Beyond obstacles and problems: women principals in Spain leading change in their schools

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In Spain, the presence of women in decision-making positions and in positions of power is not proportional to the total number of women within the field of education. Women have encountered personal and professional barriers in their advancement to the principalship; however, significant and substantive changes to school policy are revealed when examining the experiences of those who achieve principal status. This article discusses the findings from a one-year qualitative multi-case study of women principals’ roles in educational leadership and their creation of policy for educational change. Using in-depth interviews, observations, and field notes, the study focused on eight women working as principals and how the school community perceived their work, which lead to change within their schools. Despite the difficulties the principals encountered, this study found the women’s experiences to be positive in several areas: school change; self-renewal and growth; relational and social networks with faculty; students and school community; and democratic and participatory styles of leadership as successful ingredients of their work.

Introduction

The under-representation of women in administrative positions within educational institutions continues to be a matter of some concern, particularly since the teaching force is largely made up of women, both nationally and internationally (Cubillo and Brown 2003). However, the increase of more liberal attitudes toward gender roles, and a less traditional division of domestic labour throughout European countries as a whole, has radically improved women’s situations (Lovenduski and Stephenson 1999, Crompton et al. 2005). Spain has one of the highest growth rates of female labour participation in Europe (from 23% in 1964 to 68% in 1998 for women aged 25–44 years), but this percentage is still low compared with male labour participation (Carnicer et al. 2004, Alfageme et al. 2006).

In Spain, women’s traditional primary responsibilities have been housekeeping and childcare; women with families are therefore typically discriminated against, and their possibilities for advancement are less (Frau 1998, Gómez 2004, Cabrera 2005). Cultural traditions in most southern European...
countries, where family is a very strong institution and where work schedules are lengthy (a typical working day has a long break for lunch and can run late in the evening), have contributed to make work and family difficult to negotiate (Hill et al. 2004).

The study described herein represents part of a wider project that focused on barriers perceived by women acceding to the principalship in the Andalusian region of Spain. Substantive research has explored the work–family interface focusing on patterns of interaction and social dynamics (Greenhaus and Powell 2003, 2006, Nordenmark 2002, Greenhaus et al. 2003, Smithson and Stokoe 2005). Research has analysed and distinguished between internal and external barriers, and their influence on mobility and professional promotion, confirming the presence of the ‘glass ceiling’ and its impact on women’s opportunities for advancement (Fitzgerald and Weitzman 1992, Betz and Hackett 1997). In general, women in organizations are not as visible and face structural and cultural barriers. Career goals are often adapted to meet other life circumstances (Burke and Nelson 2002, Perrewé and Nelson 2004, Lynness and Brumit 2005). In the education environment, a number of researchers have attempted to identify and categorize some of the barriers impeding the progress of women’s careers in educational administration and leadership (Brown and Ralph 1996, Coleman 1996, 2001, Hall 1996, Krüger 1996, Young and McLeod 2001, Cubillo and Brown 2003). Earlier findings within the larger study mentioned above indicated that role conflict was the primary factor influencing the decision-making process regarding acceding to the principalship.

On the other hand, the rationale for the study must pay attention to the situation of women in the workplace. The role of women has been practically absent or has been treated as irrelevant historically and in academic discourse. Translated into practice, women’s issues are often ignored in the workplace and their efforts undervalued (Calás and Smircich 1996, Alvesson and Due Billing 1997, Ely et al. 2003, Mills and Marjosola 2002, Kottke and Agars 2005). Administrative work has long been recognized as masculine and organizations are principally managed through these same background assumptions and constructions of masculine subjectivity. Writing on management and organization has frequently served to deny or denigrate the significance of gender as a concept in the pursuit of ‘better’ management practice. This historical process assigns female insight and practice a marginal or ‘other’ inferior status (Knights and Kerfoot 2004).

Since the 1980s, there has been an increase in research focused on gender and school administration, which has documented women’s experiences across the globe. Studies highlighting women in administration and the management process (Shakeshaft 1987, Gatenby and Humphries 1999, Skrla 2000, Young and McLeod 2001, Martin and Collinson 2002, Hatcher 2003), in leadership roles (Hall 1996, Drake and Owen 1998, Strachan 1999, Coleman 2003, 2004, Fennell 2005) or in the principalship (Smulyan 2000, Oplatka 2001, Eckman 2004) have shown that women in management positions work in organizational cultures dominated by masculine visions and models that reinforce situations of inequality and marginalization. Thus, organisational cultures have created obstacles to women’s progress and their access to management positions (Gherardi 1995, Evetts
Moreover, the broader social, economic and political relationships shaping the educational work associated with policies underpinned by managerialist and market principles in educational institutions (Davies 2003), have a powerful impact on the principalship and on educational leadership (Blackmore 2004a).

