to grow and expand beyond their defined roles so that when the time came for her to leave her position, the others could continue the work that had been started. Referring to this tactic as capacity building, Barb also defined it as transformative:

I would describe it as the ability to engage others, build the capacity of people in various roles and transform them into a type of leadership role. So it’s building the person’s capacity by motivating them to take on a variety of different things so that individuals become better than they were yesterday. They become empowered to do things. When you do that, you build sustainability because programs and initiatives aren’t just based on my leadership but on this shared leadership.

Similar to Andrea and Barb, Connie described her leadership style as collaborative and composed of a number of elements:

I think to a large degree I try to be more servant-based from the standpoint it’s my job to facilitate a lot of great things that go on in the building. I do think I make a strong effort to hear people, hear different voices in the building, and get

different perspectives, different viewpoints to try to build critical mass to move forward. I think that I recognize when there are times where you just need to make a decision and that's your role as a leader. I think also part of my leadership style is to work with folks to set expectations and to set the bar for those expectations.

Connie's definition echoed Barb's approach to capacity building and Andrea's focus on listening to stakeholders. Connie did note that sometimes it is necessary for a leader to make some decisions without input from faculty members or other stakeholders.

Darlene described her leadership style as democratic and nurturing, seeking the input of stakeholders before making major decisions; however, she did not use the term collaboration when referring to her preferred method of leadership. Her description of seeking out the opinions of stakeholders within and outside her building before making a major change to the high school schedule contains some elements of collaboration. When the high school decided to implement PBIS, Darlene identified the key stakeholders and provided formal training for them:

I identified the key stakeholders and put them through the formal training from our CESA. Once they were trained, the information was filtered down through them to essentially train the rest of the staff. The teachers reflected on what things had been successful in the past with students with behavioral issues and what hadn't worked. I encouraged people to rethink what they were doing and look for situations in the past when we actually used PBIS before it was identified as that.

### **Instruction-Focused Decisionmaking**

With an emphasis on meeting the learning needs of students, Andrea did work collaboratively with a group of ninth grade teachers to design a learning experience to help ninth graders succeed academically during their first year of high school:

We were being warned by our middle school teachers that our incoming ninth graders were a high need group. Working with the ninth grade teachers, we came up with the idea of a ninth grade guided study hall where students could be monitored academically and receive academic interventions from the study hall teacher. So within the ninth grade teachers' instructional schedules, one of their assigned classes was the guided study hall. I manipulated the schedule of the ninth graders so that they are assigned to a guided study hall with ten or fewer other ninth graders.

In this example, Andrea's leadership is collaborative and her decisionmaking is based on what is instructionally better for students.

Barb described herself as an instructional leader who focused on improving instruction by helping her faculty members become instructional leaders who focus on best practice and successful outcomes for student learning:

Prior to me, the principal was very authoritarian in focus; kind of it's my way or no way type of thing. He was also laissez faire. You just do what you do, and I'll do what I do; and as long as everything's good, then everybody's okay. So I recognized that it was really about changing the vision of the school so that the faculty became reflective practitioners. I set some expectations in terms of what we wanted to accomplish academically.

Barb was proud to report that state test scores and other measures of academic progress have improved. She predicted that implementing the Common Core Standards into classroom instruction would not pose major problems because her teachers are now adept at analyzing data, reflecting on best practices, and implementing necessary changes to improve classroom instruction.

As an example of a leadership initiative that Connie felt showcased her collaborative leadership style as well as her commitment to instructional improvement, she described the use of “Instructional Rounds”:

We have started something called Instructional Rounds which prior to this year probably would not have worked. Because of the number of new staff that we have and because of the repair work we’ve done with working relationships in our building in the past few years, we’ve been able implement Instructional Rounds and it has made a significant impact on our classroom instruction. Three administrators plus a teacher from the building observe another teacher’s lesson. After the observation, the observation team meets with the teacher we observed and we all have a follow-up conversation. It’s not evaluative; it’s a reflective learning opportunity for everybody at the table. It’s not about grilling the person; it’s about being inquisitive about methodology and lesson delivery. We now have a formal vehicle for learning about and spreading best practice.

Connie added that through the process, teachers and administrators learned about the great things happening in the building and developed a new admiration for the professional abilities of each other.

In an effort to redesign the high school's semester exam schedule to improve student outcomes and refocus exam preparation in classroom instruction, Darlene relied on the input of her veteran teachers:

A year ago, we changed our semester exam schedule to refocus the goals of our semester exam process. I had a significant change in mind; before I implemented that, I sought out key staff members, got their opinions, and took into account their ideas as well as mine. There are teachers in my building that have been in the classroom longer than I've been in education. Their opinion is of great value to me; so I seek out their opinions regularly before making decisions.

Although Darlene sought out the opinions of select teachers, the final decision was hers to make. Moreover, she was free to disregard the teachers' opinions if she chose.

Leadership, as these principals discovered, is an exquisite balance between guiding and delegating to build the capacity necessary to implement and sustain programs that bring best practices to the classroom. Listening to their stakeholders, considering stakeholders' ideas, and nurturing the growth and learning of their stakeholders, these principals have left the classroom but continue to teach from an administrative venue.

### **Care-Focused Decisionmaking and Nurturing**

The research work of Carol Gilligan (1982), introduced the concept that females used a style of moral reasoning that differed from the style used by males; females employed the "ethic of care" when deciding how to meet ethical challenges. This ethic of care was based on evidence that females perceive the moral issue not from a rules based platform, as males do, but from a platform of empathy and care for the welfare of the individuals involved. Later research by Trinidad and Normore (2005); and Vinkenburg,

vanEngen, Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt (2011) determined that, generally, females tend to lead organizations with greater empathy and greater degrees of nurturing than do males

Andrea shared an example of how she regularly met with teachers who had concerns about students' general wellbeing, whether they were clean, healthy, eating well, getting support from home, instead of just being concerned about the students' academic status. She said that she personally checked on the student on a daily basis and dealt with all the details and follow through to deal with the student's human problems:

I guess as a female that motherly instinct is always there, making sure that you are caring for the children. Whether they are fifteen-year-olds or eighteen-year-olds, you're still trying to protect them and make sure that they're eating properly, and well groomed. I think that's inherent in a female administrator.

