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EXPLORATION OF BARRIERS AND SOLUTIONS FOR WOMEN IN THE  
PATHWAY TO THE HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALSHIP

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of  
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirement for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP  
OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY

November 2009

Approved by:

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## ABSTRACT

### EXPLORATION OF BARRIERS AND SOLUTIONS FOR WOMEN IN THE PATHWAY TO THE HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALSHIP

Tracy Shook Skinner  
Old Dominion University, 2009  
Director: Dr. Karen Crum

The purpose of this study was to investigate barriers women face when entering school administration as well as perceptions of the high school principalship held by female high school principals and assistant principals aspiring to the principalship. Work conflicts and job demands for women were explored as well as the significance of mentoring and networking along the pathway to the principalship. The information gathered through a critical feminist approach was used to assess women's barriers to the principalship and describe methods employed to overcome those barriers.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my father for helping me obtain the unimaginable and for his continued support along this journey. Without my father this great accomplishment would not have been possible. I would also like to thank my husband for standing by my side and for his encouragement to keep going. He is my rock and his support is what made me cross the finish line.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there continue to be more males than females filling the role of school leader as secondary principals and assistant principals (Snyder & Hoffman, 2002). Even though women are beginning to fill the ranks, the numbers are unequal. As Snyder and Hoffman noted, although women represent 44% of school principals in the United States, the representation is largely at the elementary school level. When one compares the number of female teachers with the number of female administrators, an unbalanced ratio is revealed (Hudson & Rea, 1998). According to a 2004 report of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), women held 26% of all high school principalships. Males have long been considered better candidates for the position of school manager and instructional leader (Shakeshaft, 1989; Young & McLeod, 2001; Sherman, Clayton, Johnson, Skinner, & Wolfson, 2008). According to Shakeshaft, there was a prevalent belief by school districts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that women could not handle the discipline issues required of an administrator at the high school level.

One work conflict for women considering school administration is family; women believe there is not enough time to juggle family and a successful career (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000). Their commitment to motherhood and children causes women to deviate from the administrative path (Glass et al.). Women historically have faced barriers men do not experience in attempting to enter the high school principalship, because women are seen as primary caregivers (Bielby & Baron, 1986; Glass et al.). These barriers have been most obvious in research noting the rarity of female administrators in positions that

extend beyond entry level (Bielby & Baron). According to Bielby and Baron, the shortage of female principals in the United States has continued to be unacknowledged by school boards and local school districts.

### *Purpose of Study*

The purpose of this study was to discover the various pathways women have taken to achieve the high school principalship or assistant principalship, a position of power historically dominated by their male counterparts. Understanding how these women were able to overcome the historical barriers presented before them and break through the glass ceiling sheds light on the pathway and provides inspiration for females who aspire to the high school principalship. This study adds to the literature in the field of educational leadership by presenting a better understanding of the pathway to administration to help women complete the journey successfully. The researcher's ultimate goal was to transform secondary school administration into a more female-friendly field. This study was designed to encourage the participants to raise awareness for other women seeking a high school leadership position.

### *Significance of Study*

This study is important for understanding the reason there are fewer female secondary school administrators than male administrators in the United States and for discussing ways women might overcome the barriers they face in attempting to enter school administration. Some scholars have asserted that research in educational administration has focused primarily on the male experience (Enomoto, 2000); the researcher has noted that studies are based on the male perspective, which may be irrelevant for explaining female behavior (Shakeshaft, 1989; Young & McLeod, 2001;

Sherman et al. 2008). Sherman et al. further asserted that a male atmosphere is dominant in the field of educational administration; Shakeshaft defined the practice of viewing the world through a male lens as andocentric. The dominance of male-based educational research becomes a problem when it is assumed to be a true reflection of all administrators' behavior (Shakeshaft). If all points of view are to be understood, Shakeshaft declared, research in educational administration should examine the female perspective.

It appears that the term gender has become synonymous with women's research; however, researchers have noted that women and gender issues are not the central focus of most studies in educational administration (Shakeshaft, 1989, 1999; Riehl & Byrd, 1997; Young & McLeod, 2001). Instead, study of women's perspectives has been considered special and not essential to the understanding of the bureaucratic structure (Shakeshaft; Young & McLeod). Young and McLeod discussed the importance of studying the reasons women choose to enter secondary administration. For centuries, women were restricted to the classroom, and men were the educational administrators (Shakeshaft; Young & McLeod). This trend continues today in that men most often supervise females. According to Sherman et al. (2008), this stereotypical behavior exemplifies the male dominance of the bureaucratic structure existing in modern-day school districts.

### *Research Questions*

During the interview and document analysis processes, this researcher attempted to answer three questions that established the framework for the study:

1. What pathways to the high school principalship do women follow?

2. What barriers do women face on their pathway to the high school principalship?

3. How do women entering the high school principalship overcome barriers to the profession?

### *Limitations*

The researcher examined the stories of female principals and assistant principals in the South Hampton Roads area of Virginia; thus the results are not generalizable to the United States as a whole. The researcher had professional ties with some of the subjects, as they were employed by the same school district. One of the principals was the building principal of the school in which the researcher worked. The researcher selected this individual because she was the first female high school principal in the school district. To avoid bias, the researcher acknowledged the relationships; every effort was made to avoid judgment of the administrators. To gain access to female aspiring principals, the researcher e-mailed every female assistant principal in South Hampton Roads. Other female aspiring principals throughout Hampton Roads may not have been identified and, therefore, were not interviewed for this study.

Coding is a subjective process; because the researcher assigned the codes for all of the interviews, patterns or ideas may have been overlooked. Mortality related to continued participant involvement in the interview process became an issue in this study. Participants in the interview portion of the qualitative study were asked to complete four reflective journal entries in the weeks following the study; only five of the twelve participants chose to complete this portion of the study. The fact that there were no male

participants in the interview process was an additional limitation for the study. Finally, there was only one researcher gathering and reporting the data.

### *Delimitations*

This qualitative study was restricted to female participants who were either current or aspiring high school principals in South Hampton Roads school districts. Analysis of administrative staff data within these school districts revealed there were 14 females currently serving as high school principals and 43 females serving as assistant principals. The number of participants for this study included six female high school principals and six female assistant principals. The sampling process was closed when the researcher believed enough information had been collected to answer the research questions. The researcher constantly compared interview responses until saturation of themes was reached. At that point in the research process, no further participants were sought for individual interviews.

### *Assumptions*

This study assumed that current female high school principals had faced barriers along their pathway to the principalship. Additionally, aspiring female principals face difficulty entering a male-dominated position within the school system. Likewise, it was assumed that all participants answered the interview and journal entry questions honestly and to the best of their knowledge. Through the coding process, common themes were developed based upon the participants' answers provided in interviews and journal entries. It was further assumed that the interviewed principals provided perspectives comparable to those that might have been obtained from other female principals due to similar experiences on the pathway.

### *Framework of Literature*

The literature explores the extent to which females seeking the high school principalship have become susceptible to perceptions, stereotypes, or misconceptions in their experiences as female candidates for the position. Furthermore, the literature examines the barriers through which women must break to enter a male-dominated position. Scholarly research for over 75 years has relied primarily on the study of males. In only the last 20 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did researchers begin to focus on the experience of the female administrator (Tallerico, 2000). The literature is sparse with regard to specific studies regarding the female high school principal. Nevertheless, comparisons can be made between women and men in any male-dominated field.

### *Organization of the Study and Methodology*

This research involved qualitative methods and triangulation of data through the use of interviews and reflective journal analysis. The research was based on critical feminist theory because the theory advocates transformational leadership and tries to show how past injustices have shaped people's views. Critical feminist theory is concerned with issues of power and justice, particularly in the matters of gender, education, social institutions, and cultural dynamics (Patton, 2002). Critical feminist theory was best suited for this topic because the study examined the past injustices for women entering school administration in education as well as the politics and gender bias involved in networking and mentoring. The research also provides women with guidance along their ascent on the professional ladder. The interview protocol and coding process employed the use of modified grounded theory due to the thematic nature of the interview protocol, which was developed from themes that emerged during the literature review.

Examination of the principalship through the lens of a female has been documented in the field of educational leadership and is unique to the nonminority culture.

### *Definition of Terms*

*Barriers.* Obstacles people face when trying to enter school administration.

*Career track.* The path of an administrator who chooses career advancement over family and parenthood.

*Compressing time.* The ability to multitask to balance work and family.

*Empowerment.* Allowing voice and power to people who have previously been oppressed.

*Face time.* The presence of the administrator in the school building.

*Family friendly.* Description of a career choice that allows employees to easily balance career and family.

*Filtering method.* Procedure for selecting individuals from the candidate pool for a principalship.

*Formal mentor.* An experienced mentor assigned to a novice administrator to guide them through the developmental stages.

*Gatekeeping.* A system in which a network of people do not allow certain candidates to enter the field of school administration.

*Glass ceiling.* Perception that the career advancement of women is not equal to that of men.

*Good old boys.* A network of people that exert influence over the local education system and decision making in the hiring of school administrators.



*Grow your own.* Formal mentoring program developed by a local school district that does not hire administrators from outside the district.

*Ideal worker.* Someone whose presence can be guaranteed on a daily basis and who is not distracted by family responsibilities.

*Informal mentor.* An experienced mentor who guides a potential administrative candidate along the necessary pathway to administration.

*Mentor.* A principal who has advanced experience and knowledge and who is committed to providing upward mobility and support to the career of an aspiring principal.

*Mommy track.* The path of an administrator who chooses family and parenthood over career advancement.

*Networking.* Making connections with well-known administrators in the school district to promote career advancement.

*Pathway.* The journey a principal takes after leaving her bachelor's degree program until reaching the position of high school principal.

*Structural time crisis.* The struggle of administrators to balance work and family.

#### *Researcher's Perspective*

As the researcher is a woman, who was teaching social studies at a high school in South Hampton Roads but seeking an administrative position at the time of the study, her biases are acknowledged. The researcher believes the field of school administration is influenced by patriarchal ideals in terms of success, with patriarchal leaders determining individuals to be promoted. The researcher's perspectives of educational leadership align with those who believe the principalship represents a dual role of managerial

responsibilities and instructional leadership (Copland, 2001). The researcher does not consider the pathway of the good old boys to be the only pathway nor does the researcher believe a female must wait until after she has children to become a school administrator. The researcher hoped to develop for aspiring female administrators solutions to the problems arising from the time constraints of the high school principalship as well as work-family conflicts.

### *Summary*

The work conflicts for women and the barriers women face in trying to enter the high school principalship were further explored for improved understanding. A woman aspiring to become a high school principal may follow a pathway different from the pathway of her male counterparts. To promote female empowerment and to be prepared for their journey, women should understand the conflicts and barriers they will face. Sherman et al. (2008) explained the importance of studying the pathway to the principalship: "Exploring the challenges that women who aspire to the principalship face can provide information for school districts and universities alike that can be utilized to create more inclusive preparation and mentoring practices" (p. 1). Moreover, the results of this study can help prepare women aspiring to the principalship by dispelling the myth that the pathway is insurmountable.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *Introduction*

Throughout this literature review, the researcher describes the history of the female high school principalship and reveals why and how males have been the dominant candidates. The researcher highlights specific work conflicts for many women who take on the high school principalship and explains why these conflicts affect women principals more often than male principals. The importance of family in a woman's decision to enter administration is explored. Then the researcher explains the different leadership styles of male principals and female principals and describes how leadership style affects job recruitment.

The discussion is continued with description of the barriers many women face in trying to earn a high school principalship. A description of the underrepresentation of women in school administration highlights the importance of women in school leadership. An explanation of sexual discrimination throughout the recruitment and hiring process for the high school principal is examined to determine why some women are not being considered as candidates for the principal position. Furthermore, the researcher presents discussion of the high school principalship as a job that has been structured for males, including the reasons some women experience difficulty in attempts to alter that which is considered to be the normal structure. The researcher discusses the job demands of the high school principalship and the reasons women perceive the workload to be unmanageable at times. Similarly, the literature on gatekeeping exemplifies the reasons that some women are kept out of the principalship. The researcher continues the

discussion on networking: what it is and why it is important for women to partake in the process. Moreover, mentoring is explored, including the role it plays in the development of female school administrators and a mentor's potential impact on an aspiring principal. The researcher discusses the importance of leadership development for women, including the reasons it is vital in developing future female school administrators. Finally, the researcher discusses career paths for women and solutions for women attempting to enter the principalship.

### *History of Principalship*

Throughout United States history, the role of the principal has shifted (Shakeshaft, 1989, 1999). Once a female-friendly position in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the role of the head school mistress took a drastic turn after World War II, becoming a male-dominated principalship (Shakeshaft; Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006). According to Shakeshaft, there was a former belief that women could not handle the discipline issues required of an administrator at the high school level. Mahitivanichcha and Rorrer described the sexual division of labor in public schools. The decline in numbers of female principals has been most noticeable at the elementary level; in 1928, women held over 55% of all principal positions (Fishel & Pottker, 1974). The symbol of working women during World War II, Rosie the riveter, encouraged women to replace men in the workforce; this phenomenon took place in industry and in America's public schools (Fishel & Pottker). From the late 1930s until the end of the 1940s women held 40% of school administration positions at the elementary and secondary level (Fishel & Pottker). After World War II, however, men replaced women in the workforce; Caucasian women went back to the role of the housewife. In the 1950s, women held approximately 38% of

school administration positions at the elementary and secondary levels (Fishel & Pottker). In the 1960s, women continued to lose ground in school leadership as the percentage of female school administrators dropped to 22%. During the 1970s, the height of the feminist movement, women held only 1% of the elementary and secondary school administration positions in the United States (Fishel & Pottker). In the 1980s, women had moved up the public school administrative ladder and had attained approximately 20% of elementary administrative positions (Paddock, 1980). According to the *Digest of Education Statistics* (NCES, 1996), women had attained 13% of high school administrative positions by the mid-1990s. By the 2003-2004 school year, women had attained 26% of all high school principalships (NCES, 2004). Although the number of female high school principals has been on the rise over the past four decades, women in administration continue to be underrepresented, especially at the high school level. The number of hours principals work has increased over the past 20 years. In the 1980s high school principals worked an average of 53.2 hours a week. Current high school principals work an average of 60 to 80 hours week (Loder, 2005; McAdams, 1998; Read, 2000; Yerkes & Guaglianone, 1998). Their time is spent filling out paperwork, raising money, leading instruction, and supervising after-school activities (Doud & Keller, 1998). Increased expectations have overloaded the high school principalship, not allowing women (and many men) the time needed to balance their personal and private lives (Doud & Keller; Educational Research Service, 2000; Loder; Read; Sherman et al., 2008).