On the other hand, leadership has been recognized as vitally important for schools. When we speak of leadership we associate it with the work of principals and the process of school management. The essence of management is about what people in positions of authority and responsibility do in organizations. In this context, scholars have shown that women often use less directive and authoritarian administrative styles, less bureaucratic policies, and devote greater attention to people and processes (Pankake et al. 2000, Fennell 2002, Acker 2003, Coleman 2003, 2004, Eagly 2005). Women leaders tend to focus more on relationships between individual and communities, and viewed power as being a multi-dimensional and multidirectional process to empower others, rather than having power over them. As a whole, these differences have provoked a change in organizational school cultures (Asplund 1998, Brunner 2002, Day 2005). Though the persistent inequities in educational administration suggest that institutionalized privileges, enjoyed by one group over another, are more potent than research that might show (Rusch and Marshall 2006: 231). Even so, our research does not intend to give preference to either women or men, but to recognize the necessity to move beyond the antiquated and longstanding ‘men-are-autocratic’ and ‘women-are-nurturing’ dichotomies (Vecchio 2002, Collard and Reynolds 2005, Krüger 2008). This study just tries to show these matters in political, historical, cultural and educational landscapes like Spain.

In Spain, females hold more positions in school classrooms compared with males, especially in the lower grades. In 2004 Spain had a total of 199,971 women, as opposed to 59,272 men, in preschool and elementary education teaching positions, while 70% of men held the position of principal as opposed to only 30% of women (Instituto de Estadística de Andalucía 2006). Prerequisites for candidature to the principalship are the same for both women and men. Criteria include having spent five years in the workplace, having completed an in-service course, and having a predefined placement. Furthermore, Spain is one of only two OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries where school principals are elected from—and also partly by—each elementary and secondary schools’ teaching staff. Nevertheless, more than 50% of principals in elementary and secondary education end up being appointed by those in administration, due to the lack of candidates to assume the role of principal. Women continue to increase their share of managerial positions, but the rate of progress is slow, uneven and sometimes discouraging.

According to Bolívar and Moreno (2006), after the fall of the dictatorship in the mid-1970s, Spain experienced a growing social demand for a more democratic model of school governance. Today, however, only a few decades later, this participatory model is undergoing a major crisis, with more voices in the education sector demanding a shift in the structure of the principalship. The high expectations created by a culture of democratic participation—which prevailed in the 1980s seemed to be far from fulfilment
20 years later. The deterioration of the model was evident when, at the beginning of the 1990s there were no candidates willing to run for the principalship in roughly 50% of the schools in the country. The socialist government, through the General Education Act passed in December 2005, tried to balance a more professional approach to the principalship, with active participation from the school community in the election process. Still, more than one-third of the schools did not have teachers ready to run as candidates.

Though gender research within educational administration has been emergent and even abundant in many countries, Spain has suffered from an absence of participation in the discourse. Except for the study by Díez et al. (2006), which examined the barriers impeding advancement to the principalship with women principals in the northern region of the country, little has been done to offer significant empirical insight to the field. The lack of research reflects what little attention the country has given to the issues of women in administration or leadership roles. In short, the interwoven political, historical and socio-economic threads of Spain’s context offer an interesting and complex tapestry to unravel and explore with regards to the role of the women in contemporary society, workplace, educational institutions and, educational administration. In particular, these circumstances create the need for research that explores women in the role of principal. We did this from the female perspective to gain new insights and work methods, and also to capture previously undervalued and undocumented work practices, acknowledging the dynamics and complexities involved (Czarniawska 2006). In this case, we want to know how female principals, working in their schools, recognize leadership roles and management policies for educational change. Specifically, in this article we present the findings from the work of eight women who are principals in a range of preschool and elementary schools within the region of Andalusia.

Method

Context and participants

Andalusia, located in the south of Spain, has been a region characterized by a high index of unemployment, and levels of economic and social development below the national average. However, in the last 20 years it has experienced remarkable growth. Unemployment has reached 13%, an historical low. This figure is down 20 points from 10 years ago, but is still double the national average. Since 2004, over 400,000 new jobs have been created in Andalusia. Upon close examination of the labour force between the ages of 25 and 54 years of age, positive transformations are being made for women as they have acquired many of these new positions. From 1995 through 2005 the rate of unemployment for women dropped from 43.1% to 19.4%. Though discrimination against women has a long and historical tradition, between 2001 and 2005, the number of women acquiring jobs increased to 44% and women’s unemployment dropped to 28%, a percentage that is twice that of men in some cases (Instituto de Estadística de Andalucía
2006). There have been other advances as well. Political and legislative frameworks have focused on improving the situation of women. The new Law of Autonomy for Andalusia, approved in November 2006 by the National Government, highlighted women’s legal and political rights to equality. Furthermore, in November 2007 the government enacted the First Law of Equality of Andalusia to promote equality and to correct the great number of discrimination cases still encountered. Despite these advances, in education the percentage of school principals continues at a non-proportional ratio of 70/30 in favour of men.

Eight schools participated in a one-year qualitative, multi-case study conducted in each one of the Andalusian provinces. Previously, these schools has been included, together with another 198 schools, in the first descriptive stage of research, which focused on the barriers women encountered in their advancement to the principalship at the preschool and elementary school levels and how these barriers influenced the women’s personal and professional lives. Having finished this stage we contacted some female principals. We employed an intentional procedure (Goetz and LeCompte 1988), for participant selection, following several criteria: school type (rural/suburban/urban); socio-economic problems; and the nomination process of the female principals (designated by the ‘educational authority’, which is somewhat akin to educational administrators in the US, or elected from—and also partly by—the teaching staff of schools). Using these specific criteria, we selected one school and its female principal for each province of the region. Table 1 displays each school’s and female principal unique characteristics.