Andrea further explained that she had observed that female administrators are more likely to be "more concerned about the details [of a situation] and be more concerned about the emotional ramifications [of a decision]. To support her perception, Andrea added that in her previous job as an athletic director, she talked regularly with fellow female athletic directors who perceived that female athletic directors were more attuned to details and the general comfort and welfare of players and coaches than male athletic directors were.

Barb also expressed her belief that female principals were perceived to be nurturing and mother-like. She explained that she often had mothers who spoke with her from the mother-to-mother vantage point, believing that she would understand the

situation better. “As a mom they would say, you know you’re a mom and as a mom this is what I’m experiencing.”

Barb extended her contrast between female and male leadership patterns by stating that “males might operate from the numbers, from the tallies, if you will the tally marks of what we’re doing or not doing. I feel that when I operate as well as other females operate, we operate from the heart.” She clarified operating from the heart as considering the value of each person’s contribution to the success of a particular process, setting a goal collaboratively, and being flexible about how to accomplish the goal in a way that “makes people feel comfortable.”

Barb relied on a stereotypical element of female behavior when she commented, “On the other hand, we can be very competitive—very catlike if you will. I think that small things can get to females a lot.” Working with two male associate principals, she has requested that if they notice she is “getting a little catty or holding grudges,” they are to tell her to reconsider her approach to an issue so that she can move on.

Using the terms nurturing and mothering to describe personal characteristics that most women bring to leading as a high school principal, Connie commented that she believed that female principals bring a different approach than men do to the position. “I think women as a gender have a little more empathy and sympathy and caring and compassion. I think that has worked to my advantage.” She credited her ability to build strong relationships with her faculty and students to, at least in part, her gender and its accompanying emotional skills. She did concede, however, that there were times when she had to make unpopular decisions and demand that those people who did not agree “change their behavior before changing their attitude.” Unfortunately, she felt that when

she did use this approach, she was seen differently than a male principal using the same approach:

You get labeled a certain way when you make hard or unpopular decisions. If you're a male you're perceived as being a strong-willed individual, who's driven and whatever else. Pardon my French, but if you're a woman, you're kind of a bitch.

Agreeing with the other three study participants, Darlene believed that female principals were more nurturing than males, cared more about emotions, and tried to collaborate and compromise to make all stakeholders satisfied:

Moms find me more approachable and see me more of an ally than they may see males. I don't often take off my mom hat, so they appreciate that approach I take in dealing with their children.

### **Summary of Themes**

The three major themes which emerged from the study were the influence that rural communities play on the leadership experience of female high school principal, the impact gender has on the principals' leadership experiences, and the leadership approach employed by the female high school principal in the rural setting. Further themes found within the theme of rural community influence were support networks, the role of the female rural high school principal, and tradition and change. Contained within the theme of gender impact were examples of the application of sex role stereotypes. Additional themes identified under the theme of leadership included communication and change, collaboration with an instructional focus, and care-focused decisionmaking and nurturing.

## Conclusion

Within the comments made by the study participants specific similarities appeared. All of the principals had been mentored informally by at least one administrator and often by more than one; some of the mentors were the participants' direct supervisors who encouraged the participants to pursue a career in administration, and some were friends and colleagues who noticed that a participant had the attributes necessary to be a leader. Eagly and Carli (2007) noted that females must build social capital within their organizations to access leadership positions. This process is usually done informally. They also need to establish a mentoring connection with individuals who can professionally support them as they work toward an administrative position.

None of the participants felt that they had faced any barriers to accessing the principalship because of their gender; however, three of the four participants were able to describe examples of when they felt that their gender had a negative impact on how they were treated by parents, students, or community members. Based on their experiences, all of the participants felt that females led with greater degrees of nurturing and care, describing such leadership as collaborative. Further, they noted that given the traditional nature of their schools and communities, respecting the values of the school and community and working collaboratively within those parameters, they had been able to make positive changes that enhanced student learning and classroom instruction. Finally, three of the participants saw a value in being able to talk with other female high school principals, but they did not necessarily know if they would use a formally established statewide network as the venue for those professional conversations.

Emerging from the theme of rural community influence, the principals all noted that the high school principal was required to be a role model at all times, a change agent who respected the values and traditions of the community, and an effective communicator. Each participant saw herself as representing the school district and her school during her contracted work hours and during her personal time. In a rural community, there is no separation “between the duties that contribute to the school and those that contribute to the community” (Budge, 2010, p. 17). The participants were challenged to create methods to bring about changes to improve student learning and engagement while simultaneously honoring the traditions and values of the school and the community. They accomplished this by connecting with stakeholders in the school and community using ongoing and honest communication. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) recommend this method to enhance the possibilities that change can occur.

Although the participants identified their predominant leadership style as collaborative, they also exhibited aspects of relational leadership that was instruction focused. Relational leaders build capacity in their followers by empowering them to make leadership decisions. Females focus more on creating relationships with those they lead than do men; and in the school setting, female leaders generally consider the instructional and curricular implications of their decisions more than male leaders do (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Two of the principals, Barb and Connie, described the strain that accompanied the job of high school principal, but Andrea and Darlene did not. Doing the job effectively negatively impacted the personal lives of Barb and Connie. Coleman (2005) described the difficulty female leaders faced in creating a feasible

balance between the demands of career and the demands of maintaining a viable personal life; in 2012, the difficulty has not yet vanished.