### *Barriers for Women*

Women are faced with barriers in trying to enter the high school principalship, barriers which usually begin with negative stereotypes against women (Tallerico & Blount, 2004). Women do not fit the traditional mold of the married male principal and therefore are discriminated against by some school board members (Lovelady-Dawson, 1980). Copland (2001) asserted that a high school principal must be a super-hero principal: a person who can be the instructional leader, manage the school, attend after-school activities, control the finances, handle the master schedule—do it all. According to Copland, it is difficult for a woman to be a super-hero principal if she also has domestic responsibilities. The idea of a super-hero principal hinders a female's advancement in interviewing for a principal position (Copland). Gatekeepers protect the high school principalship in their school districts and reserve this position for a more traditional candidate (Tallerico & Blount). Networking is essential to becoming a successful administrator in any school district, but women are unaware of the skills necessary to network as a man does (Evans, 2001). Mentors guide aspiring female applicants successfully along the pathway and assist them in being accepted by their male counterparts (Riehl & Byrd, 1997).

### *Family*

One significant work conflict for women is family (Glass et al., 2000). Glass et al. claimed that women must choose between the “mommy track” and the “career track” at a very early age. According to these scholars, by the time a woman reaches her late 20s or early 30s, she must choose between administration and motherhood. Because some women have struggled to manage both roles simultaneously in the past, more and more

women are choosing motherhood over administration (Glass et al.). Women that have their children early could face discrimination when trying to pursue administration because they have young children (Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006). Spousal support is the key factor for a woman who is trying to take on the triple role of wife, mother, and principal (Loder, 2005).

Some women believe there is not enough time to have a family and to commit to a career. In fact, having children may cause women to deviate from the administrative path (Glass et al., 2000). Many women follow the mommy track when they decide to stay in teaching rather than move into an administrative role for which they have prepared with extended education (Glass et al.). Loder (2005) claimed that most female administrators have their children prior to becoming principals to avoid having to choose between motherhood and career. Loder described a woman's difficulty in having young children and serving as a high school principal; consequently, some women choose to wait until after their children are older to enter administration. Noddings (2003) asserted that women are losing ground in the field of educational administration because of the constant work-family conflict they face, which has now overshadowed sexual discrimination as the number one reason there are fewer female administrators.

According to Mahitivanichcha and Rorrer (2006), some women face discrimination for being married and having young children. These factors are closely associated with school boards' limiting the chances for young women to move from teaching to administration because they are looking for candidates that can handle the time demands of the high school principalship (Riehl & Byrd, 1997). The role of the high school principal is designed for a man who has a wife at home; therefore, many female

administrators go to work without the same level of domestic support that males have (Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer). Spousal support at home can make or break a woman's decision to enter administration (Bruckner, 1998; Loder, 2005; Nichols, 2002; Young & McLeod, 2001). According to Loder, it is assumed a male administrator has domestic support at home and can have both career and family. Further, the role of wife is very important to some women, who have trouble balancing the role of principal and playing a more supportive role at home. This work-family conflict usually results in the husband's having difficulty accepting the time requirements of his wife's job as well as accepting his own nontraditional role of providing the support at home (Loder).

Some school boards consider marriage and family to be liabilities for female candidates, thereby making women less preferable candidates for school boards' seeking a high school principal (Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006). Whether the female candidate is already married, already has children, or is young enough to be entering the age of marriage and childbearing, according to Mahitivanichcha and Rorrer, a negative stereotype may stunt the career of young, aspiring female administrators. Further, the researchers found that most women administrators admitted not considering administration until after their childcare responsibilities at home had ended because they did not want to lose time with their children. According to Schwartz (1989), there are two types of women: "career primary" and "family primary". Family-primary women are considered to be a liability compared to women focused on career and willing to postpone marriage and children for career advancement. Therefore, most women in the family-primary category rarely ascend beyond middle-management positions (Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer). According to a study conducted by Sherman (2005), interviewed women who



participated in a district-based mentoring program reported family responsibilities as an obstacle to administration.

According to Schor (1991), a “structural time crisis” faces many female administrators in schools. Public schools often demand that administrators be instantly available, thereby promoting the idea of “face time” (Bailyn, 2000). Bailyn explained face time as the idea that the administrator must be in the school at all times, even if she has other domestic responsibilities. The public school setup often does not allow administrators to share time, if someone needs to come in late or leave early, even though the administrator can make up the hours during nonschool time (Bailyn). The caregiver role conflicts with the role of the principal because of the extreme time demands and work pressures of the principalship (Glass et al., 2000). Some women simply do not have enough time to fulfill both roles. One way to be a mother, wife, and school administrator is to “compress time.” By compressing time, women can multitask, allowing them to balance work and domestic responsibility (Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006).

Key promotion stages in a person’s career usually occur early in the career path, when a person is in his or her mid to late 20s (Armenti, 2003). This timeframe coincides with the period during which most women consider having children. Armenti further asserted that age of promotion seems to be more of an obstacle for women than for men. Biological constraints do not hinder men the way they do some women. Men rarely consider the question, When is the right time to have children?; nor do they face the choice of not having children because to do so will conflict with a job promotion at a younger age (Armenti). Across the United States, only 10% of female principals are under the age of 40 (Snyder & Hoffman, 2002). According to NCES (2008), less than

15% of male and female public school principals (elementary and secondary) are under the age of 40. Women principals tend to enter their positions in their 40s and 50s in contrast to men who usually enter the positions in their late 20s or early 30s (Doud & Keller, 1998). Women are entering the principalship after 12 to 20 years of experience in the classroom versus a male's typical experience of 5 to 10 years (Young & McLeod, 2001). Although very few women become high school principals in their 20s and 30s, White women born after the civil rights movement are entering the principalship at a younger age than minority women born during the same time period (Doud & Keller). Young female administrators today, believing they have more options for marriage and children, have delayed both until after being promoted into administration (Loder, 2005). These women are choosing not to try to be wife, mother, and high school principal simultaneously because of the time constraints (Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006).

### *Underrepresentation*

According to NCES (2008), there has been a noticeable withdrawal of women from the workforce. In the year 2000, 74% of women between the ages of 24 and 54 were employed. In 2008, the percentage was only 72%, representing 4 million fewer female workers in the workforce. At first, it was assumed the decline was due to more women choosing to stay home for personal reasons, primarily to raise their children or to manage their homes. The data, however, indicate that because many women have had dormant salaries or their earnings cut in half since 2000, they have chosen not to work in the paid labor force rather than be paid significantly less. With wage stagnation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, women have been discouraged from seeking employment.

Underrepresentation of women in high school administration has also been noted in studies of the glass ceiling. The glass ceiling is most obvious in research showing that women administrators tend to be found in positions that seldom extend more than a level or two beyond entry level (Bielby & Baron, 1986). The shortage of female principals, along with alternative leadership programs, has continued to be overlooked and unexamined by the educational community (Sherman et al., 2008). Shakeshaft (1999) reported underrepresentation of women in administration by 19% at the middle school or high school level and by 31% at the elementary school level. Women have continued to be underrepresented in school leadership in comparison to their representation in teaching (Sherman et al.). In 1999 and 2000, women represented only 44% of the public school principals at both the elementary and secondary levels in contrast to their representing 75% of the teachers in public schools (Snyder & Hoffman, 2002). With regard to the role of principal, a double standard for women has developed (Snyder & Hoffman). School boards and site managers are seeking the “ideal” worker; however, the observed outcome of their practices has been a division of labor according to gender (Tallerico & Blount, 2004). Some women in education face sexual discrimination in the form of the glass ceiling, which stunts career tracks (Williams, 1992). According to Williams, men are recruited more often than women for higher level administrative roles even though women continue to outnumber men in educational administration graduate courses. According to Diversity Web (2000), women made up 63% of the 1998 doctoral-degree recipients in education. The “baby-boomer” generation is retiring from the principalship in massive numbers (Doud & Keller, 1998; NCES, 1997; Newton, Giesen, Freeman, Bishop, & Zeitoun, 2003). Some researchers have suggested this phenomenon represents

a window of opportunity for women to enter administrative positions in record numbers (Newton et al.). Unfortunately, women continue to be underrepresented in educational leadership positions, even though they represent a largely available source at a time when there is a principal shortage (Newton et al.). This trend denies school districts a valuable human resource (Sherman et al. 2008). In summary, women are underrepresented in school administrative positions, especially in the high school principalship.

### *Minority Women*

In public school administration, minority women are grossly underrepresented (Lovelady-Dawson, 1980). Research pertaining to minority principals is inadequate, but the research on the underrepresentation of women of color is even sparser (Lovelady-Dawson). Mahitivanichcha and Rorrer (2006) noted that access to administrative positions is even more difficult for a person of color. When one looks at the combination of gender and race and considers the representation of women of color, the numbers are even more disturbing. Some scholars have asserted that minorities who pursue the principalship take longer to advance than their nonminority counterparts (Doughty, 1977, 1980; Mendez-Morse, 2004). This phenomenon suggests limited opportunities for advancement (Doughty; Lovelady-Dawson; Mendez-Morse). Grogan and Brunner (2005) reported that only 8% of school leaders were identified as persons of color, with 1% identified as Latina. According to Doughty, minority men entering the principalship do so in their early 40s whereas minority women do not enter the principalship until their mid 40s to mid 50s.

There is no single reason why women, as well as ethnic and racial minorities, are underrepresented in the principalship. According to Lovelady-Dawson (1980), Tallerico

(2000), and Valverde (1980), the gatekeepers to administrative positions are responsible for recruitment, placement, and promotion decisions. Typically, gatekeepers promote the candidates who best represent themselves and the characteristics of the traditional candidate. Traditionally, schools are led by White males who choose other White males for administrative positions (Lovelady-Dawson; Tallerico; Valverde). In a study conducted by Tallerico, less than 1% of the applicants chosen for an interview for a leadership position were women of color. This finding reinforces Tallerico's theory of gatekeepers' choosing candidates that reflect the norm.

Doughty (1977, 1980) drew attention to the minority female principal's difficulty in contending with resentment not only for her gender but for her race and often for both. Lovelady-Dawson (1980) noted that minority women are often unaware of the barriers in their career pathways that limit their ascension into educational leadership positions. Minorities have been denied access to the leadership position and therefore are unaware of the job's dynamics, thereby making the job more difficult (Lovelady-Dawson; Mendez-Morse, 2004).

### *Discrimination in Recruitment and Hiring Practices*

Recruitment of school administrators displays a pattern of men being recruited more often than women. Patterns of recruitment demonstrate that men are recruiting men, making it difficult for women to enter the position (Lovelady-Dawson, 1980). According to Lovelady-Dawson, there is no single reason women are underrepresented in the principalship; however, one fact continues to persist: Males in leadership roles are recruiting and hiring candidates that share similar characteristics. White males are using subjective criteria and hiring more White males for school administration positions. To

break these patterns, Lovelady-Dawson asserted, hiring committees need to diversify and clearly define the characteristics for the position of high school principal.

When hiring a candidate, a school district is looking for the ideal worker. An ideal worker is defined as someone whose presence can be guaranteed on a daily basis and who is not distracted by family responsibilities (Bailyn, 2000; Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006; Williams, 2000). During the recruitment process, school districts are seeking the ideal worker to make sure the individual can handle what the job entails (Grubb & Flessa, 2006; Institute for Educational Leadership [IEL], 2000; Keller, 1998; Olson, 2000). To be a prospective candidate for school administration, an individual must meet the criteria school leaders desire; school leaders are seeking a candidate that can be a super-principal or hero-principal, thereby displaying characteristics needed to run a high-quality school (Copland, 2001). According to the ideal worker philosophy, a woman cannot handle the job demands if she is responsible for a family, whereas a man has the domestic support of his wife at home to help him be an ideal principal (Bailyn; Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer; Williams). Moreover, a woman will struggle to be a super-principal or a hero-principal because she cannot put in extra hours if she has other domestic responsibilities (Copland).

The White male has historically dominated the high school principalship because he is associated with terms such as “warrior, militant, or business” (Grogan & Henry, 1995). With regard to women, questions such as “Can she do discipline? Can she do budget?” should simply no longer apply. Nevertheless, Tallerico (2000) found evidence of gender stereotyping and racial prejudice toward minority candidates. According to Tallerico, school board members assumed strong disciplinary and other noninstructional technical abilities of male applicants, but they questioned female competency. Tallerico

uncovered questions school board members asked during the interview process, such as “What the hell does she know if a damn school bus breaks down?” One school board member admitted gender biases still existed even if a female was a finalist for a position, indicating the question arose regarding whether or not the female must be paid as much as the male if hired. A second school board member admitted his school district was “just not ready for a woman.” Tallerico asserted such evidence represents a long-standing cultural prejudice toward women in positions of power, indicating that cultural preference in the United States values nonminority male leadership. Ultimately, according to Tallerico, school districts must recruit women and men equally if the priority of the school district is to have equal representation within their administrative ranks.

Female applicants interviewing for the high school principal position in public school administration are often scrutinized more harshly than are men (Angula, 1995; Grogan, 1996; Skrla, 2000). This finding links perceived ability with gender because high school principals are more often male and elementary principals are more often female (Newton, 2006). According to Newton, the distinction is the perception that women are not as able as men to run a large school. The highest proportion of female administrators continues to be found in staff coordinator positions or director roles, not high school administration (Shakeshaft, 1989; Sherman et al., 2008). The principalship requires candidates to be politicians and to interact with local business people. According to Shakeshaft (1999), it was considered unthinkable to hire a female for much of the past century; the researcher indicated that the good-old-boys network practiced discrimination in hiring practices, promotion and mentoring of certain individuals, and networking.

Moreover, Shakeshaft (1989) contended that women were discriminated against because of their gender when they were candidates for the principalship. They could not comply with the super-hero principal philosophy and therefore were being overlooked during the recruitment and hiring process.