As mentioned, eight in-depth case studies were conducted, one in each province of Andalusia, in schools with differing characteristics with regards to their environmental context, the school’s make-up, and the principals’ profiles as well. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the educational leadership styles of the women as they carry out their roles and perform their responsibilities as principals?
2. How do the female principals characterize and describe their roles and responsibilities within their leadership position?
3. What do they consider to be the strengths and weaknesses they attribute to their own administration?
4. How does the educational community (i.e. faculty, students, and family members) react toward the female leadership role at the school?
5. What are the feelings and opinions the situation has created?
6. How does the educational community perceive and describe the female-administered principalship and the characteristics of the women’s leadership styles?
7. How do they assess the women’s ways of carrying out their jobs and managing the schools?

We visited each school once a week for one academic year (10 months); thus a total of 320 visits were conducted. Data for this study were collected through multiple sources. Interview data played an essential role. A total of 104 interviews were completed. Within each of the eight provinces, we carried out four in-depth interviews with each principal. In addition, 32
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>School type</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Student immigrant population</th>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Number of teachers (female/male)</th>
<th>Context socio-economic problems</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Years in current position</th>
<th>Years in teaching</th>
<th>Previous principalship</th>
<th>Access to principalship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Almeria</td>
<td>Preschool Elementary</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>4–6</td>
<td>+50%</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>19 F/5 M</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>50–55</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>+25</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Elected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cádiz</td>
<td>Preschool Elementary</td>
<td>520</td>
<td>4–6</td>
<td>−25%</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>22 F/4 M</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>45–49</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>+25</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Elected</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seville</td>
<td>Preschool Elementary</td>
<td>575</td>
<td>4–6</td>
<td>−25%</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>28 F/4 M</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>50–55</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>+30</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Elected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Córdoba</td>
<td>Preschool Elementary</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>4–6</td>
<td>+25%</td>
<td>Inner-city</td>
<td>24 F/8 M</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>45–49</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>+25</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Elected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaga</td>
<td>Preschool Elementary</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>4–6</td>
<td>+25%</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>14 F/6 M</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>50–55</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>+30</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Designated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huelva</td>
<td>Preschool Elementary</td>
<td>415</td>
<td>4–6</td>
<td>−25%</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>18 F/10 M</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>45–49</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>+25</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Elected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaén</td>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>4–6</td>
<td>−25%</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>11 F/0 M</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>45–49</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>+25</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Designated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Granada</td>
<td>Preschool Elementary</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>4–6</td>
<td>+50%</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>9 F/5 M</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>45–49</td>
<td>8</td>
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school teachers, 16 students belonging to the last grade of elementary schools, and 8 people with the title of 'administrative staff' were interviewed using random sampling procedures. Likewise, 32 family members were interviewed; most of these were done with the mothers. Mothers take part in, and are more involved in, schoolwork than fathers.

1. In-depth interviews with the principals of each school were conducted with the focus on examining and exploring the women’s subjective experiences and learning about the following: the women's career paths; internal and external motivations for the way in which they carry out their leadership roles; obstacles encountered when performing the duties associated with their position; coping mechanisms; consequences and personal and professional rewards of their administrative performance; characteristics and styles of management; and their perception of how they perform their administrative tasks and responsibilities.

2. In-depth interviews with members of the educational community (teachers, students, administrative help, and families) were conducted to understand their opinions and assessments of the administration led by the women and to identify the characteristics they attribute to the principals, the women’s styles of leadership and their role in creating a better school.

In addition to exploring new areas and experiences, subsequent interviews were used to clarify and further develop earlier dialogues, and to verify participants’ meanings and experiences (van Maanen 1992). All interviews were tape-recorded and confidentiality was assured.

3. An analysis of official school documents was carried out in order to gain a holistic picture of the way the each school operates. We reviewed and analysed lesson plans, prospectuses, and other school documents beginning with records from the year before the principal took the position to the present.

4. Observations and field notes describing the visits to the school; the relationship with the principal and other participants; and the involvement and participation of the researcher in the various activities, events, and daily routines that give the school rhythm and life.

The use of narrative and discourse analysis was continual throughout the research process (Court 2004). Inductively, we paid close attention to the discovery of patterns and themes by means of identification, coding, and categorizing various elements and establishing the relationships among them with the intent of reducing the large volume of collected data (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Through this means we were able to advance to a level of thematic description that highlighted leadership styles and the development of administrative school policies implemented by the women principals. Once we obtained the data from the eight schools, and these data had gone through preliminary analysis, we developed a comprehensive, multi-case study of the Andalusia region. Emerging themes were used for synthesizing the information we obtained. These themes indicate the intellectual, social, and emotional complexities of the principals’ actions, and also provide clear
indicators of the understandings, qualities, strategies and skills through which these women working, managing and leading change in their schools.