The use of care-based decisionmaking and nurturing and the presence of sex role stereotyping emerged from the interviews in the theme of gender impact made on the participants' leadership experiences. The principals described themselves as nurturing and mothering faculty members and students. They further spoke of making decisions based on what was in the best interest of their students and others with whom they had established working relationships. This approach to reasoning is defined as an ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982 & Noddings, 1984). The influence of sex role stereotyping appeared in multiple experiences that the participants had with parents, students and others both inside their schools and from outside their schools. Eagly and Carlin (2007) explained that roles assigned to males and females "are pervasive and influential even when people are not aware of them" (p. 85).

Chapter 5 expands on the discussion of the findings and the study's implications for further research, its limitations, and its implications for practice. Chapter 5 also explains the principals' use of care-focused decisionmaking in tandem with relational leadership as a method to act as change agents within the confines of the tradition-bound rural community.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This chapter presents an overview of the study, a summary of the findings, a discussion of the themes that emerged from the interviews, limitations of the study, implications for practice, and implications for further research. The data collected from this study produced information that, taken as a whole, creates a picture of the rural high school principalship in the Midwest from the perspective of female leaders holding the position in 2012. The experiences described by these women during a series of interviews are similar to results gained from previous studies (Sherman, 2000, Eckman, 2004 & Schuman, 2010); however, new information surfaced about the use of power within the rural community setting: Female rural high school principals used relational leadership (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011) techniques underpinned by ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984) reasoning to make changes within the tradition-bound rural community setting.

### **Overview of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the lived experience in leadership of the female principal of a Midwestern rural high school. Findings from this study add to the research base that describes the experiences of women in the rural high school principalship. This study was conducted during October and November 2012. Four female high school principals leading in rural Midwestern school districts were interviewed to collect qualitative data to answer two research questions: 1) How does the community influence the lived experience of female

principals of Midwestern rural high schools? and 2) How do female principals of rural Midwestern high schools describe their leadership styles and experiences?

Each participant was interviewed four times, and each interview lasted approximately one hour. The interview transcripts were then professionally transcribed. The data were analyzed to determine the themes, the influence of the rural community setting on leadership style and the leadership styles used by the principals, which emerged from the interview transcripts.

The dilemma faced by females leading in a male-stereotyped position within a highly tradition-bound rural community exposes a unique component of the leadership experience. These women struggled with the need to be an agent of change in their environment without offending the traditions valued by the rural community. Moreover, they encountered both positive and negative responses to their leadership when they employed a nurturing approach in dealing with students and parents alike. The question arises, then, whether females leading rural high schools would face fewer conflicts if they embraced the male approach to leadership by negating their self-expressed nurturing approach. Further, it is possible that the definition of “rural high school principal” is in a state of flux as more females take on the position and change how the job is performed.

### **Summary of Findings**

Within the theme of rural community influence, a theme that emerged was support networks and their informality. Although the principals did not receive formal mentoring, all were informally supported and guided by administrative colleagues. Sherman (2000) found that females had fewer opportunities to experience formal or traditional mentoring experiences simply because male administrators preferred to

mentor male administrative aspirants. Ongoing support for these principals was present, but again this was done almost exclusively through informal means.

The rural community governed how the participants presented themselves as public role models. Although all of the participants became change agents in their buildings and districts, they learned to make changes by practicing effective communication and creating relationships or networking webs (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011) within the community.

Themes emerging from the interviews related to leadership style included an emphasis on collaboration, capacity-building, and diffusion of power. A collaborative leader respects the ideas and skills of all members of the organization and, therefore, willingly spreads the power inherent in the leadership position among multiple members of the organization. The sharing of ideas and cooperative problem-solving and decisionmaking make all members of the organization accountable for the subsequent results. In this scenario, decisionmaking and continuation of plans and policies do not depend on the leader only. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) noted that female leaders establish relationships with followers when engaged in collaboration and labeled this relational leadership.

Evidence of sex role stereotyping surfaced throughout the study. Participants reported parents attempted to intimidate and bully them for the benefit of their children. Participants evoked the stereotype of females being nurturing or mothering when they described their leadership and decisionmaking styles when directly involved with students and those adults who they supervised.

Two exceptionally interesting results of this study were that the participants relied on sex role stereotypes to explain the advantages of female leadership style and that they employed care-focused decisionmaking in tandem with relational leadership to circumvent the power of the tradition-bound rural community to make changes to benefit student learning. All of the principals agreed that female leaders exhibit an inherent skill to nurture and care for the welfare of those they lead. The assumption that females inherently possess and exhibit this nurturing skill because they are female draws from elements of the female sex role stereotype. The acceptance and application of nurturing as a female-only attribute is both decried and applauded by feminists (Tong, 2009).

Working within the tradition-bound rural community setting, the principals recognized that changes to the status quo had to come from and be supported by school and community stakeholders. The principals created relationships with stakeholders through effective communication. The principals working cooperatively with the stakeholders made instructionally-focused changes within their high schools. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) define this leadership approach as relational and note that female leaders seem to use this approach more readily than male leaders.

The following discussion will explain barriers to hiring as a rural high school principal that females experience, the part that mentoring and networking plays for the rural high school principal, the influence that community tradition and values place on the female rural high school principal as she leads, the enduring presence of sex role stereotypes and how the principals use these stereotypes to their advantage, and the principals' use of relational leadership coupled with an ethic of care perspective in

decisionmaking that produces positive results for student learning. Limitations of the study, implications for practice and further research will also be discussed.

### **Discussion**

Females, historically, have served more often as elementary or middle school principals rather than high school principals (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). A number of factors including the number of females applying for the high school principalship influence these percentages, and research has shown that these factors include the way the high school principalship is defined; that is, from a male or androcentric viewpoint. Androcentrism posits that the male experience of life is the norm (Tong, 2009). Therefore, the androcentric viewpoint presents the high school principalship as it has been practiced by males: Reserved for males because males possess the physical stature to purportedly command respect from students and thus the ability to control student discipline. Additionally, the androcentric description of the skills needed to be a high school principal includes the agentic skills associated with men in leadership: decisiveness, aggressiveness, problem-solving, and competitiveness (Eagly & Carli, 2007). The acceptance of this male-focused definition of the high school principal may cause some hiring committees, especially those of rural communities that tend to maintain the status quo, to fail to recognize the value that the typically female leadership skills of collaboration, cooperation and relationship building could be a positive addition in leadership.