### *Job Structure and Demands*

The structure of the public school administrator position requires a separation between work and private life. This demand puts women at a disadvantage because they may not fit the mold upon which the structure is built (Acker, 1990; Bailyn, 2000; Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006; Sirianni & Negrey, 2000; Tallerico & Blount, 2004; Williams, 2000). The glass ceiling is especially present when classroom time is compared between female administrators and male administrators (Glass, 2000): On average, men spend 5 to 6 years in the classroom before entering public school administration, whereas women spend 7 to 10 years in the classroom prior to entering administration (Glass; Young & McLeod, 2001). Therefore, it takes longer for women to climb the ladder toward the principalship than it takes their male counterparts (Glass).

Traditionally, men most often have filled the role of the principalship. For the past century, males have been associated with leadership roles because they defined the meaning of leadership (Enomoto, 2000). Men have often been promoted to the principalship over women because society associates women with teaching and learning and men with fiscal management and other noninstructional issues (e.g., Björk, 2000; Glass et al., 2000; Newton, 2006). The widespread belief women face each day is that men manage and women teach (Newton). Historically, a male principal has been responsible for the managerial and political tasks; however, in the era of accountability,



principals must also take on the role of instructional leader (Grubb & Flessa, 2006).

Assuming these roles is often a difficult undertaking for a woman who wants to fill the roles of wife and mother. The principalship is designed for the traditional married male worker who has full-time domestic support at home and can free himself from household and childcare responsibilities (Hochschild, 1975; Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006; Williams, 2000). According to a recent report issued by IEL (2000), fulfillment of the dual roles of instructional leader and school manager is unrealistic.

Freeman, Bourque, and Shelton (2001) described the discrepancy women face as they enter positions of power. They pointed out the difference between management and instructional leadership. According to Freeman et al., the management role involves oversight of areas such as discipline, textbooks, and locker distribution, whereas the instructional leader creates the vision and oversees teaching and instruction. The role of instructional leader is a position that has not often been given to women in the past (Freeman et al.). Moreover, some women are not entering the assistant principalship until their 50s, whereas their male counterparts enter the field in their 30s. This age difference significantly affects the pathway to the principalship for women.

The role of the high school principal demands many hours beyond the 40-hour work week: The principal is required to attend after-school events and activities, make public appearances at community events, and act as the school's manager and instructional leader (Loder, 2005). Women, more often than men, identify as an issue the overwhelming workload confronting them in the role of the principal (Kochan, Spencer, & Matthews, 1999). Women who aspire to the principalship are deterred from advancement because of the enormous shift in time between teaching and administration

(Loder). If a female teacher does assume the role of an administrator, she is usually not prepared for the hours the job requires (Loder). She gives up her shorter working hours, weekends off, and summer vacations in exchange for piles of paperwork she is usually forced to bring home with her (Loder). According to Loder, this time shift results in women's giving up time with their spouses and children and even forces some women to leave administration and return to the classroom. All in all, the time a principal devotes to the responsibility as school supervisor and the balance he or she tries to create between work and home distract the principal from the most important role: to improve student learning (Doud & Keller; ERS; Read).

### *Gatekeepers*

The traditional White male administrator has become known as the gatekeeper for administrative positions. Tallerico (2000) defined gatekeeping as a flow process involving the passage of applicants through a variety of "channels," most of which are composed of multiple subdivisions or "sections." According to Tallerico, these channels may have different starting points. For example, the superintendency channel may begin with self-nomination, whereas other channels may begin with a headhunter. These channels ultimately converge to an endpoint, where one candidate emerges successfully through the final selection. According to Tallerico, these channels are important in that each section in the process includes an "in" gate and an "out" gate. These gates are controlled by "a set of impartial rules" or by people with various levels of power. The gatekeepers keep women out of administrative positions because of societal norms that attach educational administrative positions to male candidates.

Winn's (1993) research included details of school boards' and superintendents' acting as gatekeepers to the principalship. According to Winn's findings, these gatekeepers hold the key for aspiring female administrators, using age, sex, and race as factors affecting job promotion. Most of the women who advance to the principalship, Winn discovered, serve at the elementary level. According to Winn, some women are underrepresented in district leadership programs. Riehl and Byrd (1997) discussed the career mobility of women in public school administration and the influence of gender upon negative stereotypes. They concluded that factors such as aspirations, qualifications, and experience do not assure women equity with men in administrative career development. Within public school administration, men are concentrated in positions that put them on "glass escalators" leading to higher level administrative positions more often than are women (Williams, 1992). Finally, gatekeepers keep many women out of the principalship because the gatekeepers are seeking a traditional principal, in their eyes, a male.

### *Strategies for Success*

#### *Networking*

Networking plays an essential part in an individual's entering the role of the high school principalship. Women need to be able to define networking accurately and understand what it entails (Sherman, 2005). Women must begin to network and become as politically adept as men, if they are to be successful school leaders (Evans, 2001). In *Play Like a Man, Win Like a Woman*, Evans proclaimed the necessity for women to adopt the male leadership style, noting women's need for professional training in dress, stance, voice tone, and even handshake firmness. Women can learn the games men play and

learn how to network in a similar fashion. According to Evans, women must understand the male work culture; knowing the definition of networking provides women with ground rules for the male work culture: how to play the game and how to win.

Riehl and Byrd (1997) identified women's responsibilities in the home and their lack of access to informal networking as problems in their securing administrative positions. Some networks are influential in the career advancement of men and women and in the decision making involved in choosing from candidates seeking the principalship (Riehl & Byrd). According to Valverde (1980), the good-old-boys network may exclude minorities and women from promotion because they are not being adopted as protégés. The good old boys traditionally have not deviated from the norm of White male protégés; they base inclusion in the network on physical characteristics rather than education levels. Further, the pathway to the principalship can be blocked by the network of White males even if a minority individual or a woman is accepted by his or her peers. If a woman cannot break into the good-old-boys network, she may never advance to the principalship.

Sherman (2005) described formal programs developed by independent school districts that allow for networking to occur within the school district; therefore, nonparticipants do not have the opportunity to experience formal networking. Often, teacher leaders are selected for these formal mentoring programs, which provide opportunities to network with other administrators. Ehrich, Hansford, and Tennet (2004) advocated mentoring programs because they found that protégés who participate in school district mentoring programs often report gaining practical knowledge, self-confidence, and opportunities for networking. In a study conducted by Sherman, 7 of 15

women identified networking as the most important aspect of the school district's leadership program. Three women thought skills were the most important, indicating they could network themselves; however, Sherman discovered these women did not fully comprehend the idea of networking. Some of the women thought networking simply meant being introduced to and talking with other administrators. As Sherman noted, however, networking extends far beyond talking with others, including the traditional types of networking activities in which men engage. Men who participated in the program seemed to have been already intertwined in the school district's network system.

Sherman (2005) discussed the problems associated with women's not knowing how to network properly within the district. According to Sherman, some women must network in the same manner as men if they want to gain entry to the principalship. Networking is a traditional tool for attaining the "know how" of the school district. Many female participants in the mentoring program did not understand the true meaning of networking. Networking allows some aspiring administrators to gain key contacts as well as access to the other side of leadership. Grogan (2004) noted that traditional networking excludes some women from administrative roles within districts. In summary, women are just beginning to understand the role of networking and its influence upon the hiring of candidates.

### *Mentoring*

Mentoring is another key element for the successful journey of a young aspiring female along the pathway to the principalship. Having a mentor may make or break her acceptance into the network of other administrators (Riehl & Byrd, 1997). Ragins and McFarlin (1990) provided the following definition of mentor: "a high ranking, influential

member of your organization who has advanced experience and knowledge and who is committed to providing upward mobility and support to your career” (p. 321).

Philips-Young (1982) defined six distinct mentoring roles, thereby suggesting very different definitions of mentors: traditional mentors, supportive bosses, organizational sponsors, professional mentors, patrons, and invisible godparents. Crosby (1999) provided a somewhat different definition for a mentor: “a trusted and experienced supervisor or advisor who by mutual consent takes an active interest in the development and education of a younger, less experienced individual” (p. 13).

Definitions of mentoring have evolved over the past 30 years. The most popular definitions of mentoring focus on the career advancement and professional development of a protégé by someone with the necessary experience in a position of authority (Mertz, 2004). Defining the term mentor has proven to be a difficult task; according to Mertz, that task represents the first step a researcher must take when examining mentoring programs. According to Milstein, Bobroff, and Restine (1991), well-defined mentoring programs provide aspiring principals opportunities to apply newly acquired knowledge to authentic administrative practices during carefully developed and monitored field-based experiences. Muth (2002) added to this definition by highlighting the importance of reflection and discussion of those experiences with peers and mentors.

Informal mentoring to promote the status quo has existed for centuries (Darwin, 2000). Traditional strategies often reveal attitudes that hinder female and minority career progression (Valverde, 1980). An important step in breaking this pattern is to facilitate mentoring relationships for potential administrators. In such a relationship, an established administrator adopts a potential administrator and guides him or her along the career path

to promotion. Valverde offered several explanations for females' and minorities' being excluded from the traditional process: (a) the rejection of minorities and women as potential protégés is subconscious, (b) mentors tend to seek candidates who have characteristics which mirror their own image, and (c) peer recognition by principals is essential to promotion. Riehl and Byrd (1997) revealed the importance of role models at the organizational level as an influential factor in career development. They identified the use of role models as an organizational opportunity, noting that such role models are needed for support of subordinates. The presence of same-sex role models influences the aspirations and opportunities for prospective female recruits and aspiring administrators. The presence or absence of role models in educational leadership and administration, on the other hand, can affect the mobility of women along the pathway (Riehl & Byrd).

Due to reports of an impending national shortage of school administrators, school districts have begun implementing "grow-your-own" leadership programs (Fusarelli & Smith, 1999). These programs involve a formal mentoring process for aspiring administrators; they include planned interventions designed by school districts to ensure a pool of candidates ready to enter administration (Fusarelli & Smith). These district-based programs are described as stand-alone programs because they are independently operated by individual school districts (Sherman, 2005). This type of formal mentoring program prepares individuals for administrative roles such as curriculum and instruction, finance, and school law (Fusarelli & Smith). There has been widespread agreement among scholars that an aspiring administrator benefits from the relationship with a mentor (Gardiner, Enomoto, & Grogan, 2000). According to Fleming (1991), such mentoring

programs have the potential to reach a greater number of aspiring administrators, including a more diverse group of candidates.

Ehrich et al. (2004) found that district-based mentoring programs increase support, sharing, and encouragement between mentors and protégés. Mentoring opportunities may allow women to gain insight and understanding with regard to the juggling of work and home responsibilities. According to Ehrich et al., formal district-based mentoring can enhance women's advancement and promote the unity of female administrators. Sherman (2005) also asserted that women who participate in mentoring programs advance to administrative positions more quickly than women who do not participate in such school leadership programs.

Becoming an assistant principal and then a principal is a predictable career path for many teachers wishing to advance. Teachers who seek greater responsibility and want to engage in personal transformation find success in school administration (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004). According to Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, many new principals report an experience of discomfort and uncertainty in their new leadership role. Developing effective school leaders requires effort on the part of school districts and local universities. School districts demonstrate the value of the principalship and attract teacher leaders by providing opportunities for discussion between teachers and administrators (Yerkes & Guaglianone, 1998). Ongoing teaching and coaching as well as professional development must occur if new administrators are to feel comfortable in their role (Kelley & Peterson, 2000).

Crow and Matthews (1998) identified three important outcomes of mentoring for school administration during the internship phase: First, mentoring stimulates role



socialization for aspiring and novice principals; second, veteran principals serving as mentors gain professional development and time for reflection; finally, mentoring novice principals during internships provides candidates for school districts to meet the demands for school leadership. Daresh (2004) asserted there are at least two potential ways for school districts to improve the effectiveness of school leaders. The first way is to assign an appropriate role model or mentor to the novice administrator to facilitate the development of a relationship between the mentor and mentee. The second is to recognize that the school's procedures, rules, instruction, and discipline constitute a crucial part in the development process for new administrators.

Daresh (2004) noted the importance of a personal relationship between the mentor and mentee in determining whether or not the potential educational leader is willing to make the changes in his or her life necessary to meet the time demands of administration. Furthermore, mentoring is a key element for the mentee's being socialized into the administrative environment, forming professional relationships, and developing administrative skills, which are usually based on the skills of the mentor. To facilitate full development of the new educational leader, mentors and mentees should be matched according to leadership style, instruction, background, learning needs, and professional development. Ideally, these one-on-one matchups take place within the school settings; unfortunately, however, mentors are usually assigned on a random basis, on a volunteer basis, or according to availability (Daresh).

Daresh (2004) described the benefits of mentoring for protégés, mentors, and school districts. For the protégé, benefits include confidence about his or her professional competence, translation of educational theory into practice, enhanced communication

skills, opportunities to learn tricks of the trade, and a sense of belonging. For the mentor, benefits include increased job satisfaction, personal development, and possible career advancement. Benefits to the school district include development of a more capable administrative staff, improved self-esteem of staff, and greater productivity. Some women have been rejected as mentees in the past but have found ways to find their own mentors to help them enter administration. The grow-your-own mentoring programs districts have developed may encourage women to enter administration by opening a doorway to a previously closed network.

### *Leadership Development*

According to Glass (1992), young females who aspire to school administration can be given support by their school districts to enter graduate programs for school leadership. Districts that not only recognize their potential leaders but also support their leadership development will be able to alleviate the shortage caused by retiring administrators (Glass). Although women are underrepresented in secondary school administration, this phenomenon cannot be attributed to an assumption that women are uninterested in secondary administrative roles. In fact, women account for more than 50% of those who attain administrative licensure and at least 50% of doctoral program candidates (Shakeshaft, 1989). Without a greater number of female high school principals and role models, female teachers may not perceive themselves as being capable of running a high school or being potential administrative candidates (Sherman, 2005).

Grogan (1996) confirmed the finding that increasingly greater percentages of individuals in leadership preparation programs and administrative positions leading to the principalship are women. Although women may have been left out of the candidate pool

in the past, a more recent study found females' expressing the desire to seek a high school principalship more often than their male counterparts (Pounder & Merrill, 2001). Overall, women are attaining 50% of the school administration degrees from universities across the country, yet they account for only a quarter of school principals (Pounder & Merrill). More and more women want to enter the principalship, yet some continue to be excluded from the recruitment process and the candidate pool.