**Findings**

Research reports from each of the eight provinces emphasize the uniqueness of each school’s context and of each principal. In this article we present similarities and common ground as a whole, referring to the principals’ activities used in leading change and their consequences. From analysis of narratives (Polkinghorne 1995: 12), four basic themes emerge from a global, multi-case analysis:

1. **Becoming a principal offers an opportunity for school change, self-renewal, and growth.**
2. **Relational and social networks with faculty, students, and school community serve as a resource for principals.**
3. **‘You count’ policies and leadership styles that are democratic and participatory in nature are hallmarks.**
4. **Problems and troubles for the women principals.**

*Becoming a principal offers an opportunity for school change, self-renewal, and growth*

For the participating principals, the decision to become a principal was primarily motivated by a commitment to schooling, a concern for students, for teaching and learning, and to the overall functioning of the school in general. It was not due to a desire to become a principal per se that led them to follow the path, but rather the need to boost change within the school. These women wanted to be principals because they wanted to see their ideas put into action; they wanted to be agents of change regarding schooling and schoolwork. Indeed, those women that obtained this administrative position did so for the same reason they wanted to facilitate the learning process early on when they first became teachers (Young and McLeod 2001). Aspects related to salary, status and social recognition were, and remain, secondary.

Once the women became principals, changes and improvements in the schools’ functioning began to take place, according to those in the educational community. In all cases we observed the women working towards the ‘establishment of norms and policies for improvement’. This work is complemented with the daily tasks of speaking and listening to the educational community as a collective ‘each and every day’. It is meticulous work that is slow and continuous, and involves the assumption of certain commitments, the implementation of initiatives, programmes and projects, and involves different members of the educational community.

The women principals foster teacher empowerment, and through their leadership they help teachers generate reforms internally. If, for example, little family involvement is found in the life of the school as a result of
associated social problems (as in the cases of Cádiz, Malaga, and Granada), the principals design a road map to generate support and resources for their schools and show the need for collaboration and involvement of the families—working within their range of possibilities—in the students’ education. In the cases where there is low participation from the school community, the principals have developed more open and inviting environments through various innovative programmes and processes.

Thus, we have observed the development of what could be called ‘micro-reforms’ as a substantive part of the principals’ agendas. We refer to small but significant changes in the functioning of the institutions as a result of the administration, which leads to an improvement of school processes and activities, and in many ways adds balance to work normally considered bureaucratic and primarily oriented towards ‘putting out fires’.

According to Harris (2004, 2006) schools in difficult contexts require a high degree of external support and intervention. In our study, women principals in schools in difficult settings (Cádiz, Malaga, Granada and Huelva) exercise an indirect but powerful influence on the effectiveness of the school and on the achievement of the students. Despite the problems encountered in practice, the women are usually insistent and persevering when it comes to obtaining the resources necessary to school change and student learning. Changing the conditions in order to improve learning is taken as a challenge:

I try to improve my work to improve the [children’s] education, to make it attractive, so that low achievement students will find this place to be a pleasant and comfortable place to be, where they can learn and stay motivated to learn. (8CORPRI)

The principal in Jaén commented:

Given the special characteristics of the school’s environment, there exists an opportunity for the school to set itself apart and to carry out creative activities within the community. I have to be attentive in my search for resources and support for the betterment of the school, and focus on having the school function at its very best so that everyone within the school community can enjoy the school. (6JAEPRI)

In the case of Malaga, to the south, the principal simply sees her work as ‘an opportunity to provide services to the community’ (4MALPRI). As a result, she believes this philosophy should be reflected in the internal activities of the institution and that the school should be completely integrated in its environment. This objective leads to remarkable support from the educational authority.

The initiation and implementation of school change is implicitly conceived as a positive contributor of self-renewal and growth (Oplatka 2003: 38). The women project within their work a personal set of characteristics and knowledge obtained from their unique life history. The women’s narratives highlight the importance of careers and professional life. Previous personal experiences and the importance of prior influences and learning processes converge in substantive pieces of the women’s professional identity. Their personal experiences serve as a framework for their professional lives and are constructed and reconstructed based on new life experiences. In all eight cases, the early career paths helped to
inform the present and provide explanations to the reasoning used when the women decided to become principals. The women’s early framework, made up of predispositions and personal knowledge, emerges in their lives, interacts within a variety of contexts, advances the level of personal and professional knowledge and eventually guides the way in which they think and act as principals.

It is evident that, before becoming principals, the women were actively involved in some type of educational administration, such as a curriculum director or in something related to teacher co-ordination. If we add this to the wide professional experience they all have (25 years or more), combined with the extensive knowledge of the educational contexts in which they work, we find that when they accede to the principalship they incorporate both experience and first-hand knowledge from a professional point of view. Even so, there does not appear to be, at a general level, purposeful career planning towards becoming a principal. For example, as one principal said:

I never imagined this would happen one day, not even at the moment when the prior principal announced he was leaving. In fact, it was his idea that started me on this adventure. (3CADPRI).

Biographical interviews with the participants reveal the influence of female role models in the personal and professional lives of the principals, especially in three cases (Almeria, Huelva, and Seville). In many ways, these influences help explain the career paths and help us understand the principals’ work practises and leadership styles. Additionally, with the principals in both Seville and in Almeria, it is important to note that a social and political commitment that began during the years of the democratic transition in Spain has influenced their style and way of being.