### **Barriers to Hiring**

Although none of the study participants expressed any recognition of barriers to their ability to obtain the position, this group may have been the wrong demographic to

measure the presence of barriers simply because they all were hired for the position. However, one of the subjects was appointed to her position and one was asked to apply by a district level administrator. This type of access to the principalship may be better represented as a gateway to the principalship. Further research targeting those females who applied for a rural high school principalship and were not hired would be necessary to attempt to further explore the existence of barriers. Investigating the motivations used by school board members and superintendents when choosing a high school principal would add another perspective to the reasons few women are chosen for the position. This study, however, was inconclusive in identifying specific barriers to females being hired as high school principals described in previous research studies (Eckman, 2004). Nevertheless, the continued disproportionate representation of females in rural high school principalships remains disturbing.

### **Support Networks**

The four study participants identified individuals who had served as informal mentors in their path to the principalship; however, no participant described participating in any formal district-sponsored mentoring process while in the position. Previous research studies (Eckman, 2004; Nogay & Beebe, 2008) found females aspiring to the high school principalship did not receive the mentoring or access to networking provided to males. The results of this study negate that finding to an extent; all participants named male and female colleagues who encouraged them to pursue the high school principalship and continue to mentor them. Additionally all of the participants meet regularly with high school principals of districts within their athletic conferences; albeit, the majority of the members of these groups are male. Two of the principals, however, gave examples

of devising specific tactics such as using a teasing or humorous approach when left out of male-dominated conversations. Additionally, one participant explained that effective networking with male high school principals included playing golf with them; hence, she learned to play golf to access the advantages of this social networking venue. Based on the responses of the study participants, some progress has been made in females being mentored to apply for the high school principalship and having access to some networking; nevertheless, females sometimes have to be accepted by their male colleagues into predominately male work and social groups. Eagly and Carli (2007) recommended that females build social capital within their organizations by networking with male colleagues whether they are invited to do so or not because males still retain the majority of influence and power in business, governmental and educational organizations and “the more powerful networks are usually dominated by men” (p.173).

### **Influence of Rural Community on the Principal**

Unique to the rural principalship experience is the need for the high school principal to recognize the importance of the rural community setting in terms of the traditions and values supported by community members. Budge (2006) explained that rural high school leaders “needed to understand the ‘mentality’ of the small rural community” (p.7) to be successful. All of the participants described the high school as an extension and focus of the community. The principal, as the living symbol of the high school, therefore, has to maintain an acceptable public image at all times and participate in community activities. In Sherman’s (2000) study of female rural high school principals, she found that the principals often felt like outsiders:

The women who moved into an administrative position from nearby communities find it difficult to gain community support and in this marginalization feel they must constantly prove themselves to local residents. As one woman described, “I will always be *from away*, even though I have been here over ten years.” (p. 135)

None of the principals interviewed stated that they felt unwelcome in their communities or felt like outsiders; however, they clearly articulated that maintaining an image acceptable to the rural community helped them to build credibility and trust with community members.

Although only one of the participants in this study lived in the community where her school was located and thus was never truly able to avoid community observation, the other three participants articulated the need, when in the district, to behave as a role model and representative of the district. One participant, Barb, expressed an interesting aspect of being a role model that the other participants did not. She felt that as a public school administrator, she needed to maintain an image of extreme professionalism. She compared her social standing to that of a doctor or lawyer who, in her estimation, would not shop at rummage sales held in the community.

All participants described their communities as traditional and conservative. One participant noted that her community members are “more apt to think in terms of what we would define as values from maybe ten to fifteen years ago of how one behaves, how one dresses, all those things.” This participant felt that she shared these values and saw these values as a positive aspect of the rural community influence.

Another participant, Andrea, described the fundraising support that her rural community provided for the high school as a positive representation of the rural

community influence. “We were in need of a new grand piano for the music department. Within a very short time, the community had raised the \$30,000 and purchased the piano for us.” She also noted that the community supported such groups as the football team, basketball team, and the FFA (Future Farmers of America) through the establishment of booster clubs. Community members were visibly supportive of sports, plays and concerts.

When questioned by the researcher to describe the positive impact that the rural community provided for her building, Connie was initially unable to give any examples. Later, however, she said that the teachers call on community members to serve as guest speakers for certain classes. Traditional school activities, such as Homecoming, are very well attended by alumni and other community members.

The composition of the population of the rural communities studied remains fairly static and community members value tradition as a stabilizing force. This value of tradition extends to the management and structure of the high school. Maintaining existing programs and procedures ensures that traditions are preserved. For example, one principal worked to change the method by which students were ranked academically. This proposed change has yet to be accomplished; although, the new ranking procedure will not impact the students’ opportunities to enter post-secondary education or the job market. High school graduates who often remain in the community to raise their own families see no need to make changes to a system that worked fine for them.

Each participant acknowledged that effective communication with all stakeholder groups was important before any long-term changes could be implemented. Sherman’s (2000) study of female rural principals revealed not only that the “women felt responsible

for ensuring communications at all levels were proactive and yet responsive to each group's needs" (p.139), but also that female leaders' relational approach to leadership, including ongoing communication with stakeholders, be recognized as valuable and effective. The advantages of the proposed changes had to be clearly explained multiple times to multiple groups. Input by community members and faculty members was requested and considered. Two of the principals successfully navigated changes in grading procedures by building pockets of support throughout the community. The principals created this support initially by establishing credibility with community members and then opening and maintaining strong lines of communication with community members. The principals also laid the ground work with faculty members using the same approaches: getting input, establishing relationships, and creating effective lines of communication. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) framed this strategy as relational leadership. They further stated that "when this type of leadership is grounded in purpose, relationships build the capacity that can be harnessed to create change" (p. 46)

Using similar tactics, another principal worked collaboratively with the district administrative team and specific community members to successfully convince the community to pass a building referendum. By securing input from stakeholders, communicating the connection between upgraded technical education instructional space and future employment options for graduating seniors as well as providing community industrial plants with skilled employees, the leadership team showed the community that tradition and maintaining the status quo was not in the best interest of the community or the students.