### *Leadership Style*

Leadership style has become a topic of discussion among scholars in the past decade (LoVette, Watts, & Hood, 2000). Some researchers have suggested that a woman's leadership style differs from a male's. According to LoVette et al., a person's leadership style tends to evolve based on his or her gender. Women tend to be more focused on collaboration and want to build a climate of trust; men, on the other hand, are focused on discipline and adherence to school policy. Men seem to have a top-down style of leadership, whereas women are collaborative with their staff (LoVette et al).

According to Stein and King (1992), principals should realize that the best way to achieve a school's goals is to be willing to delegate power and responsibility to others. Based upon their research regarding teacher perception of school climate, Montgomery-McMinn (1990-1991) stated, "In schools where administrators established high expectations, set good examples, and solicited input, the climate was perceived as being more positive. Teachers were motivated more in schools where a positive perception was evident" (p. 55). Overall, women are sometimes perceived as weak because they favor a collaborative leadership style, whereas men are seen as being in control because they use a hierarchical style of leadership.

### *Transformational Solutions*

Loder (2005) emphasized the importance of a collaborative approach to the principalship for both men and women to balance their work and family lives. Grubb and Flessa (2006) cited their research in which they studied schools with coprincipals; one principal was the school supervisor and the other the instructional leader. These solutions offer an alternate approach to the notion of the super-hero principal, which seems to be an impossible mold to fill. As principals are retiring in record numbers, school districts need to begin examining these alternatives or face hiring fewer qualified candidates.

Lovelady-Dawson (1980) offered several solutions to alleviate the problem of underrepresentation of women in the principalship:

1. School districts should make the hiring of women and minorities a priority.
2. School districts can work with local colleges and universities to gain access to qualified candidates who meet these criteria.
3. An active recruitment policy and public statement against discrimination should be established in the community.
4. Development of and adherence to an affirmative action plan with goals to diversify educational leadership is needed.
5. Staff development should be provided for human resources employees and other administrators to correct sex-stereotyped attitudes and provide female employees with leadership training.
6. Part-time and flexible work schedules should be provided so women can be administrators, wives, and mothers.

7. The school district should encourage and recruit female graduate students.

Promoting lifelong learning and providing financial assistance to aspiring female administrators will also decrease the underrepresentation of women in educational administration.

### *Summary*

The history of the high school principalship has depicted a male-dominated position in a female-friendly field (Shakeshaft, 1989, 1999). At the height of the feminist movement in the United States, women represented only 1% of all high school principals (Fishel & Pottker, 1974). In 2004, women accounted for 26% of all high school principals, representing a dramatic increase over the previous 30 years (NCES, 2004). Family is the number-one work conflict for women considering school administration (Loder, 2005). Likewise, a woman's leadership style is often compared to that of her male counterpart when school boards try to answer "Can she do the job?" (LoVette et al., 2000).

Barriers that prevent some women from attaining the high school principalship begin with negative stereotypes against women (Tallerico & Blount, 2004). Some women are discriminated against throughout the recruitment process because school district leaders are seeking candidates that represent themselves, traditional White males (Lovelady-Dawson, 1980). When considering candidates, some school districts are seeking a hero-principal, one who can manage work and family without being distracted (Copland, 2001). The structure and demands of the high school principalship have been developed for a man who can separate work and private life (Bailyn, 2000). Gatekeepers may keep women off the pathway to the principalship by determining when they are in

and when they are out of the running for the position. Networking in a manner similar to that of a man is a skill that can help women be more successful (Evans, 2001). The provision of supportive mentors to guide aspiring female applicants has proven to be a successful strategy for their being accepted by male counterparts (Riehl & Byrd, 1997).

Overall, school districts should employ leadership development programs (Glass, 1992) and find transformational solutions to guide more women into the principalship (Lovelady-Dawson, 1980). The current practices of school district discrimination against female candidates should be further examined. School districts should begin to find alternative methods for guiding aspiring female administrators along their career pathway, realizing that hiring an ideal female principal is neither a reality nor should it be the expectation (Grubb & Flessa, 2006)

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### *Purpose Statement*

In conducting this study, the researcher was attempting to transform secondary school administration into a more female-friendly field. The purpose of the study was to discover the various pathways women have taken to achieve a high school principalship or assistant principalship, a position of power historically dominated by their male counterparts. Understanding how these women overcame the historical barriers presented before them, as well as learning how they were able to break through the glass ceiling, sheds light on the pathway and adds to the literature in educational leadership. The objective of this study was to encourage the participants to raise awareness for other women seeking a high school leadership position. The researcher chose critical feminist theory as the theoretical perspective because it advocates transformational leadership; it shows how past injustices have shaped people's views on gender. The ultimate goal of this study was to offer aspiring female administrators strategies for breaking through the barriers that may lie before them.

#### *Qualitative Research*

Qualitative findings often have a simple yet elegant, insightful character. The descriptive data transport the reader into the research setting (Patton, 2002). That which sets qualitative research apart from quantitative research is the use of words rather than numbers. The purpose of qualitative research is to determine concepts related to an event or issue through the perspectives of the participants. Qualitative research allows the participants to have a voice that informs the researcher of their life experiences.

Qualitative research focuses on these experiences and the meanings that participants place on events, processes, and structures of their normal settings. This type of research provides a holistic view presented through the participants' own words and perceptions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data collected through qualitative research, either written or spoken, focus on naturally occurring events in ordinary settings. The goal of such research is to understand what real life is like for the participants (Skinner, Tagg, & Holloway, 2000). Marshall and Rossman (1995) described qualitative research as particularly valuable when the researcher is trying to discover links between groups and organizations. Miles and Huberman described qualitative data as useful in trying to validate or explain phenomena within a social setting. This study gives voice to the experiences of female high school principals and assistant principals. It identifies their perspectives of the pathway to the principalship, the barriers they experienced, and the lessons they learned and reflected upon during their passage across gender lines. According to Maynard and Purvis (1994), interpretation of qualitative data is selective and includes the challenge of reconstructing biographical accounts of the participants. Developing awareness and understanding of the pathways followed by female principals allows the researcher to gain insights and generate transformational solutions to obstacles faced by aspiring female administrators (Patton).

### *Critical Feminist Theory*

Critical feminist theory was best suited for this topic because the research examined the past injustices experienced by women entering school administration, including the politics and gender favoring involved in networking and mentoring; the research was designed to raise the awareness of women seeking positions of leadership



and to share strategies for their success on the pathway (Patton, 2002). Critical feminist theory is based on exploration of the lives of women to uncover how the forces of patriarchy shaped them in multiple ways along their career paths (Maher, 1987). The theory aims to develop awareness so that women can critique the male-dominated systems that have oppressed them; its pedagogy represents an effort to balance a male's identity and a female's identity (Morris, 1996). Critical feminism has challenged the nature of a woman's inferior status and has attempted to develop a theory to explain gender inequality in society (Lorber, 2005). This theory becomes a form of cultural politics through which knowledge is produced as part of the struggle to create a more democratic reality within the school system (Goodman, 1992). Scholars employing critical feminist theory in the discussion of education focus on social justice and equity in an attempt to change the distribution of power within the institution (Ragin, 1987). The institution of education is a key component in obtaining dialogue related to the female experience in leadership. Understanding the female's voice encourages a more comprehensive understanding of the female perspective, including the obstacles that exist within the educational system (Stacki & Monkman, 2003).

Critical feminist theory critiques the nature of women as family caregivers and the nature of women's work. It exposes traditional family arrangements, such as the working father figure and the stay-at-home mom (Smith, 1987). Critical feminist theorists attempt to deconstruct the power relationships that are embedded in family dynamics and to understand these relationships (Allen, 2001). According to Smith, scholars who use critical feminist theory work toward transforming the power dynamics hidden in these family arrangements. Throughout the past 25 years, feminist theorists have viewed the

field of educational administration as an important area of focus for research. As early as 1963, Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* highlighted the notion that a woman's experience does not bear any resemblance to the accepted male version. Friedan recognized that a patriarchal system denies women their voice. According to Evans (1997), a woman's disconnect between her lived experiences and realities and traditional family arrangements ushered in the first wave of feminism. With the third wave of feminism, different feminist theories have emerged as have alternate ways of viewing women's lives (Allen). This study further explored a woman's difficulty in separating work and family, which often results in a choice between career and motherhood.

Critical theory concerns issues of power and justice, particularly with regard to gender, education, social institutions, and cultural dynamics. It seeks to understand, critique, and change the balance of society in favor of the less powerful (Patton, 2002). This critical model helps women understand the oppression under which they have been living and how it has affected their lives and careers. Once this oppression has been acknowledged, women can begin to develop their own voices and engage in dialogue for their own empowerment (Asch & Fine, 1988). To return to truth within a feminist perspective, the critical theory framework advocates diversity and exposes the male-dominated viewpoint (Spender, 1995).

Feminist theory presumes the importance of gender in human relationships and societal process. Within feminist theory, there is a sense of connectedness between the researcher and the researched. Finding voice within a select group of women allows the researcher to explore relationships and emerging themes. This researcher was challenged to connect voice and perspective and discover the untold stories of the female high school

principal (Patton, 2002). Within a feminist framework, the oppressed may begin to define their oppression in their own words and not in the words of those oppressing them (Asch & Fine, 1988). Hooks (1984) acknowledged the feminist tradition of the female voice's providing depth and richness to avoid the "one experience fits all" mistake. The theory asserts there is no one way to resist the oppressive culture or society in which women live. Using qualitative methods within the framework of feminist theory indicates a respect for method and process (Watts, 2006). Specific considerations for feminist researchers include a power relationship between the researcher and participants. Additionally, the aim of feminist research is to improve women's lives and create an awareness of the different relationships between the researcher and the participants (Watts). Feminist theories focus on women's lives and the desire to end inequality for women (Barber & Allen, 1992). Women's voices depend on the circumstances surrounding their everyday lives and their sources of support (Sandoval, 1991). Stanley (1990) asserted that feminist researchers should use every means available to study women in a sexist society. A strength of feminist theory is grounded in women's actual experience in that it can explain women's feelings about family without undermining the structure (Smith, 1987).

A critical feminist theoretical approach offers a way to initiate change; it provides an opportunity for the researcher to consider how participants' individual experiences may have been influenced by a male-dominated field. Critical feminist theorists work to correct the distortion and invisibility of the female experience and to end a woman's unequal social position (Lather, 1991). The goal of this work is to contribute to women's

knowledge in the field of educational leadership and to generate helpful information they can use along their pathway to the principalship.

### *Design*

A unique feature of this study was the researcher's interviewing six female principals in South Hampton Roads, Virginia to gain insight regarding how they were successful in their pursuit of the high school principalship; this technique assisted in offering solutions related to the barriers for aspiring administrators. In addition, the researcher interviewed six female high school assistant principals who were aspiring to the principalship to better understand the barriers they believed to exist along their pathway. By conducting interviews and analyzing reflective journal entries, the researcher attempted to determine whether or not the perspectives of female high school principals and assistant principals corresponded with the belief that barriers exist for women in educational administration that do not exist for men.

This research involved a nonexperimental, qualitative design. The researcher employed naturalistic inquiry to conduct in-depth interviews with female principals and assistant principals from South Hampton Roads, Virginia. This exploratory study allowed for the gathering of data through interviews and the analysis of emerging themes. Using exploratory study techniques allowed the researcher to form meaning from emerging patterns and apply the information to the next stage of the qualitative process.

Triangulation of data increases the validity of the study; in this study, triangulation was achieved by collecting data through interviews of female high school principals that had been successful on their journey, interviews of female high school assistant principals continuing on their journey, and document analysis of reflective journals written by the

participants (Patton, 2002). This study was conducted using a critical theoretical approach within a feminist paradigm. The researcher employed critical feminist theory as a lens during the interview process. Additionally, the researcher used modified grounded theory in the interview process due to the thematic approach of the interview protocol. The concept of barriers relates to the theoretical framework and was used as a guide to formulate the interview questions. In addition, the concept of barriers was the underlying assumption of the research project itself. Formulation of the problem of barriers for women in high school administration was based on the notion that school administration is a gendered profession in which women usually serve in supporting roles. The phenomenon of the female high school principal led the researcher to believe gender acts as a barrier to professional inclusion in a male-dominated field. The critical feminist lens served as a filter through which to disseminate the information gained through the interview process. It served to highlight concerns, points of view, and voices of women. Additionally, it helped build rapport between the researcher and the interviewees as the feminist framework advocates the use of face-to-face interviews to gain more insight (DeVault, 1999).

### *Research Questions*

During the interview and document analysis processes, the researcher attempted to answer three questions that established the framework for the study:

1. What pathways to the high school principalship do women follow?
2. What barriers do women face on their pathway to the high school principalship?

3. How do women entering the high school principalship overcome barriers to the profession?

#### *Human Subjects Review*

This study necessitated filing a Human Subjects Research (HSR) application regarding the interviews the researcher conducted. The HSR application was reviewed by the Human Subjects Research Committee at Old Dominion University. The interviews did not harm the participants in a foreseeable way in terms of their employment, financial standing, or credibility. There was no risk for criminal or civil action against them as the result of their participation. Confidentiality was maintained; the participants cannot be readily linked to the information obtained from them during this process. The researcher's study was deemed exempt by the Human Subjects Research Committee and approved by the Darden College of Education Committee at Old Dominion University in June 2009.

#### *Sample*

The participants in this study were selected through purposeful sampling; the sample comprised six female high school principals and six female assistant principals. The researcher examined the Web site of each school district in South Hampton Roads, Virginia to develop a list of high schools in the area. From there, the researcher compiled a list of all female high school principals and assistant principals in the area. Each possible candidate was e-mailed by the researcher to request participation. Each high school principal that did not respond to the original e-mail was telephoned to request participation. Assistant principals were not telephoned due to the e-mail response rate. The researcher identified common patterns that emerged among the interviewed

administrators while attempting to capture the core experience of each administrator. Because the researcher interviewed only female high school principals and assistant principals in South Hampton Roads, a tradeoff existed in the gathering of more in-depth information from these particular administrators while giving up the breadth of information that would have been possible from a wide range of administrators across the State of Virginia. Additionally, the use of critical feminist theory accomplished the researcher's intentions to explore the shortage of women in school leadership and to address the need to examine hiring practices for female administrators.