Learning experiences and personal and professional development are equally reinforced by the fact that the women have reached a certain level of maturity in their lives. Our findings are similar in nature to those of Shakeshaft (1987), Riehl and Byrd (1997) and Eckman (2004), who show that women accede to the principalship at an older age than men and have more educational experience when they reach their first term in the position. Therefore, they reach administrative levels later in life than men. Female administrators tend to have an average of 10 more years of teaching experience than men and thus are older than most men when they first take up these positions.

In any case, the principalship supposedly has an equal ‘opportunity to organize [one’s] professional life and work, and recognize and value situations and aspects of school life that previously went unnoticed’ (6JAEPRI). Certainly, the position has become an invaluable personal and professional learning experience for the principals who participated in this study.

Relational and social networks with faculty, students, and school community serve as a resource for principals

The principals are concerned with the social climate in the schools. Addressing these dynamics leads the women to recognize the social roles
of the educational institution which, in the majority of the cases studied, engage in purposeful activities that go beyond the physical walls of the school itself. The school opens itself to the outside and improves its external image. The female principals develop visionary and creative responses to social circumstances, actively engaging in and promoting social justice in their environments. The principals in the eight cases studied demonstrated involvement in student problems (both academic and social), interaction with families, and integration with their communities. To do this, the women link up with NGOs and other external agencies, and manage the necessary resources to create policies and programmes promoting a social commitment. These actions of solidarity can be attributed to questions of sensitivity—of a greater sensitivity to these issues. The importance of cooperating with the entire school community, having a smooth relationship with each of the various entities within the community, and the principals’ role as facilitator is stressed by the members when they state:

The relationship between the principal and the school community probably would not be the same with a man .... There wouldn’t exist this same relationship that has a sense of sensitivity. (2SEVOMSC1)

A possible explanation for the roles the principals assume are because ‘the roles women develop in society are very similar to this’ (2SEVMOTH).

The principals try to achieve the necessary balance between the demands and needs of the various groups; especially with regards to the relationship between the faculty and the educational authority, and between the faculty and the families. These relationships unfold on a horizontal plane, with the principal being just one more within the collective of people, but one who facilitates participation from all. This ‘lateral capacity building’ (Fullan 2006: 116) is a powerful strategy. In the case of the principal from Almeria, egalitarian relationships are promoted and enhanced, not by the proposals and ideas the principal puts forth because of her position, but rather by the weight of the arguments. Even if she disagrees with what the majority has decided, she accepts the decision. When there is disagreement, her role is that of mediator, attaching great importance to participation, dialogue, and consensus. If there is no agreement, the activities are not carried out and the faculty are not involved:

To generate a good atmosphere among your colleagues and peers, you need peace, mediation, flexibility, consensus, and you need to forget what you want and attend to others. That is what is important. Your perspective, your opinion should come last. One must listen, because that also enriches your own perspective. (7ALMPRI)

Recognition of the role of interpersonal relationships to promote a pleasant and relaxed atmosphere at work is reflected in the attention to the smallest of details (Samier et al. 2006). For example, the principal of Almeria maintains a close relationship with the faculty and families and shows her attention to detail in her communication with them by decorating documents sent out (for example, memos, proposals, meeting announcements) by drawing different designs on them depending on the time of year (summer, Christmas, etc.) with the goal of minimizing the formality of the
issue at hand. In the case of Cádiz, the attention to detail can be evidenced in the fine-tuning of the organization, which can be observed in both the physical appearance as well as in the processes and dynamics of the school functioning. In Malaga, specific attention is given to the care of the building: the presence of plants gives a distinctive air and comfortable feel to the school. In the case of Córdoba, one member of the administrative staff stated:

Additionally, women are more attentive to detail than men. ... The truth is, that the principal always has everyone on her mind, that Mr. so and so has this child; that this other person was just operated on ... Well, it’s just that she’s very detail-oriented and always has a place for everyone, and observes everything that happens in the school community. (8COROMSC)

Our female participants cultivate an atmosphere of caring, built around relationships; they demonstrate a preference for collaborative leadership and place importance on networking. Moreover, they facilitate the social climate of the institution; for instance, they act as mediators for conflict resolution between faculty and students, and when conflicts arise among the students themselves. They foster relationships between the teachers and families. They work both professionally and personally to help those in need. The principals worry about the proper dissemination of any information that comes to the institution to all parties. They get to know and manage the needs of the various groups within the educational community. The women foster coordination and teamwork among the teachers and encourage the development of extracurricular and other organized activities with different institutions. They take care to carefully watch how they present themselves when they hold plays for the public and have contact or collaborate with external entities such as school inspectors, support teams and other institutions (educational or otherwise), always keeping in mind the consequences of their actions, the well-being of the students and sustaining the school’s purpose. The principals ensure that the use of space and the access to resources demonstrate egalitarian norms, and they are very attentive to the development of policies that value and reward work from the differing groups that make up the educational community.