Social traditions such as adult alcohol consumption at high school sporting events and changes to homecoming court selection offered greater challenges to the principals' desires to make changes. One principal experienced a high level of frustration with the community's inability to recognize the inappropriateness of adult sports spectators consuming alcoholic beverages while watching school sporting events. She did, however, employ an effective communication tactic to clarify, without being condescending, the need for the tradition to cease. Another principal chose to bypass a conflict with the community over changing the process used to create the homecoming court; instead, she proposed the change to the student body, asked for their support, and requested that they intervene with community members. At the time of the conclusion of the study, the change had yet to be approved or implemented.

These female rural principals recognized that patience and tenacity were required to make changes to long-held community-school traditions. Each participant noted that timing and knowledge of the existing feelings of the rural community at a given time are important for successful change to occur. The changes implemented by these principals were accomplished over many weeks and months of continual communication with the community. Evidence from previous studies of leadership and gender (Eagly, 2005; Johansen, 2008) revealed that changes suggested by a male leader will be more readily accepted than those proposed by a female leader. Eagly and Carli (2007) suggested that "in traditionally masculine settings . . . expert women are often discredited, but expert men are given the benefit of the doubt" (p. 113). In the traditionally male setting of the high principalship and the tradition-bound rural community, female principals face significant challenges to implementing changes.

## **Sex Role Stereotypes**

Female high school principals operate simultaneously using two roles: one as the high school principal which is a male-defined position and one as a female which carries specific gender stereotypes. (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). The sex role stereotypes that imply that females are easily intimidated, fearful of conflict, and indecisive have appeared in the participants' leadership experiences. Eagly and Karau (2002) posited that because the female gender role did not fit the male-defined leadership role, female leaders were likely to encounter prejudicial treatment.

Three of the four participants were able to describe instances when they experienced negative treatment based on their gender. These examples involved discipline issues with students. Andrea did not initially recognize that male students were reacting to her differently than they might react to a male principal until it was pointed out to her by a male faculty member. Barb and Connie gave examples of being negatively treated by parents in one-on-one conversations with parents about their child's behavior. Barb classified a parent's behavior toward her as "bullyish . . . she thought she could push me around a little bit." Connie, being the youngest of the participants, felt her age and gender impacted how she was perceived and treated by some parents, "particularly the men, have been condescending or, even at times, trying to be intimidating."

Two principals who regularly met with groups of predominately male high school principals expressed feeling some degree of intimidation when interacting with these men. Andrea and Connie felt that they needed to find ways to effectively contribute to the discussions of the groups or be left out. Determining whether the males were simply

interacting in the manner that was comfortable for them or whether they were purposely blocking contributions by the lone female members of their groups would be purely speculative based on evidence gained from this study.

### **Relational Leadership and Nurturing**

The leadership theories of Eagly (2005) and Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) and the ethic of care described by Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (1984) inform the leadership style findings of this study. Relational leadership (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011) is marked by a diffusion of power among many stakeholder groups as opposed to a more hierarchical leadership structure best described as “not power over but rather power with”(p. 7). Relational leaders empower others by sharing power and the tasks associated with decisionmaking.

The participants in the study spoke often about doing what was best for others within their buildings and communities whether that meant checking on the hygiene and welfare of a student or determining that suspension of a student for prohibited behavior was not the best way to help the student learn from her mistakes. Noddings (1984) labeled this type of decisionmaking as ethical caring and believed that females were more likely to exhibit this type of caring behavior than males. This element of caring appeared when the participants described their leadership approach as nurturing or mothering.

Describing their leadership style as collaborative and nurturing, the subjects shared a focus on improving classroom instruction and student learning. They recognized that the main purpose of leadership in an educational setting is to improve student learning outcomes and prepare young people for post-secondary education or the job market. These findings are consistent with the findings of Sherman (2000) who noted

that female principals of rural high schools worked collaboratively with their followers to improve student learning and Beck (1992) who posited that successful high schools are led by an administrator who is nurturing and instruction-focused. It is possible that this focus may come from the influence of the years of classroom teaching that all of the principals accrued before taking on their administrative assignment. Barb, in particular, voiced this possibility when she explained that she did not consider a principalship until she had gained enough teaching and curriculum writing experience to be well prepared for the position. The three principals who were mothers referred to their leadership style as nurturing especially when dealing with troubled students or colleagues who needed support. Darlene noted that she never “removes her mother hat,” and feels that her interactions with parents are enhanced because the parents, particularly the mothers, believe she understands their point of view. Coleman (2005) found the same nurturing or mothering theme in her study of female secondary school principals in England. Each of the four principals expressed a desire to do what was in the best interest of their students. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2001) stated that women leaders “are more likely to pay attention to who is being served” (p. 97) rather than the level of authority they have at their disposal.