The participant pool consisted of female principals and assistant principals in South Hampton Roads. For this study, administrators from the Chesapeake, Hampton, Newport News, Poquoson, Portsmouth, and Virginia Beach school districts were contacted. Analysis of administrative staff data within these school districts revealed 14 females serving as high school principals and 43 females serving as assistant principals. Furthermore, in these school districts, there were 20 males serving as high school principals and 85 males working as high school assistant principals. Therefore, in South Hampton Roads, Virginia, females represented 41% of the principal population; however, females represented only 33.6% of the assistant principal population within the same school districts. Snyder and Hoffman (2002) reported a national average of 44% for female high school principals in the United States; therefore, the percentage for South Hampton Roads, Virginia was only slightly under the national average.

### *Participants*

The 12 participants for this study are referred to by pseudonyms. Each pseudonym was created by the participant and has no connection to her real name. For

the purpose of this study, six female high school principals and six female high school assistant principals were selected based on their current administrative placements. To protect the participants, the pseudonyms are used throughout presentation and discussion of the findings.

### *Bonnie*

Bonnie was a 51-year-old White female principal in a suburban school district. She was a native of the locality in which her school district was located and was in her 1<sup>st</sup> year as a high school principal. Prior to accepting her current position, she spent 8 years as an assistant principal. She had taught physical education for 11 years. Bonnie then completed a master's degree in special education and worked as a special education teacher for 5 years before becoming an assistant principal. Bonnie held a doctoral degree in educational administration. She was married and had two daughters in college.

### *BP*

BP was a 51-year-old White female assistant principal in a suburban school district. She began her career in management as a director of community development. BP returned to school and earned a master's degree in teaching. She spent 10 years in the classroom teaching business classes before becoming an assistant principal; BP had been in her current role as an assistant principal for 6 years. She held an educational specialist degree in educational administration. BP was married with no children.

### *Carol*

Carol, 36, was the youngest principal or administrator interviewed for this study. She was a native of the locality in which her school district was located and was in her 2<sup>nd</sup> year as a high school principal. Prior to her current role, she had been an assistant



principal for 2 years, a technology academy coordinator for 5 years, and a classroom teacher for 5 years. Carol held a master's degree in education, was single, and did not have children.

### *Jean*

Jean was a 45-year-old White female working as an assistant principal in a suburban school district. She began her career as a health and physical education teacher. After 3 years, Jean became an Advanced Placement biology teacher. She taught biology for 20 years before becoming an assistant principal. She completed two administrative internships while completing her master's degree in educational administration. Jean was entering her 3<sup>rd</sup> year as an assistant principal, was married, and had one daughter in high school.

### *Jennifer*

Jennifer was a White female in a suburban school district; she was 42 years old. She was an assistant principal for instruction (API), who was seeking a high school principalship. Jennifer held an educational specialist degree in educational leadership and was working toward a doctorate degree. She had been in her current role as an API for 4 years, worked at central office as the science specialist for 4 years, and spent 7 years teaching science. She was divorced and had two sons, one in high school and the other in his early 20s.

### *LFB*

LFB held an educational specialist degree in educational administration. She was 60 years old, a native of the locale of the school district in which she worked. LFB was an African American principal in an urban school district. She began her career as a

substitute teacher and then began teaching English. After spending 16 years in the classroom, LFB became a teacher trainer. LFB had been an assistant principal for 8 years at two different high schools, an alternative school administrator, and a middle school principal for 4 years; she had been in her current role as high school principal for 4 years. She was single and had no children.

#### *Samantha*

Samantha was a 42-year-old, African American assistant principal. She began her career teaching elementary school fourth-grade math; she progressed to teaching middle school math and then high school math. Samantha spent 15 years in the classroom and one year as a testing specialist. She had been an assistant principal for 3 years and held a master's degree in educational leadership. At the time of the study she was working on a doctorate degree; she was single and the guardian of four children.

#### *Summer*

Summer was a 53-year-old African American. She had been an assistant principal for 10 years. She began her career as a physical education and biology teacher. She spent a total of 8 years in the classroom before earning a master's degree in counseling and certification in educational leadership and supervision. Summer moved into counseling for the next 12 years of her career. Her spouse was in the military service, thereby giving Summer the opportunity to teach in several states, including Virginia, and overseas. Summer and her husband had three sons, all in college, and she was a native of the locale of the school system in which she was employed.

### *Sunshine*

Sunshine was a 51-year-old White principal working in an urban school district. Sunshine had spent 13 years in the classroom as a special education teacher. Then she served as a dean of students in a high school setting for 2 years. She became an assistant principal in another school district and served for 4 years prior to taking a year off to complete her doctorate. Sunshine had returned to the same school district as an assistant principal for an additional 2 years and then became principal of an early childhood learning center for students with special needs. From this position she had entered the high school principalship where she had served in her current role for 4 years. She was married and did not have children.

### *Susie*

Susie was a White principal in an urban school setting. At the time of the study, she was entering her 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the high school principalship. Susie taught the sixth grade for 4 years prior to becoming a guidance counselor for 2 years. She then became the principal of a summer program and was appointed dean of students for 1 year. Susie entered the assistant principalship at the high school level and served for 3 years. She was promoted to middle school principal and served in that position for 5 years. Susie then became a high school principal. Susie held a doctoral degree in educational leadership, was married, and had two children, under the age of 12. Susie was the first female principal at her high school.

### *ZT*

ZT was a 55-year-old White high school principal. She worked in a suburban school district and had been a high school principal for 14 years. ZT was the first female

high school principal in her school district. She spent 6 years in the classroom teaching special education; then she moved to central office as the special education coordinator. From this position, ZT moved into the assistant principalship as the API. She was an API for 5 years before becoming a high school principal. ZT held a doctor of education degree in educational administration. She was married and had no children.

Each of the principals held a K-12 administration and supervision license in the State of Virginia. Their respective schools served populations ranging from 1250 to 2503 students in Grades 9-12. The 12 women participants represented 11 different high schools in the South Hampton Roads area of Virginia. Of these 11 high schools, 3 failed to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) during the 2008-2009 academic year (Virginia Department of Education, 2009). Demographic data for the participants are presented in Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3.

Table 1. *Female Principal and Assistant Principal Characteristics*

Characteristic	Frequency (Principal)	Frequency (Assistant Principal)
Race		
White	4	5
African American	1	1
Asian	1	0
Other	0	0
Education level		
Doctorate	4	0
Education specialist	1	2
Master's	1	4
Background		
Teaching and counseling	0	1
Teaching special education	3	1
Teaching secondary subject area	3	4
Years of classroom teaching		
0-5	2	0
6-10	1	2
11-15	1	0
16 or more	2	4
Age		
35-40	1	0
41-45	0	2
46-50	0	0
51-55	3	3
56 and older	1	0
Total years in education		
0-10	0	0
11-20	2	3
21-30	2	3
31 or more	2	0

Table 2. *Family Constructs of Female Principals and Assistant Principals*

Characteristic	Frequency (Principal)	Frequency (Assistant Principal)
Marital status		
Married	4	4
Single	2	1
Divorced	0	1
Child status		
Children	2	5
No children	4	1

Table 3. *Age of Children Upon Administrators' Entry Into Administration*

Characteristic	Frequency (Principal)	Frequency (Assistant Principal)
Age		
0-5	0	0
6-10	2	0
11-15	0	8
16-20	0	4
Over 20	2	1

*Gaining Entrée*

After the study received approval from the Darden College of Education Research Committee, each female principal in the South Hampton Roads area was contacted via e-mail to provide an explanation of the study's purpose and the importance of her role. The e-mail informed the potential participants of study expectations: time requirements, the interview process, the assistant principal recommendations, and the follow-up reflective journal entries. The researcher followed up by telephoning principals that did not respond. She relied on the female principals of South Hampton Roads to recommend female assistant principals that were interested in becoming principals or that had been trying unsuccessfully to become principals. Because this method did not prove to be effective, the researcher e-mailed every female assistant principal in South Hampton Roads, Virginia to gain entrée. The e-mail messages communicated the requirements for participation, including time commitment and information about the interview process. The researcher then responded via e-mail to the assistant principals who volunteered to participate in the study.

Interviewees were informed that their participation in the study would involve more than a 30- to 60-minute interview. Participation required the completion of a reflective journal e-mailed to each participant by the researcher. Consent to participate in the study was received through a verbal response as well as a signed consent form presented to each participant prior to the interview process (See Appendix A). Each participant chose her own pseudonym for the purpose of the study to ensure confidentiality and anonymity when the recordings were reviewed and transcribed (See Appendix B). The incentive for participation was the knowledge that they would be

helping future female administrators to become familiar with the pathway toward the goal.

### *Role of the Researcher*

It was assumed that patterns would emerge through the interviews of the female high school principals and assistant principals and that the patterns would allow for themes to emerge and for saturation of responses to occur. The discrepancies that arose among the participants' responses resulted in the researcher's e-mailing each participant a copy of the interview transcript for clarification of the data. It was believed the information gathered would lead to a better understanding of the female high school principal and give voice to an underrepresented minority in school leadership.

Because the researcher, a woman, was currently teaching social studies at a high school in South Hampton Roads but seeking an administrative position, biases are acknowledged. The researcher believes the field of school administration is influenced by patriarchal ideals for success and the promotion of individuals is determined by patriarchal leaders. Her perspectives on educational leadership align with those who believe the principalship represents a dual role of managerial responsibilities and instructional leadership (Copland, 2001). Nevertheless, the researcher does not believe the patriarchal system is the only way a woman can achieve the high school principalship, nor does she believe a female must wait until after she has children to become a school administrator. Through this study, the researcher was attempting to develop solutions to the time constraints of the high school principalship and the work-family conflicts for aspiring female administrators.



During the early years of her doctoral program, the researcher coauthored an article about pathways to the principalship, as experienced by both men and women, to analyze the varying gender perspectives. From that study, specific interest in the female high school principalship arose. This research expands upon the previous study by determining how women reach the high school principalship and collecting information regarding their barriers, their mentor relationships, and the influence of networking. This study involved interviews of female principals only, whereas both female and male principals were interviewed in the previous study. In addition, female aspiring principals currently serving as high school assistant principals were interviewed to gain an understanding of the obstacles they might have faced along their pathways.

At the time of study, the researcher was working for a female high school principal, teaching social studies, and actively seeking an administrative position. It should be noted that many administrative positions had been unfilled in this school district and in the spring of 2009 there was a hiring freeze due to shortfalls in the state and district budgets. The entry-level leadership program for which the researcher applied was also discontinued in the spring of 2009 due to the economic crisis in Virginia schools.

### *Data Collection*

To collect the necessary data, the researcher conducted interviews with female principals and assistant principals in South Hampton Roads, Virginia. She used an existing open-ended, semistructured questionnaire to gain as much in-depth knowledge as possible from each interviewee. The existing interview questionnaire was adapted from a previous research study, *Pathways to the Principalship* (Sherman et al., 2008). The

questionnaire collected data regarding educational background, familial support, and mentoring. The researcher revised the existing questionnaire to add questions regarding networking, solutions, and advice for aspiring female principals. Because the study was focused on the pathways to the high school principalship, the questionnaire was revised to inquire about how the female principals were appointed to their positions, requesting details regarding each step taken by the individuals after completing high school (See Appendix C). The interviews with the female assistant principals detailed their pathways and their struggles to gain entry to administration and the high school principalship (See Appendix D). The interviews took place in the summer of 2009, specifically between the months of June and August 2009.

It was necessary to obtain permission from the Darden College of Education, each school district, and each of the selected participants. The researcher needed to schedule an appointment with each participant during her noninstructional time. After the interviews were completed, they were transcribed by a transcriptionist and then coded. The researcher identified themes and began coding the reflective journal questions. The use of reflective journals allowed the participants to take more time to answer questions and to reflect to a greater extent upon personal experience than was allowed through the interview process (See Appendix E). Questions were given to each participant at the time of the interview, and e-mail reminders were sent periodically. Once the dominant themes emerged from the reflective journals, they were saved and coded using Microsoft Word. Costs associated with the qualitative study included paying a professional transcriptionist to transcribe the interviews and purchasing the recording devices, as well as travel expenses. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes, depending on the

interviewee; the researcher used a voice digital recorder and a voice tape recorder for back up.

### *Data Analysis*

The analytical framework for this study comprised processes. By implementing a system of processes through a critical feminist lens, the researcher developed a general explanation of the emergent themes. The analysis was organized according to several themes such as history, familial support, mentoring, networking, career aspirations, and solutions. The researcher could have used the analytical framework of issues such as race and age; however, the primary focus remained on the pathway and the process of becoming an administrator. Validity may be in question with regard to the interpretation of issues and themes based upon the interviews. This interpretation is the responsibility of the researcher, a female currently seeking an administrative position in southeastern Virginia. To increase the validity of the study the set of codes was reviewed by a second person who holds a doctorate degree in educational leadership and works within a university research setting. Acknowledging this bias helps reduce the possibility of personal emotions' interfering with the study. To transcribe the interviews in a timely manner, a transcriptionist was hired. Pseudonyms for the principals and assistant principals served to protect them during the recording and transcription process.

Modified grounded theory was applied to this study because the researcher used an interview protocol that was developed from the themes in the literature review. The reflective journal questions were based on the themes that emerged during the literature review and the interview process. The researcher's use of a modified version of grounded theory allowed real world situations to be discovered, thereby providing meaning to the

study. Grounded theory allowed the researcher to have interplay with the data and allowed the framework to evolve from a set of codes (Patton, 2002). Glasser (2000) did not limit grounded theory to this definition. He described grounded theory as a general method that can be used with any data or combination of data. Much of the theory revolves around the notion of emergence versus forcing and the lack of use of all grounded theory methodological steps. For researchers to reap career and personal rewards, it is prudent for them to use qualitative grounded theory when the necessary resources are available (Glasser).