Their relationship with students at the schools is quite remarkable. The principals who participated in the study tend to maintain a close and cordial bond with the student body, taking interest in the issues and particular circumstances that affect the students. In those institutions with special problems, the principals do everything they possibly can to improve the social and academic situations of the students. Because of this, the students tend to have a very high opinion of the principals. The students consider the participating principals to be ‘accessible’, people they can go to at any time when they have problems, and they feel confident the principals will help. In Almeria’s school, the students perceive the principal as a ‘close’ person they greet cheerfully. In Seville, the students stressed that the principal is more like a ‘teacher’, than a principal, who ‘treats everyone the same, who becomes serious when she has too, but is nice, sympathetic, tells jokes in the classroom, and will explain things over and over again until we understand them’ (2SEVPUP). In Cádiz, the principal is convinced she must maintain a direct
link with social reality and with the families for the proper functioning of the school—a link that requires and demands knowledge and understanding of both the external reality of the school as well as the internal one. The principal insists that the ‘key to achieving a smooth functioning school and in order to accomplish one’s objectives, the administration must be familiar with both realities so that the decisions and actions are real and contextualized’ (3CADPRI). In Córdoba, the principal also teaches, and one parent’s opinion regarding her work in class and as principal reflects the commitment mentioned earlier:

She has a very good relationship with us and knows the family circumstances of each and every boy and girl in her class. She works at trying to achieve a greater degree of communication with the educational community and each and every day the relationship improves even more with the school. She proposes many activities and because of being aware of everything that takes place in the surrounding area and in other institutions, the school participates in community activities as well. (8CORFAM)

Consequently, the school is now much more integrated in the neighborhood, working in collaboration with other educational entities, which means they have more strength in numbers when confronting the local government, and their demands are met. The principal believes that collaboration with external school agencies must be bidirectional and mutual learning must occur.

In the schools with distinctive social problems (Huelva, Cádiz, Malaga, or Granada, for example), collaboration and involvement with families becomes more complicated. In many cases, a strong connection has not been established between the homes and school. This makes it difficult to maintain an atmosphere of cooperation between the different groups. Even so, the principals participating in the study are committed to involving the families in the administration of the institutions. And according to the principal at Malaga, that goal requires ‘long and hard work’ (4MALPRI).

‘You count’ policies and leadership styles that are democratic and participatory in nature as hallmarks

In the Spanish educational system, in addition to the principal, two other people assist in carrying out the daily functioning of each school: one is in charge of curriculum and instruction, while the other deals with administrative issues. As a group, the three constitute a ‘leadership team’ (administrative team), but this does not mean they are forced to work as a team. However, as dynamic agents of the schools’ activities, the principals in this study were very aware of the advantages of working as a team, and that team management includes delegating responsibility to others and working closely with others. Although each principal has a powerful impact and influence over the team and in the institution, in each case the coordinators on the team appear to be strong change agents within the school as well.

The team is important; leadership means sharing decisions (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2003). For example, in the school within the province of
Seville, the three members of the management team share administrative duties. The principal states: ‘I have always felt part of a team where we all three participate’. This concept of leadership as a team is picked up by the mothers and administrative staff; they tell us they see a partnership among the three and ‘although the principal is the one who signs at the bottom at the end of the day, she never makes a decision without asking others first’ (2SEVFAM); ‘I see them very united’ (2SEVOMSC2). The principal in Huelva recognizes and positively values the teamwork among the teachers and the idea of shared power. In Malaga and Granada, where schools function under difficult conditions, teamwork involves the entire educational community. The enormous costs, energy, and effort this can imply are recognized. Though there is a push for this collaboration, the principals would like to count on more support from the faculty, as this group is the most problematic in terms of involvement and cooperation.

Women principals do often promote a somewhat kinder, more socially-compassionate version of organizational goals and social policies, and place more emphasis on democratic relationships, participatory decision-making, delegation, and team-based leadership skills (Eagly 2005). The principals in our study actively try to develop democratic and participatory management styles, involving the various groups on a horizontal plane, or on equal footing, regarding school policies with constructive goals that serve the common good. The outcomes provide value for the common good rather than the satisfaction of narrow, personal, or even greedy interests. Because of this, we see evidence of both innovative school leadership (Thomson and Blackmore 2006) and sustainable leadership (Davies 2007).

The administrative styles observed and perceived by the members of the educational community are described as ‘close’, ‘direct’, and ‘responsive to the people’. The flexibility, accessibility, and creativity, along with the ability to share in the search for solutions to problems, mediate, and tackle problems without creating confrontations are all defining characteristics of the women principals’ administrative styles. They are principals who are ‘visible’ and ‘available’. They are viewed as mediators who listen, consult, and maintain a dialogue with the different groups (faculty, students, families, etc.) and leaders who play a key role in the functioning of their school.

Women principals generally prefer frequent contact and information sharing as they construct what Hegelson (1990) calls a ‘web of inclusion’, where strong connections exist between all members of the educational community, dialogue is ongoing, and information is disseminated in all directions. This facilitates a process of shared decision-making. They exercise authority, understood in the sense of making things happen with the different members of the educational community, without being authoritarian; involving them in the management of school affairs. Additionally, their work serves as a model for others. Leading by example is a common characteristic of the participating principals.