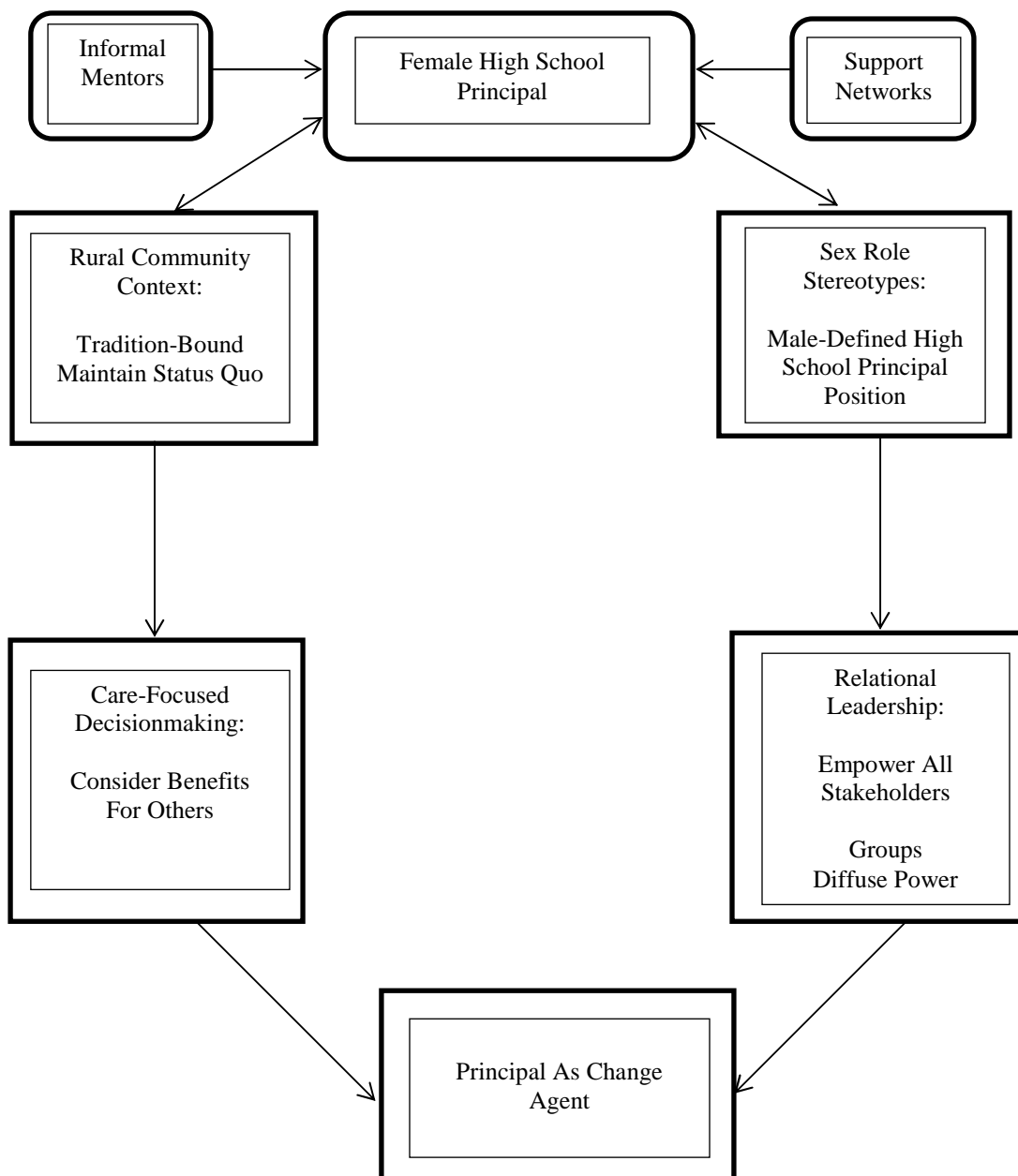
The principals also stated that part of their approach to leadership involved helping their teachers improve and learn new skills thus building capacity within their buildings. Barb was the most vocal regarding this theme. Facing retirement in five years, Barb wanted to make sure that the programs and policies established during her tenure would continue after she left. She felt that by encouraging her faculty members to

participate in decisionmaking and coaching them through the process, she increased the capacity of her faculty to continue what she began.

To the four principals, the process used to meet goals was vastly more important than just emphasizing completion of the goal. Comparing a male principal's emphasis on competition and winning through completion of a goal, one principal described male principals as "keeping a tally and adding up points—winning no matter how it was done." Research by Eagly and Chin (2010) established that female leaders generally care more than male leaders about followers' feelings and input during a change process.

Figure 5.1 represents the principals' application of relational leadership and care-focused decisionmaking to circumvent the rural community's restrictive limits placed on change. The diagram illustrates elements that the participants felt helped them manage the daily leadership demands of their job positions: informal mentoring through self-designed support networks. The tradition-bound rural community setting as well as the presence of sex role stereotypes used to define the behaviors and decisionmaking approaches that the community deemed appropriate for the high school principal tended to thwart changes to the status quo that the female principals hoped to accomplish. Consequently, the principals found success as change agents when they employed relational leadership approaches to empower all stakeholders and focused on maintaining relationships and making decisions based on caring about the welfare of all persons who would be feel the impact of those decisions. Hartsock (1983) and Kreisberg (1992) described this diffusion or sharing of leadership power among stakeholders as a power with as opposed to a power over leadership structure.

Figure 5.1 Power With Versus Power Over



### Limitations of Study

This study was conducted using a small number of participants who shared two general attributes: their gender, female, and their occupation, rural Midwestern high school principal. Additionally, these principals led 9-12 high schools located in the

southern third of the state. All of the principals had held their positions for two or more years, and all had previously served in an administrative position. Consequently, the results of the study do not represent the leadership experiences of female high school principals in urban or suburban districts in Midwest or in rural school districts in which the principal leads a middle/high school combination.

In qualitative research studies, the researcher becomes the vehicle or instrument by which the study is conducted. It should be noted that the researcher served as a female principal of a high school in a rural Midwestern school district for a period of five years but not during the time frame of the current study. Because the researcher had experienced leadership situations very like those described by the study participants, interpretation of the data could have been influenced by researcher bias and assumptions. Similarly, the interview process may have been influenced by the researcher's preconceived judgments based on her leadership experiences. In an attempt to reduce the level of subjectivity, all subjects were asked the same questions, had their answers audio-taped and transcribed, and were treated with the same protocol throughout the study.