The researcher coded the data collected through the interviews to find common themes. According to Guba (1978), researchers must determine responses that fit together when starting the coding process. This researcher looked for recurring themes that revealed patterns, which could be sorted into categories. The codes and categories were inserted into a classification system to verify the meaningfulness and accuracy of the category and the data placement. The researcher organized the classification categories to establish a system of priority and determine which were most important with regard to the information (Guba). After this step was complete, the categories were tested for completeness. The first test was for integrability, testing for consistency of the data and determining the overall scenario. Second, the set of categories was determined to be inclusive of the data and the information that existed. Third, the data set was appropriately arranged to be understandable to a second observer. The last test regarded the credibility of the data as perceived by the persons who provided the information; the researcher e-mailed a copy of the interview transcript to each participant to ensure that all quotations and data represented the interviewees' intentions (Patton, 2002). According to

Guba, the final step is to bridge the gaps in the data and to make connections across categories.

The researcher reviewed the interview notes and wrote margin notes regarding present themes and topics. For the interviews, the researcher used six major codes from the literature, which were implicated in the interview protocol: personal background, entry, family, mentoring, networking, and solutions. Each of these codes included subcategories: personal background (age at entry into administration and number of years in the classroom); entry (barriers and pathways); family (spousal support and number of children); mentoring (relationships, leadership style, and communication); networking (the good old boys, gatekeepers, and networking strategies); and solutions (advice to aspiring female administrators). After the interviews were complete, the researcher highlighted the transcripts using Microsoft Word to color code each theme. To simplify the coding process, the interview questions were arranged according to the six major codes.

### *Authenticity*

Authenticity was ensured through consistent review of the research perspective and its use during the data analysis process. The voices of the female high school principals and assistant principals were respected and represented through the creation of a coding scheme, complete with definitions of each code. Each of the principals' or assistant principals' responses was interpreted with regard to her personal background. The researcher attempted to understand the struggles each participant encountered along the pathway to school administration, as well as the reality of each individual's story and its relationship to the experiences of other participants.

The researcher maintained a journal to record meeting and interview times for the administrators, perceptions and thoughts regarding the interviews, and follow-up questions. This journal was used to record initial themes or codes to assist in developing the final thematic coding.

### *Confidentiality and Safety*

Each administrator interviewee created a pseudonym to ensure her confidentiality and anonymity. These pseudonyms were used by the researcher in place of the interviewees' actual names during the transcription process; all family members' names also were changed to maintain the anonymity of the participants. Furthermore, all names of colleges were altered as well as the names of the school divisions and high schools in which the participants were employed. For the purpose of this study, all high school names were changed to presidential pseudonyms. A transcriptionist was hired to transcribe the recorded interviews. Once the transcriptions were complete, the recordings were stored separately from the transcriptions; only the researcher had access to them. Participants were provided the researcher's contact information, including phone numbers and e-mail address, in the event they had questions regarding the study or wished to withdraw from the study.

### *Definitions of Codes*

*Personal background.* Participant background information from the interviewee, including years spent in the classroom, subjects taught, and education levels.

*Family.* The family background of the interviewee and the family support or hindrance she experienced in entering administration.

*Mentoring.* The pairing of an aspiring principal with an administrator having advanced experience and knowledge, who is committed to providing upward mobility and support to the aspiring principal's career.

*Networking.* Making connections with well-known administrators in the school district to promote career advancement.

*Solutions.* Advice offered to aspiring female administrators.

### *Conclusion*

This qualitative study advocates transformational leadership and attempts to show how past injustices have shaped people's views. Critical feminist theory is concerned with issues of power and justice, particularly in the matters of gender, education, social institutions, and cultural dynamics (Patton, 2002). The interview protocol and coding process employed the use of modified grounded theory with regard to the thematic nature of the interview protocol, which was developed from themes that emerged during the literature review. The examination of the principalship through the lens of a female has been documented in the field of educational leadership and is unique to the nonminority culture. The researcher interviewed six female high school principals and six female high school assistant principals to gain an in-depth understanding of their pathway to the principalship and the barriers they experienced along that pathway. By giving voice to this understudied group of women, the researcher's goal was to present solutions for women's gaining entry to this historically male-dominated position.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### *Introduction*

Throughout the data collection process, the researcher was attempting to discover the pathways women had followed into the high school principalship and the pathways aspiring assistant principals were following. During the process, the researcher wanted to know how the participants had been successful. The research process was guided by the following research questions: What pathways to the high school principalship do women follow? What barriers do women face on their pathway to the high school principalship? How do women entering the high school principalship overcome barriers to the profession? Interview findings were consistent with the literature and were grouped into several thematic categories. These categories included participant background, family, mentoring, networking, career aspirations, and solutions.

#### *Pathways*

Female interview participants had followed traditional pathways to their principalship and assistant principalship positions. According to Grogan (1996), women navigate themselves along pathways to which they have access. Interview participants in this study had not found alternative routes to leadership roles. The traditional pathway followed by participants began at the teaching level, moved into the assistant principal position, and then into the principalship.

#### *Personal Background*

During the interview process, six female principals and six female assistant principals shared their personal stories with the researcher. This information included the



subject areas in which they received their bachelor's degrees, the subjects they taught, their education levels, the number of years they had spent in the classroom, the number of years they had been in administration, and their total number of years in education.

### *Age*

One of the first discrepancies that appeared was in the age at which the participant became an administrator. This age difference was often discussed in the literature with regard to men's moving up the ladder more quickly and at a younger age as compared to women. Most female administrators do not enter administration until their late 40s or early 50s (Doud & Keller, 1998). Carol was the exception to this rule, entering the principalship at the age of 34. The average age of the interviewed principals was 50.6 and the average age of the assistant principals was 48.8. Bonnie discussed the relevance of her age in seeking a principalship: "I, at one point...thought a barrier might be age." The majority of the responses from the female administrators interviewed in this study replicated findings from the literature.

### *Education Level*

Of the six female principals interviewed, four currently held doctoral degrees in educational leadership and administration. One held an educational specialist degree in the area of educational leadership and administration, and the last held a master's degree in education. When discussing their education levels, one female principal noted the difficulty of obtaining a doctorate degree while working as an assistant principal because of the time demands of her job. Sunshine said, "At the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> year at Roosevelt, I took a year off and went to Virginia University to finish my dissertation." When the female assistant principals were interviewed, the researcher discovered that four of the

six assistant principals held master's degrees and the other two held educational specialist degrees in educational leadership and administration. The two assistant principals with educational specialist degrees were working to complete their doctoral degrees. Bonnie hoped that earning her doctorate degree would help her obtain a high school principalship; she said, "Well, I always hoped one thing that had to do with it was my doctorate degree, you know, because that's what we go to school for."

### *Subject Area Taught*

In discussing their years in the classroom, three of the six principals reported teaching backgrounds in special education. The three remaining women had taught various subject areas including math, science, and technology. Coincidentally, three of the six interviewed assistant principals also reported teaching backgrounds in math, science, or technology. Two of the remaining assistant principals had taught physical education and special education, respectively, and the third had been a counselor.

### *Years Spent in the Classroom*

The female principals interviewed throughout this study reported a wide range of years spent in the classroom. Two of the six women principals had spent fewer than 5 years teaching in the classroom. One principal had been in the classroom for 6 years, another for 14 years, and two principals each had taught in the classroom for 16 years. The interviewed assistant principals had spent more time in the classroom; this finding is consistent with the literature (Glass et al., 2000). Four of the six interviewed women had spent more than 16 years in the classroom before entering administration. The remaining two assistant principals had spent 6 and 7 years, respectively, in the classroom.

### *Total Years in Education*

When examining total years in education, the researcher found that two of the six interviewed principals had spent more than 30 years in education. Two of the principals had been in education for more than 20 but fewer than 30 years, and the remaining two principals had each spent more than 10 but fewer than 20 years in education. The assistant principals' years of experience were more equally distributed. Half of the assistant principals interviewed for this study had been in education between 10 and 20 years and the other half had been in education more than 20 years.

### *Barriers to Entry*

The researcher wanted to investigate the barriers female administrators had faced to better equip women to overcome similar obstacles that may present themselves. The researcher asked each administrator when they had made their career aspirations known. Carol was hesitant to make her aspirations known because of her age and race. She said,

One was age; I felt that I was perceived to be too young. I believed that the perception out there was that I was too young for that very important role. The other one limitation I thought was being Asian. Because there are no Asian principals at the elementary, middle, or high school level. So I thought, you know, that would be ground breaking.

Carol continued to discuss additional barriers she experienced in not following a traditional pathway to the principalship:

I certainly interviewed for some principalships along the way but I did feel that the title was a limitation because the traditional pathway is from an assistant principal's position. So I made the career decision to move into an assistant principalship, which again was a very lateral move for me, but in the 2 years that I was at Jefferson I felt that I could finally concentrate on one role and use some of those experiences to wait for the right opportunity.

Susie described the feeling the local community had about her living outside the district and the being first female principal:

In fact, some folks in the community questioned me about where I lived and why I don't live close, and I said, you know what, you will never know that I don't live next door to this school because I will be here as much as you will. So...just the expectations are a little different for women too because they, well, don't you have kids? Yeah I do, and they're here with me all the time a lot.

These women felt as though age, race, and the community were barriers along their pathways to the principalship. Carol thought she had two barriers to overcome: age and race. Susie perceived that the local community would not accept her because she did not live within the community.

### *Application for Position*

The researcher asked the administrators how many times they had applied for their positions. Sunshine applied for an administrative position more times than any other participant. She said, "All in southeastern Virginia, 14 times I interviewed. Not applied, 14 times I interviewed, but I don't think I ever applied that I didn't get an interview." ZT described the application process in her school district: "When positions came open, they were just appointments." Bonnie explained how she did not apply for her current position: "Well, the superintendent called me in his office and told me he had this position.... He wanted me to take it." Jean discussed her difficulties in obtaining an assistant principal position:

For all the positions that were available I probably applied for four, maybe five or six, jobs and, you know, some middle schools, some high schools. I went on interviews, I researched questions, I researched the school. I thought I was doing great, you know, and I'd have a great interview, and I'd hear you're really not fit for the job. So it was very frustrating.

Samantha discussed her application process: "I applied a good number of times; probably I had one...about four interviews—all in the same school district."

Some women followed the pathway of applying for the position, in some case numerous times, whereas others were “tapped” for the position. The women displayed feelings of frustration when they were told they were not the right fit for the job.

### *Family*

Each administrator discussed the importance of support from their spouses and families. In the literature, many female administrators stated that it was the support from their spouses and family members that fostered or inhibited their decisions about entering administration (Loder, 2005; Young & McLeod, 2001). Initially, each administrator perceived that her family was not a barrier to her position or career aspirations. Only two of the female principals interviewed for this study had children, and one of those principal’s children were in their 20s.

### *Marriage and Children*

The researcher discovered that 67% of the female principals and assistant principals were married at the time of the study. According to the information reported by the principals in this study, 33% of them had children. A greater percentage of the assistant principals than the principal participants reported being mothers. Through review of the data, the researcher determined that 83% of the assistant principals had children. Only one participant, an assistant principal, was divorced at the time of the study. Loder (2005) reported that women generally have children before entering administration. Kathy confirmed the notion that women do not enter administration until after having children: “I did not progress in my career until after our youngest son attended kindergarten.” Bonnie mentioned having older children when she entered administration: “I think it was easier for me [be]cause my children were older and

involved in so much by the time I got into administration, and they were in high school when I started in administration.” Jennifer also fit the model of not entering into administration until her children were older: “They were older and didn’t need me around quite so much. I would not have gone downtown until my kids were older.” Some women make the decision not to have children. This was the case for Sunshine and her husband: “Mark and I agreed a long time ago (we have been married for 27 years) not to have children of our own.”

According to the data, one principal had two children between the ages of 6 and 10 when she entered the high school principalship and another had two children who were over the age of 20. The six female assistant principals reported having a total of 13 children when they entered the assistant principal position: eight children between the ages of 11 and 15, four children between the ages of 16 and 20, and one child over the age of 20. According to the literature, women are choosing either the career track or the mommy track, a phenomenon supported by this study’s data regarding the children’s ages (Glass et al., 2000). Only one female principal opined that one can be both: a mother and a principal.

### *Parental Support*

Many of the administrators discussed the influence of their parents on their trying to enter administration. Several of the administrators interviewed for this study had parents that were educators. Sunshine talked about the support she received from her parents: “They know that there aren’t a lot of women in principalships of schools this size, and, you know, they’re very proud and they’ve always been supportive of everything that we do.” Carol said her family supported her through “constant

encouragement, even through disappointment. Because there are other educators in my extended family, having a high school principal in the family brings a great sense of pride and accomplishment to all.” Bonnie pointed out the importance of her parents’ being in education: “My parents, who were in education, they were both teachers and coaches here in the system. So they have always been very, very supportive of anything I’ve done.” BP discussed the support she received: “They were always extremely supportive. My parents have always been very pro education.” Susie described the support from her parents, both educators, and her sister, who was also a principal: “My sister is a principal next door at Madison School. We support each other, and my parents have always supported my sister and I [sic].” LFB also had a supportive family: “I come from a family of educators. My mother was a teacher, aunts all teachers.”

Moreover, the female administrators whose parents were educators seemed to have a drive to enter educational leadership positions. Parents and children had carried out generational professions, each one making it further in the profession. Familial support was noted as an essential element to the success of the participants.

### *Spousal Support*

Findings from the study are consistent with the literature in regard to the importance of spousal support for women leaders. According to Loder (2005), a lack of spousal support usually ends a female’s ambitions for educational leadership. The majority of female participants in this study had very supportive spouses. According to ZT, a high school principal, “it helped because my spouse is also in education, so he had an understanding of some of the demands.” An assistant principal, Kathy, expressed it this way:

My husband stepped up and played the, took, the dominant parent role while I worked on my master's program. So that was not easy with three kids, because he worked full-time as well; but he stepped up and took over a lot of the domestic responsibilities.

BP discussed the importance of her spouse:

My husband understands my job responsibilities and the amount of time that I work at night attending various school sports and activities. He has a responsible position in his field, which demands long hours as well. He understands the hours that I put in. So, it's kind of like, well, you do the same thing so...he's very understanding.

Spouses seemed to understand the time demands of the high school administrative team. According to the participants, husbands were assuming household and child-rearing responsibilities as well as making financial sacrifices. All in all, the husbands depicted here seemed to have a true understanding of the demanding positions their wives held.