Another distinctive feature of women’s leadership styles is recognizing that emotions provide a cornerstone for collective action. According to Reger (2004: 205), ‘emotions draw participants into social movement, influence group interaction, and shape movement strategies’. Workplace cultures
shape, and are in turn shaped by, individual and collective emotional responses (Beatty 2002, Blackmore 2004b). The participating women principals develop policies evidencing mutual support and caring, creating ‘structures of feeling’ (Zembylas 2002). The emotional management work of leadership is not merely about managing one’s own emotions; it is also about building a positive emotional economy based on collaborative models of professionalism (Blackmore 2004b).

The female participants were more aware of their emotions and able to relate interpersonally and act in a socially-responsible manner. In Granada, a teacher stated:

The principal is very effective at administering and using the affective realm—using her own feelings and affections, as well as those of others, to prevail with a sense of caring. (5GRATEA4)

This gives the impression that the principals promote greater peace of mind, show more flexibility, contextualize problems, encourage participation, and find time for dialogue. They never seem to be in a hurry. The ability to listen appears to be limitless. They are active listeners, as was mentioned in the case of the principal in Granada. They dedicate a lot of time to listening, asking, showing interest and getting to know a topic or the issue at hand. This description could, at first, seem too caring and, therefore, ineffectual, given the nature of the educational institutions. On the contrary, this way of working is combined with a solid base of organization and planning. In Jaén, a teacher spoke of ‘the clarity of thinking, strength of conviction, clear vision of action to be taken, and the decision to move the school forward’ (6JAETEA2). Furthermore, the principals know how to combine that which is legal with the special characteristics of each school, and they use with intelligence the numerous possibilities permissible by law that are available to them. In Malaga, a faculty member commented on the matter:

The functioning of the school is often based on things that have nothing to do with efficiency, or dedication to work, or the effort that people put forth, or even with a sense of justice, but rather it is based on knowing how to ‘win over’ the staff. (5MALTEA3)

For this undertaking, the principals are especially capable.

Problems and troubles for the women principals

This positive description of the principals’ work does not represent the complete picture, for the job is not without its difficulties. Role conflict and other social and cultural barriers exert a substantive influence over the women. Taking care of household responsibilities takes time away from the profession. This is time that female principals are not ready to give up in exchange for potential professional promotions. Therefore, being the principalship is not more important than dedication to family. The principalship is not something many women aspire to, since it implies a re-structuring of their family time. Family matters such as marriage and children influence aspirations and achievements within women’s goals. The participating
principals found a more favourable context to consider professional promotion and the principalship once their children grew up and were independent. When family demands affected their job performance negatively, women made more adjustments to their workloads—such as refusing overtime or turning down assignments—for the sake of their families. Spanish female principals do not appear ready to compromise their familial roles, even when considering the possible implications that go along with that decision, such as the loss of potential promotions. This finding seems to be consistent with prior research (e.g. Keene and Reynolds 2005, Osnowitz 2005, Perrone et al. 2005).

Many practising principals opt to leave administration in favour of classroom teaching (Newton et al. 2003). Thus, the principals in this study encountered difficulties and certain feelings of nostalgia. Problems appeared in properly balancing teaching and administration, which made them consider the possibility of spending a shorter amount of time in the principalship. Principals regret the ‘abandonment’ of teaching and miss the direct and daily contact with students. They have been trained to be teachers, not principals. Women principals in this study point out that educational management and the effort and energy required for this type of work compensate neither professionally nor personally. In Córdoba, the principal found it difficult to balance both teaching and administration (it is not uncommon for principals in Spain to teach throughout their tenure in administration). One mother’s opinion illustrates the situation when she says:

The students at her side are very lucky. But it is a shame because she can’t, she can’t. She has neither the time for the principalship nor time for her students as she would like. (8CORMOTH2)

The same situation in Granada is impossible, given the special characteristics of the context of the principal’s work. Perhaps the principal’s opinion in Seville can shed light on what the other principals feel as well, when she states:

Once I finish my tenure as principal, my life will be more relaxed, both professionally and personally, and I will be able to, once again, enjoy so much more with my classes and my students. (2SEVPRI)

Other problems encountered by women principals include the following: lack of involvement, collaboration, and support of faculty; time commitments and lack of support from the educational authority.

Lack of involvement, collaboration and support of faculty. Even though the women claim to have the support of their colleagues, their peers are the ones who are most critical of the principals’ work, compared with the other groups (families, students, educational authority) who, in general, show no negative attitudes toward the female management. Sometimes, it is the female colleagues who have least valued and supported the female principals’ work. On other occasions, their male counterparts often fail to acknowledge their authority. This leads the women principals to fight and work harder to obtain recognition and legitimacy in the decisions and
actions carried forth. At times, the principals have felt the tension created by the discrepancy between the masculine culture of educational institutions and the numerical dominance of women in the preschool and elementary schools studied. They often felt like they had to prove more than their male colleagues would have had to for the same administrative issues, as leadership tasks are historically associated with the masculine. These findings seem consistent with prior research (e.g. Mills and Marjosola 2002, Eckman 2004).

**Time commitment.** Expectations for the principals to complete paperwork, supervise after-school activities, market the school, generate financial support and work with social agencies largely account for the increased number of hours worked, and which overload their workday and their role (Newton et al. 2003). However, the principalship, for these women, means going beyond the administrative requirements:

> Administration and leadership is more than just knowing the law and doing paperwork. It is a very complex task in which we must work continuously. (3CADPRI)

Many of these activities are quick, such as making phone calls, sending faxes, writing memos, consulting with community members, but they are frequently interrupted by others requiring immediate consultations. In spite of it all, the principals have also learned to effectively negotiate the more complex administrative requirements.