The results of this research were based on the perceptions of only four participants. Because each of the participants has experienced different life circumstances and events, their perceptions are necessarily flavored by their backgrounds. Therefore, their perceptions may be considered reality only for each of them.

### **Implications for Practice**

To increase the number of females applying for rural high school principalships, the current role perceptions of the position need to change. Coleman (2005) noted that

one of the reasons that females do not apply for the position is because they believe they are not suited for it. Women who aspire to the rural high school principalship need role models to follow. As an initial step, those female principals who currently hold the position need to share their leadership approaches publicly through print media and presentations.

Currently, none of the professional associations that represent this Midwestern state's high school administrators has a division devoted to the concerns of female members nor is the female perspective on leadership acknowledged in print by these organizations or presented at these groups' yearly conferences. Institutions of higher education in the state do not include female-focused courses in their administrative leadership programs. Both males and females would benefit from being exposed to leadership information from multiple viewpoints.

Because rural school districts tend to be isolated, rural principals do not have the opportunity to meet with colleagues or attend professional development programs as readily as urban or suburban principals. Additionally, female rural principals leave their buildings even less preferring to stay with their students (Wallin, 2005). Virtual networks could be established to connect these principals and serve as a venue for professional support.

The Department of Public Instruction established the Advancing Rural Education Initiative to address the needs of the state's rural school districts. Under the auspices of the DPI, information about female rural principals' leadership styles and leadership successes could be highlighted through this initiative. The Rural Schools Alliance (RSA) also does not have any programs highlighting female leadership styles and concerns in

rural districts. Adding such programs to its yearly conferences and providing information to rural school board members and superintendents would begin the process of changing the stereotypical image of the rural high school principal. A concerted effort by rural districts to recruit females for high school principal positions might also lead to more female applicants for the position

### **Implications for Further Research**

Research about rural school districts is inadequate and research about female leadership experiences in rural districts is severely limited. Although leadership studies focusing on the high school principalship have been conducted, high school leadership from the female perspective focused specifically on rural districts is quite limited. Therefore, further studies are called for to enhance the current research base. Studies investigating the perceptions that rural district superintendents, board members and community residents hold about high school leadership would provide insight into hiring practices that seem to favor males. Females who applied for rural high school principalships but were not hired could be studied to determine their perceptions about barriers to accessing the position. Additionally, studies about high school teachers' career and leadership aspirations would provide further insight into the reasons females may be choosing not to apply for high school principal positions. With few studies having been done on the rural community and its influence on leadership, there is a need for more investigation in this area.

The intent of this study was to explore the leadership experience of female high school principals in rural Midwestern school districts and further, to focus on the impact that the rural community setting has on that experience. The study produced data that

suggested that female high school principals leading 9-12 rural high schools in the Midwest faced similar demands and expectations in their positions. They were expected to be role models for students and representatives of the school district both on the job and during their private time when in the district. Although none reported facing barriers to accessing their positions, they did encounter instances when, because of their gender and the stereotypical role assigned to their gender, they were treated differently than a male principal might have been.

As change agents, the participants were successful when they led from a relational standpoint, built networks of support from faculty, parents and community members, and exhibited an ethic of care in decisionmaking. The participants shared their power thus creating an atmosphere of “power with instead of power over.”

The value of this study rests in its addition to the research base. It also informs the public and probable female candidates for the position that the traditional definition of “rural high school principal” as principally male-defined may not be the future reality of the position or the preferred definition for job performance in the future. Current female high school principals in rural districts may be opening the door to a new definition that is marked by a feminized approach to creating change. The study clearly suggested that female leadership styles that focus on empowering followers and respecting relationships are an effective method to create change. “With excellence in leadership in short supply, no group, organization, or nation should tolerate the losses that follow from unfairly restricting women’s access to leadership roles” (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 11).

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**Appendix A**  
**Invitation Letter**

Dear Principal \_\_\_\_\_,

As part of my doctoral program at UW-Milwaukee, I am conducting a qualitative phenomenological research study about the experiences of female high school principals in rural school districts in the Midwest. Very little research has been conducted regarding the experiences of female high school principals in rural Midwestern school districts; therefore, one of the goals of my research is to provide information that will fill that gap in knowledge and expand the research base.

This study will be conducted through a series of interviews with study participants during the first semester of the 2012-13 academic year. Interviews will be audio-recorded and then transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Your identity and the identity of your school will be protected at all times throughout the entire process of collecting data, transcribing the data, and composing the final report. You will be assigned a pseudonym, and your school will be identified by the use of an alphabetic letter. Our meetings will be arranged to accommodate your schedule.

The information gained from this study will become part of my dissertation. It will be shared with a committee of university professors and then placed in the UW-Milwaukee library.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please contact me at [bartlin6@uwm.edu](mailto:bartlin6@uwm.edu) at your earliest convenience. I will acknowledge your contact and then speak directly to you by phone to answer any questions you may have and to arrange the initial interview.

Thank you,

Ellen Bartling

## Appendix B

### Consent Form

**Informed Consent**

**IRB Protocol**

**Number: 13.104**

**UW-Milwaukee**

**IRB**

**Approval Date: October 3, 2012**

### University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee Consent to Participate in Research

**Study Title:** Female High School Principals In Rural Midwestern School Districts: Their Lived Experiences In Leadership

**Person Responsible for Research:** Ellen Bartling

**Study Description:** The purpose of this research study is to describe the leadership experiences of female high school principals serving in rural Midwestern school districts. Approximately seven subjects will participate in this study. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to answer questions posed by the researcher during multiple interview sessions and have your answers audio-taped. This will take approximately five hours of your time.

**Risks / Benefits:** Risks that you may experience from participating are considered minimal. There are no costs for participating. There are no benefits to you other than to further research.