### *Work-Family Conflict*

Women are concerned about missing out on either the opportunity for motherhood or the opportunity for a career. According to the literature, women are not attempting to coexist in the roles of mother and instructional leader (Glass et al., 2000).

Carol presented the most interesting self-reflection in her reflective journal entry regarding the decision between the two tracks:

I'm at a personal crossroads with my decision to have children. Professionally, I am exactly where I want to be. However, depending on what the future holds for my personal life (marriage and family), I am torn between my desire to have a family and still maintain the demanding schedule of the high school principalship.

The next interview question about family asked, "Does family take priority over career?" Each administrator quickly answered "yes." Administrators gave examples of times they had taken time off from work for family obligations or had let family needs take priority over their jobs. ZT described taking off from work to attend to a close family member:



The death of my sister: I took off probably close to a week, I think, and the same with a medical procedure with my mother recently. I had to take off a week to assist her. So they weren't long periods of time, but...and I think early in my career, it would have been a lot more difficult for me to do that...that there are things that are more important so it's easier to put family first and career second.

BP described making decisions when family and work events conflicted:

There have been conflicts. For example, I may have had a responsibility where I had to be at a school function and it may have been someone's birthday. So there have been times where I really had to balance and make some hard choices...as far as what I attended and what I didn't. A lot of times family won out because to me, you know, my family is only here for so long and, you know, this job was a choice.

Susie reported that although her family obligations and her job always conflicted, she found a way to make it work. She said, "It's about striking balance, you know.

I...don't like to say family interferes with job or job interferes with family. To me it's just balancing it out." AP Samantha described the conflict this way: "Yeah, as far as just everyone sacrifices time, and even now, just if I have to go to class and they have to go to choir rehearsal, they'll get there 2 hours early because I can't do both."

The work-family conflict is especially present for women. As noted in the literature, the high school principalship is designed for a man who has a wife at home to take care of domestic responsibilities (Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006). Carol discussed her parents' feelings about her becoming a principal: "I don't think that their intent was malicious, but I do think that, because of what they see as the traditional role of the principal, they see a principal as a male....I don't know that they could visualize me in the principalship role." Therefore, according to the history of the principalship, traditional thinking holds that a male is less likely than a female to miss a work event for a family event (Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer). The fact that some principals expressed a "family

first” mentality was a refreshing finding. Many female administrators reported being able to switch events so they could attend their families’ functions.

### *Mentoring*

Mentoring was divided into the following themes: formal mentoring, informal mentoring, and district mentoring programs. The researcher asked each administrator (a) whether or not she had had a mentor who encouraged her as she moved along the pathway toward administration, (b) what type of experiences she had undergone with formal and informal mentoring, (c) whether any mentor had presented himself or herself as an obstacle, and (d) whether or not she currently saw herself as a mentor.

#### *Formal Mentoring*

First, the researcher discussed the school districts’ formal mentoring programs, which varied within each school district. Some of the principals had never had formal mentors, whereas others had been assigned formal mentors by their school districts. Sunshine talked about not having a formal mentor when she first became a principal: “Throughout my administrative educational process and then in my first few years as a principal, I did not have a real assigned mentor. I do think it may have been helpful in the early going...Lincoln School District made no offers.” When the researcher asked ZT about formal mentoring programs in the school district, she replied, “Formal ones? No. Not mentoring.” Next, the researcher asked each administrator whether or not she had a mentor to help her in her current position. Carol, a principal beginning her 3<sup>rd</sup> year, discussed her school district’s formal mentoring program: “As a new principal, we are assigned an experienced principal in the district, and Ms. Smith served as mine at Lyndon Johnson High School this past year.” Susie said she formally mentored individuals: “Oh

yeah. I've had a lot of mentees throughout the years, formally. Yes, I have." Bonnie, a 1<sup>st</sup>-year principal in the same school district as Carol, stated, "I need to fill out the paperwork for that because the system does have a program in place where they match up the new principals." BP, an assistant principal in the same district as ZT, discussed her school district's formal academy for administrators: "The only formal program I ever went through is—the school system had an advanced leadership academy." Ironically, ZT did not consider the academy to be a formal mentoring program: "Yeah, we have a leadership academy but I don't see that as a mentoring program."

In summary, one school district in the South Hampton Roads area of Virginia assigned formal mentors to their new principals and assistant principals. Other definitions of formal mentoring were unclear. Several administrators mentioned a leadership academy, which could be a formal mentoring program. From the researcher's perspective, this academy appeared to be more of a staff development program as no mentors were assigned and there were different presenters each week.

### *Informal Mentoring*

Next, the researcher discussed informal mentoring with each interviewee. Each participant reported having an informal mentor at one time or another in her leadership role. Most of the administrators described principals, central office administrators, or college professors as their mentors. Carol discussed her experiences with an informal mentor:

I also had a mentor, the principal at Kennedy High School, who served as an incredible inspiration to me. He knew I wanted, he knew that I had the leadership qualities, to be a principal, so he gave me increasing responsibilities to assure that I would be so ready for the position. And when I looked back, he was absolutely right.

Jean described her informal mentoring experiences as “remarkable” and stated that she had learned a great deal from other administrators:

You know, I’ve had so much support and so many positive people, you know, and sure, I’ve learned some things that I wouldn’t do from my mentors, you know, by watching. And I’ve learned some things that I would do and some things that I would do differently.

Kathy explained the sizable role her assistant principal mentor played in her development:

I did...when I was teaching and I was doing the administrative part-time during one of the planning blocks every day. He was an assistant principal, and he very much mentored me and encouraged and guided me. So, yes, definitely.

Jennifer said she also had informal mentors who worked in central office. She described two mentors: “There are people who are downtown who are mentors, but not day-to-day, high-contact people. They are the people who say you know you are going to do it; they are the encouragers.” Bonnie explained the mentoring relationship between her principal and herself. She clarified the relationship:

I looked towards my principal at Woodrow Wilson High School, that I worked with, as my mentor. I think he was a wonderful example to follow as a principal and I call him, I tease him, I call him nearly every day now since I’ve been here, asking questions and stuff.

Jean sought out a mentor to learn administrative duties during her planning period:

I let my principal know that I was prepared to intern prior to doing the actual internship. I said I’m done with my classes; if you need something, let me know. And I had an assistant principal who is very generous and allowed me to use my lunchtime and my planning time to work with her.

It was clear from Carol that her mentor sought her out; however, Jean found it necessary to seek her own involvement with leadership roles. The interviewed women discussed initiation of the informal mentor relationship, with about half reporting having to initiate the mentoring relationship. This pattern is consistent with literature and

highlights the differences in mentoring experiences between men and women in educational leadership (Sherman, 2005).

### *Personal Mentoring Experience*

Each administrator saw herself in her mentor and tried to adopt the leadership styles and attributes of the mentor. The researcher asked each administrator if she was a current mentor to anyone in the building seeking a leadership role. Sunshine mentioned that she mentored students from the universities:

I have been a mentor for one graduate student at Richmond University and one graduate student at Virginia State College in administration. They're both working well; one has completed her administrative license and the other one's working on her administration.

LFB highlighted the way she viewed herself as a mentor to her assistant principals:

I see myself as a mentor to my assistant principals. There are a couple of teachers who are taking courses to become administrators, but they are mainly being mentored by the assistant principals.

Kathy pointed out her mentoring of interns from local universities in her building: "I've had two deans from the MMU cohort program here through HRU and the Jefferson City schools, and I've worked—they've been an intern for me twice. So I do mentor the interns, the administrative interns."

Some female principals considered themselves to be mentors to their assistant principals, whereas others described their mentoring of interns and graduate students. One assistant principal mentioned mentoring a teacher wanting to enter leadership to help her advance along her pathway.

### *Mentor Barriers*

Next, the researcher asked each participant if there had ever been a mentor who had been a barrier to her entrance into a leadership position. Kathy described her experience with a principal:

Well, there was another principal in the same school that seemed to...when I talked with her about possibly going into the administration area,...she encouraged me and said yes, you'd be absolutely fantastic. But then when I was hired...she quit encouraging me and...it's like she was annoyed with me. She even called me a liar once. I've never lied to her, ever, but someone had told her something.

Susie had a mentor who ultimately became an obstacle to her development:

Sometimes the higher up you go, the more competitive things can be when jobs open. Sometimes you're competing against people that helped develop you and that's tough, and you really depend on the developer and the developpee to be highly professional, and there was a point where I kind of questioned loyalty.

The stories of these women seem to indicate jealousy with regard to the mentee's speedy advancement. Unfortunately, these findings are similar to the findings in the literature regarding the queen bee syndrome: when women leaders try to keep other women down (Shakeshaft, 1989).

### *Networking*

Most women do not have a true understanding of what it means to network (Sherman, 2005). Typically, to women, networking means speaking with other women, discussing the issues, and greeting everyone at events; however, a man's networking is entirely different according to the literature (Evans, 2001). Men network by going out to dinner, playing golf, and taking one another to sporting events. Many of the women interviewed in this study held a perception of networking based upon the aforementioned definition; discussion of this perception is presented with regard to networking strategies. ZT said networking by a woman can be viewed as an aggressive activity: "I think you

have to be real careful with networking. I mean, networking is good to get information, to know what's out there and what might be available, but to network to get a position I think could get...could be perceived the wrong way." ZT continued by saying, "Might be just a little too assertive."

### *Good-Old-Boys Network*

The good-old-boys network is defined as a group of individuals who have controlled the school district for a long period of time. Participants' reactions were mixed regarding whether or not a good-old-boys network still existed. In three of the school districts, the answer was "Absolutely, yes." Sunshine described how she had been a victim of the good old boys in her school district when she was not appointed to an administrative position over a period of 14 years:

I think I got caught up in the good-old-boy...situation and I wasn't a good old boy, and I do believe that because I was not a Hampton Roads University student, I did not get a job. Almost every administrator at that time had been through the HRU at one level or another, and they were very cliquey and had, you know, spots reserved and saved for the HRU students when they got their degrees.

ZT's response was immediate, "Absolutely. Where male opinions still counts, I don't want to say counts more, but maybe weighs more." Kathy confirmed existence of the good-old-boys network in her school district:

Yes, there is a good-old-boys network within our school district. However, on occasion, I have seen someone get a position because of who they knew even though they are not viewed as a great administrator....I don't know how to put it. May not be go-getters but because they've been in the system for a long time, they've been promoted, which can create less than the best. It's not acceptable.

In the remaining school districts, the good-old-boys network was less obvious to the administrators. Carol pointed out the perception in her district:

So there's always the perception of the good-old-boy network, but I think we're starting to move away, where the decision makers who sit in those positions to make...that have the authority to choose the principals, they're looking for a very

different kind of principal more than just the good old boy. They're looking for instructional leaders, which, you know, the good-old-boy network doesn't always have those instructional leaders.

Jennifer was from a different school district and was on the fence about the network in her district: "There is and there isn't because the superintendents come and go as often as they do. Those kind of get shaken up. However, there are key players who stay key players." LFB was from a third school district, and she did not see the presence of any good-old-boys network: "Not anymore. Not a good-old-boys network."

The next question the researcher asked was whether the good-old-boys network acted as a resource or a barrier to their obtaining the principalship or assistant principalship. Principal Carol argued they were a resource to her based upon the way she studied them:

I'd say it was a resource because then I started to observe the people that I perceive to be in the good-old-boy network and perceive what made them, you know, what qualities or what kinds of leadership opportunities were they involved in...that I could become a part of.

Assistant principal Kathy said the good old boy could be either a resource or a barrier depending on the person: "Oh, it could be both [be]cause you know, of course, if you're aspiring to be a high school principal, and you've been here a long time, and you know people you network, that's going to help you reach your goal." It is obvious that the good-old-boys network was alive and well in two of the school districts. In the remaining three districts, it seemed to have dissipated or to be on the way out.

### *Gatekeepers*

Gatekeepers are members of the good-old-boys network who reserve administrative positions for specific individuals. One principal acknowledged the good old boys' acting as gatekeepers to administrative positions. ZT noted that the decision



makers in her district were all male: “Well, I guess for the most part, because the people that make the decisions are males. Ironically, the women who did not have to apply for their administrative position[s] seemed to have been “tapped,” meaning the positions were being held for them by a gatekeeper. Sunshine said, “I was principal at the early childhood school for 2 years, and the superintendent told me I needed to come and take this job.” ZT described the application process in her school district:

When positions came open, they were just appointments. You could express your desire every year to the superintendent of what you wanted to do, and you could still do that but, you know, they don’t post the position, and therefore you don’t apply for any particular position.

Bonnie said, “Well, the superintendent called me in his office and told me he had this position.... He wanted me to take it.” Sunshine believed the reason she never obtained an administrative job in the school district in which she taught for 14 years was due to a particular member on the hiring committee: “Yeah, there was a person on that interview panel that clearly didn’t like me for 14 years.” Samantha discussed the importance of having a gatekeeper for administrative positions:

No, no, but you need a gatekeeper regardless..., you specify by saying someone is basically holding back for a friend, but you need someone to guard...who’s going into administration because you want the effective, instructional data-driven leader.

Some of the female administrators interviewed for this study did not perceive any gatekeepers to administrative positions other than the superintendent and department of human resources. The notion of tapping individuals for administrative positions seemed to be most prevalent in the school districts in which the good-old-boys network was very present. One principal discussed a good-old-boys network that included a woman. The woman had been in the district for a long period of time and held as much power as a

male member of the network. It seemed that tapping was still occurring in the districts; the gatekeepers were choosing very specific candidates for positions, male and female.

### *Networking Strategies*

Each principal was asked how she used networking to obtain her current position. The principals described indirect networking strategies. LFB said, “Probably indirectly, yes, we would, I would talk to other administrators at meetings, at conferences, get their input on what duties and responsibilities they had.” ZT described the connections she made with the PTA and their lasting networking effects: “You know that was a sense of networking that I did, and I didn’t really realize I was doing it at the time.” Each assistant principal was asked how she would use networking in seeking a high school principalship. One assistant principal, Kathy, began her own networking system for women in her school district. She described the program:

I started a networking for the women assistant principals.... It hasn’t taken off very well. We’ve only met about three times but I...call it the Women of Leadership, and I invited all of the female assistant principals to just kind of start networking.