**Lack of support from the educational authority.** Until recently, governmental policy regarding education has not paid close attention to critical issues. Despite the shortage of candidates for the principalship position, the educational authority has not offered training programmes or incentives or assistance to promote women’s access to administrative positions within the school. It usually begins as an ‘adventure’, started without the necessary external support. Nevertheless, the principals who participated in this study believe the position represents an excellent opportunity to lead change in their schools. For that reason, they made the decision to take the position, in spite of the lack of support.

**Concluding comments**

In order to find answers that explain the absence of women in the administrative position of principal, we cannot forget the complexities of the existing model of principalship in Spain. Furthermore, our research have recognized that the work–family interface affects significantly the women principals’ decisions on their access to the principalship. Participants consider promotion later in life, once family is restructured, and children grow older. Nevertheless, matters related to women in the workplace only indirectly affect their decisions regarding school administration. Generally, educational community members (teachers, students, administrative ‘staff’ and families) accepted and tolerated the presence of a woman in the principalship.
In Spain we now have a more favourable social and political context for gender research. It is necessary to study governmental policies regarding labour contexts as they relate to collectives, such as women teachers, to avoid keeping the division of labour at home and to stop delays in women’s professional career advancements. Also, we believe it is necessary to develop educational administration programmes that are more relevant for women, and to offer opportunities for advancement early on in their educational careers.

Luckily, the integration of women in the labour market is not just unstoppable: its consolidation has become one of the most important revolutions of the twenty-first century. These changes must be inscribed in a wider social change, resulting from sustainable economic development, the expansion of market relations, the impulse of the Welfare State and the recognition of citizenship rights for women, who will contribute to transform the social perception of the role they must accomplish.

Beyond obstacles and problems, the cases presented show a very positive assessment of administrative activities carried out by the women principals and the impact on their schools. Additionally, the cases illustrate specific leadership styles put into practice—ones that have a solid democratic and participatory base, quite distinct from the more technical and bureaucratic models. In the cases studied, we associate the principalship with educational leadership capable of transforming educational institutions and making them settings for the development of collaboration among various groups. The schools become environments favourable to learning and the education of all people.

The transition to the principalship by the women in this study paved the road for significant changes in the functioning of the schools and in policies regarding educational administration that contribute to having clear guidelines as to how to improve the important work that takes place at the school on a daily basis. The women’s leadership styles, developed to emphasize the democratic and participatory component of their administration, incorporate a moral and emotional dimension into the process without diminishing their effectiveness and results. This more feminine style contributes to the establishment of a more humanized environment that is more creative, thereby benefiting the schools, where the needs and current dynamics demand new leadership and administrative styles.

It is important to note that the traits attributed to female leadership styles should not be considered exclusive to women. The differences in sex lead to misunderstandings. The perception that one sex holds an advantage over the other is too simplistic and can obscure other ways of being and acting in administrative positions.

School management should open up the responsibilities of leadership to all the team members of the school. Given their central position in the organisational structure, there can be no doubt about the responsibility principals take on as a dynamic force. But the development of democratic leadership means extending this responsibility to the teaching staff and building teamwork, which, in the current climate surrounding school activities, rarely proves fruitful. Educational policy must take on this need and not overload principals with responsibilities and duties which also form part of the work of other members of the school.
The evolution of studies on leadership has progressively incorporated a different complexion, different orientation and different aims. A large part of these changes are due to the interpretative twist experienced in the area of social theory in general which deeply affected the study and understanding of organisations. Modestly, this work reinforces the contribution of ethnographic research on educational leadership. In the context of research frequently overburdened with questionnaires, profiles, and quantitative aspects, this study have made possible the recovering of experiences and tales from women, enriching qualitatively the research about the processes of leadership and organizational management.

There is a need to raise awareness, and of equal importance, to recognize the principals’ work in the schools, their good administrative practices and their contributions to understanding educational change that this group has been developing in their daily work as professionals. This way of working and administering can serve as an example for other organizations concerned with the improvement and professional development of its members.

Traditionally, women resolve problems and prioritize needs differently. Women were taught that, to be happy, they had to make others happy. Trying to achieve that happiness has meant developing inexhaustible abilities—women are strong and persevering, characteristics acquired through centuries of experience to achieve and maintain calm. This has transformed women into great mediators and negotiators. Developing empathy, making the impossible possible, prioritizing the essential from the superfluous, and understanding that all the small parts added together are what make life easier or harder have been other indispensable lessons learned when it comes to working in the public interest, in favour of the people. It is therefore important that women gain access to positions of responsibility—so that they may participate in building a more humanitarian, just and united society.

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Note

1. Number = case number; ALM = Almeria, CAD = Cádiz, COR = Córdoba, GRA = Granada, HUE = Huelva, JAE = Jaén, MAL = Malaga, SEV = Seville; FAM = family member, MOTH = Mother, OMSC = other member of the school community, PRI = principal, PUP = pupil, TEA = teacher.

References