**Confidentiality:** Your information collected for this study is completely confidential and no individual participant will ever be identified with his/her research information. You will be assigned a pseudonym which will be used during the interview process, transcription of audio taped interviews, data analysis and final written report; likewise, your school will be assigned an alphabetic letter to maintain confidentiality. Audio-taped data will be transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Data from this study will be saved on password protected computer files. Only the researcher will have access to the information. However, the Institutional Review Board at UW-Milwaukee or appropriate federal agencies like the Office for Human Research Protections may review this study's records.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part in this study. If you decide to take part, you can change your mind later and withdraw from the study; however, data obtained from you will become part of the study. You are free to not answer any questions or withdraw at any time. Your decision

will not change any present or future relationships with the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee.

**Who do I contact for questions about the study:** For more information about the study or study procedures, contact Dr. Gail Schneider at [gts@uwm.edu](mailto:gts@uwm.edu).

**Who do I contact for questions about my rights or complaints towards my treatment as a research subject?** Contact the UWM IRB at 414-229-3173 or [irbinfo@uwm.edu](mailto:irbinfo@uwm.edu).

**Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:**

To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must be 18 years of age or older. By signing the consent form, you are giving your consent to voluntarily participate in this research project.

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Printed Name of Subject/Legally Authorized Representative

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Signature of Subject/Legally Authorized Representative

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Date

**Appendix C**  
**Interview Protocol**  
**Interview # 1**

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewee:

As you know, my study will be looking at female high school principals in rural Midwestern school districts in terms of their leadership style and the impact that the rural community context has on their experience in the job. I just want to remind you that you can refuse to answer any question you wish and that you may withdraw from the study at any point. Do you have any questions so far?

1. To begin with, I would like to collect some basic demographic information from you: Age, marital status, years teaching, teaching assignments, educational level, hometown, experience in administration (years and titles), children (ages)?
  
2. Could you describe your career path to your current position?
  
3. How were you mentored on your road to the high school principalship? How are you mentored (either formally or informally) now that you are a high school principal?
  
4. Could you describe any barriers you perceived to accessing your position? Any advantages?



## Interview Protocol

### Interview #2

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewee:

As you know, my study will be looking at female high school principals in rural Midwestern school districts in terms of their leadership style and the impact that the rural community context has on their experience in the job. I just want to remind you that you can refuse to answer any question you wish and that you may withdraw from the study at any point. Do you have any questions so far? Is there anything that you wanted to add to the first interview information?

Today, I'd like to focus on the impact that the rural community has on you and the way you lead.

1. Rural community includes the traditions, values, economy, and demographics of a particular rural community. How would you describe this community?
2. What expectations does the community have for its schools in terms of educating its children?
3. Can you describe, using specific examples, two instances when the rural community complicated your decisionmaking? Can you describe two instances when it supported your decisionmaking?









## CURRICULUM VITAE

Ellen M. Bartling

Place of birth: Milwaukee, WI

### EDUCATION

Ph.D. University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, May 2013  
Urban Education, Major: Administrative Leadership

M.A. Marian College, Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, May 1995  
Major: Education

B.S. University of Wisconsin-Platteville, May 1980  
Major: English

Dissertation Title: Female High School Principals In Rural Wisconsin School Districts: Their Lived Experiences In Leadership

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

**University Level**      Adjunct Lecturer, Graduate School of Education, Concordia University Wisconsin, Mequon, Wisconsin

Adjunct Lecturer, School of Education, Marian College, Fond du Lac, Wisconsin

**Public School Administration**

Superintendent, School District of Lomira, Wisconsin, July 2011 – June 2012

Elementary Principal, School District of Lomira, Wisconsin, July 2011 – June 2012

High School Principal, Valders Area School District, Wisconsin, July 2007 – June 2011

Director of Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment and Staff Development,

Valders Area School District, Wisconsin, July 2006 – June 2011

**Secondary Level Teaching**

High School English and History Instructor, Merrill High School, Wisconsin, 1990 – 2006

High School English Instructor, Oconomowoc High School,  
Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, 1986 – 1990

High School English Instructor, Wauwatosa East and West High  
Schools, Wisconsin, 1984 – 1986

## **PRESENTATIONS**

*Curriculum Methods and Leadership Strategies*, Wisconsin  
Council for the Social Studies State Conference

*Social Studies with a Twist-PI34 and the Social Studies Classroom*,  
Wisconsin Council for the Social Studies State Conference

*Modern Terrorism—A Teaching Unit*, Wisconsin Council for the  
Social Studies State Conference

*The Hmong in Wisconsin*, Department of Asian Studies, University  
of Wisconsin-Madison, Teacher Advisory Panel for Asian Studies  
Teacher Workshop

## **AWARDS**

*Transatlantic Outreach Program Fellowship*, Goethe Institut,  
Berlin, Germany, 2007

*Who's Who Among American Teachers*

## **PROFESSIONAL SERVICE**

Social Studies PK-16 Curriculum Articulation Study Group Leader  
and Study Report Co-Author, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Department of Public Instruction Social Studies Statewide  
Advisory Council—Secondary Education Resource Person

International Committee of the Red Cross/University of  
Wisconsin-River Falls Department of Social Work Field  
Implementation Researcher “Exploring Humanitarian Law”

Asia Society Partnership for Global Learning Charter Member

Teacher Advisory Panel for Asian Studies, University of  
Wisconsin-Madison

Wisconsin Council for the Social Studies Executive Board  
Member

Wisconsin Association for Supervision and Curriculum  
Development Board Member

Manitowoc County High School Manufacturing Project Steering  
Committee Member

Wisconsin State Superintendent's International Education Council  
Board Member

Center for Civic Education, Wisconsin 7<sup>th</sup> Congressional District  
Coordinator

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction PI34 Professional  
Development Plan Reviewer

**LICENSURE**

State of Wisconsin Superintendent (03)

State of Wisconsin Principal (51)

State of Wisconsin Director of Instruction (10)

State of Wisconsin Professional Educator-English 7-12 (300)

State of Wisconsin Professional Educator-History 7-12 (725)