Summer was using networking regularly to promote herself: “I’ve used it already, since I’ve been here. Well, everywhere I go, I’ve networked.” Jennifer discussed her networking strategies:

Well you always network. There’s no time you don’t, even when you’re a teacher. The problem is I’m not good at networking unless it’s with folks I like. I’m polite and pleasant to everybody else, but I have a hard time being something that I’m not. That’s something I need to work on [laughing]. But you always end up networking, because you always end up talking to people.

Bonnie discussed networking to be seen as a leader:

You kind of have to figure out where you want to be before you get there and sort of, in my mind, and I don’t know if everybody does this, but if I want to be, like, if I wanted to be a principal, I’m like okay, this is how I need to act to be a principal.

Susie was the only female principal who really discussed networking in a manner similar to a man's, noting how important it was to her, as a female principal:

But I'll tell you..., the power of networking is absolutely critical, and I've learned that since I've been here, not so much good-old-boy networking but just networking, period. Especially for women it's really, really important. I actually started playing golf this summer and have done a little bit of research locally on women's golf organizations. It's crazy, unbelievable. There's so much out there. Women for women.

Susie continued to discuss her informal network with other female administrators:

We share stories and we rely on each other. Not that we intentionally exclude men, but we...women kind of have their thing going on. You know, we, we rely on each other and when we get a group of girls you can trust, it's golden.

As discussed previously, it seems the definitions of network varied from one administrator to another. Also, some of the female administrators had attempted to network, but only principal Susie and assistant principal Kathy seemed to really grasp the importance of networking and being active in trying to promote oneself.

### *Career Aspirations*

Each assistant principal was asked to describe her career aspirations toward the high school principalship. She was asked about her aspirations, any barriers she foresaw in obtaining a high school principalship, and how she planned to overcome any barriers.

### *Principalship*

When the career aspirations were discussed among the female high school assistant principals, Jennifer, Kathy, Jean, and Summer indicated the high school principalship as their career path. At the time of the study, Samantha was unsure of her career path upon completion of her doctoral coursework, and BP said she was happy in her current position and would investigate other areas of education. Jennifer described her pathway to the principalship:

I'd like to eventually be a high school principal. High school is a very hard place to get into unless you've been a principal at a different level, so I would probably start at a middle school and work my way back up to be a high school principal.

Kathy discussed the enjoyment she received from holding a higher position: "I really enjoyed doing that; I really loved that job, so my aspiration is either to return to that position or to be a high school or middle school principal." Summer wanted to move up the career ladder into the high school principalship and perhaps even the assistant superintendency. Summer expressed her goal in the following manner: "I do, I aspire to be a principal. Maybe even later an assistant superintendent or superintendent." Jean currently aspired to the high school principalship, which was a new direction for her; 5 years ago, she had thought she would retire as an assistant principal.

The career aspirations of the assistant principals helped to increase the validity of the data for this study. The experiences of these female assistant principals shed light on the pathway from a different perspective. These women were trying to break through barriers to attain their desired positions. These are their stories, not just the stories of successful female high school principals.

### *Barriers to the Principalship as Experienced by Assistant Principals*

Each assistant principal seeking a high school principalship identified barriers she will most likely have to overcome. Kathy noted that she was still considered new to her school district, having come from another district 2 years ago: "The barrier I have is because I'm new to the system and that's a...barrier because, well, because the good-old-boys system is here, but I work very hard." Jennifer had interviewed three times but had not been selected for a principalship position. Summer had applied for the principalship three times. She summed it up: "There are going to be younger, more energetic ones out

there and, you know, even mature ones who can, with a lot more experience than I have so....” Jean also described the limited opportunities for becoming a high school principal. She said, “The biggest barrier that lies with becoming a principal is that there is a large pool and a small amount of positions. You know, as you have fewer positions, you have like the lottery, you know.”

Barriers included participants’ being new to their districts, good-old-boys networks, and the few positions’ opening each year; however, the barriers of timing were those which most of these women planned to overcome.

### *Overcoming the Barriers*

The assistant principals described their plans to overcome the barriers. Kathy described her plan: “I’m a very hard worker. I try to do the very best, create new programs, and make myself known. You know, try to be innovative and creative. Make myself known and do a really good job.” Jennifer had spoken with other administrators in central office to grasp a concept of her future: “The people that I work with downtown have told me I would be a principal one day, which is nice, and it’s just finding that slot.” Jean was going to continue to pursue the high school principalship even though she knew the odds were not in her favor: “Yeah. I’m going to keep working as hard as I can. I’m... I like hard work, I like a challenge. I’m never going to use that as an excuse.” Summer planned on overcoming the obstacles by continuing her education. She wanted to get her name out there: “Well, things that I am doing right now, such as making sure that people do know who I am in the division. Committees and writing a couple of articles and having them published.”

The plans to overcome the barriers corresponded to many of the solutions principals had identified for trying to enter leadership positions. The assistant principals identified committee work, getting published, discussing their interviews with the panel, and getting their names out there.

### *Solutions*

Each administrator was asked to recommend solutions for women aspiring to the high school principalship. Each was asked to discuss the one factor that allowed her to move into a high school principalship and to describe its importance. Each principal and each assistant principal was asked to provide additional advice for women trying to enter administration. The three main ideas set forth included increased involvement and visibility, being an educational leader, and being the right fit for the job.

### *Factors for Success*

The researcher asked each administrator, “What do you think was the one contributing factor that allowed you to become a high school principal (assistant principal)?” Sunshine believed it was her outgoing personality. She said, “I think I’m very outgoing. I’m always optimistic and at the same time command the respect of those that I work with, and I think that’s what the superintendent needed.” Bonnie believed the most important factor was her problem-solving capabilities. She noted, “I think my ability to listen, to talk and solve problems, and, you know, show on paper student success that is a direct result of different policies I have implemented in the school.” LFB thought her community involvement and the importance of her being a native of the locality in which the school district was located was significant. Jennifer thought it was her instructional knowledge: “The one contributing factor was probably my knowledge. I

was actually looking for an API position, so I wanted a lot of instruction included in it.”

Susie pointed out the importance of building relationships:

Having built relationships with people over time, who knew my work and knew I could handle the challenge. If you know people on a personal level, it helps. I have put myself in positions where I’ve been able to build relationships with the superintendent and senior leadership.

In summary, important traits for a female desiring to enter secondary school administration include personality, problem-solving capability, community understanding, and instructional expertise.

### *Increased Involvement and Visibility*

When asked for additional advice, the female administrators presented several ideas about the characteristics of an individual likely to be moved into a leadership role. Getting involved in the school seemed to be the most important: coaching sports, sponsoring clubs, chaperoning events, learning administrative responsibilities, and taking on extra responsibilities without being asked. For example, a teacher seeking an administrative position might help with cafeteria duty, the bus lane, lockers, book collections, events, and ceremonies. ZT highlighted the importance of school involvement: “Get as much experience as you can while you are in your classroom position, get involved in the school; do as much as you can because that’s how people see your abilities.” Carol believed visibility by administrators significantly increases one’s chances of becoming an instructional leader:

Some of the advice that I would give is certainly to be active in the sense of visibility, leading committees. I think some of the experiences at the high school level are key to understanding the instructional role of the principal, for instance, master schedule responsibilities, special education responsibilities.

Kathy considered it crucial to be on committees throughout the district to increase visibility. She said,

So take the time to network, take the time to be on committees and get yourself known. I am on a big committee here but on the district...you know, make sure you get into those situations where you can contribute.

Furthermore, the advice offered by female administrators included being able to be more than one person at a time. The job is a constant juggling act, which includes not only teaching but also performing extra duties, furthering one's education, assuming increased responsibility, being visible on the district and local levels, and earning school board recognition.

### *Educational Leadership*

The administrators interviewed for this study highlighted the importance of one's being an instructional leader rather than a manager. Bonnie mentioned being a source of motivation for teachers:

I think I would say build relationships, build trust, build a situation where people respect you and can turn to you to get something done, and make sure you produce things that are inspiring for students and the teachers that you work with. In other words, don't just fill a seat and work at a desk and answer the phone. Actually show that you've made a difference in your job.

Summer pointed out that one must be an instructional leader; one cannot simply be trained. She said, "Sometimes it's not you just wanting to be a good leader, an instructional leader, but as someone who sees you as an instructional leader." LFB noted the critical aspects of being innovative in today's school systems: "Administrators coming into the field now have to be quite innovative. Status quo doesn't work in today's student population." Kathy also mentioned innovation during her interview; she said, "Work hard, work very hard, be innovative, assess situations, and come up with a plan on how to show improvement...believe in yourself."



As an educational leader, one must enter the situation with the idea of leading the school, staff, and students. Simply being a manager no longer applies in today's school setting. In keeping with the literature, this phenomenon is known as being a super-hero principal; one no longer just manages, one leads (Copland, 2001).

### *Right Fit*

The notion of being patient and waiting for a position that is the right fit entered the discussion with four of the female administrators. Carol really believed her situation represented the correct position and timing for her to enter the high school principalship:

When I wasn't getting the looks in terms of the principalship, yes, I subscribe to, you know, what everyone else says about the good-old-boys network. I'm probably the poster child being able to say that there is something to be said about the right fit. Be patient. There's nothing more rewarding than being the right principal for the right school.

Jennifer said, "Eventually the right fit will come along. I have faith." Summer explained, "I think there is a process that we have to go and you can't just let anyone in who may not be able to be a good fit for the school, the school division, or for the students."

Being the right fit at the right time appears to be a difficult barrier to overcome. As Carol pointed out, there are only so many high schools and so many openings; therefore, being patient is key. In some instances, the notion of the right fit may simply be a way to delay career mobility for particular individuals, whereas others who may not be the better candidates are awarded the positions.

### *Conclusion*

The overall findings were consistent with the literature. The majority of the female high school principals did not have children. On the other hand, many of the female assistant principals did have children and had spent more than 20 years in the

classroom before entering administration. Over and over again, the women discussed the importance of their having spousal and parental support to be able to serve successfully as principals. The participants discussed the important roles their informal mentors played in their development. Some of the women spoke of regrettable experiences in which their mentors acted as barriers along their pathway. Additionally, several of the women confirmed the continued existence of the good-old-boys network within the area's school divisions. The solutions presented by the female secondary administrators shed light on the pathway toward advancement.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

#### *Summary of Results*

The literature highlighted the negative stereotypes that precede women who are trying to enter the field of educational administration (Bailyn, 2000; Glass et al., 2000; Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006; Loder, 2005; Young & McLeod, 2001). Scholars discussed marriage and family responsibilities, time constraints (Bailyn; Glass et al.; Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer; Loder; Young & McLeod), mentoring, and the good-old-boys networks that are still in existence (Sherman et al., 2008). The purpose of this study was to expose the barriers to the high school principalship experienced by women and to highlight the successful pathways of female high school principals for the benefit of other women trying to enter the field. In addition, interviews with female assistant principals who aspired to the principalship offered additional insight into secondary educational leadership.

The women interviewed in this study wanted women aspiring to the principalship to know that the hours are long and the stress levels are high. They received support from families, spouses, and coworkers to persevere through the demanding role of the high school principalship. They warned the aspirants not to expect to be treated differently because of their gender with regard to the job demands for their time beyond the traditional 40-hour work week; in addition to the instructional day, after-school, evening, and weekend activities demand their attention. Some women have found the time to have both families and careers, whereas others have chosen not to have children.

### *Summary of Methodology*

This researcher employed qualitative methods and triangulation of data through the use of interviews and reflective journal analysis (Patton, 2002). The research was based on critical feminist theory because the theory advocates transformational leadership and attempts to show how past injustices have shaped people's views (Barber & Allen, 1992; Maher, 1987; Patton). Critical feminist theory was best for this topic because the study examined the past injustices endured by women attempting to enter administration in education, as well as the politics and gender bias involved in networking and mentoring; the study was designed to provide women with guidance along their ascent on the professional ladder (Barber & Allen; Maher; Patton). The interview protocol and coding process employed the use of modified grounded theory due to the thematic nature of the interview protocol, which was developed from themes that emerged during the literature review (Patton). The researcher interviewed six female high school principals and six female high school assistant principals in South Hampton Roads, Virginia between June and August 2009. Each interview was coded and interpreted by the researcher. The emergent interview themes were developed into a code set that reflected the themes identified in the literature.

### *Significance of Themes*

#### *Pathways*

The results of this qualitative study depict women principals as driven. The average age of the female principals, as well as the average age of the female assistant principals, depicts the significance of one's age upon entering the pathway to the principalship. One reason the female assistant principals waited to enter the position was

the ages of their children; the women wanted to wait until their children were older before they entered administration. More than half of the female assistant principals spent more than 16 years in the classroom before entering administration. This pattern is consistent with the literature, which indicated that women wait to enter administration whereas men do so in their late 20s or early 30s (Glass et al., 2000). Significantly, women continue to put their careers on hold until later in life while men are entering into school administration earlier in life. Therefore women will have continued difficulty in advancing to the highest levels of school administration if their career paths are delayed. In order to reverse the pattern of women delaying their careers, school districts should begin to offer child care programs to their female employees. Local universities could participate by allowing their early childhood students to intern and gain experience in the school district. It is interesting to note that critical feminist scholars have criticized the nature of women as family caregivers and the nature of women's work, in that the women, who choose to stay at home, are being denied their voice by patriarchal demands (Smith, 1987). In order to grow a younger generation of female administrators, universities should begin to promote their master's programs in educational leadership within the local school districts and focus on recruiting younger applicants.

The principals varied with regard to classroom time; their years of classroom experience ranged from as low as 5 years to as high as 20 years. The variance in their ages did not separate the family-oriented women from the career-driven. In fact, Susie, the second youngest female principal, had younger children, and LFB the oldest female principal, who had spent 20 years in the classroom, had no children. Susie represented an exception to the stereotype of a woman's remaining in the classroom until her children

are older. The female principals' ages at entry into administration varied; however, two of the principals, Carol and Susie, were fairly young when they entered administration and were the two youngest principals interviewed for this study. The significance of their age lies in the fact that they did not follow the "norm." They were both female high school principals under the age of 40. Critical feminists might argue that exploration of the lives of these two principals has uncovered a successful pathway to the principalship that was previously unexplored (Maher, 1987). In other words, women can enter the assistant principalship and the high school principalship at a younger age and still be successful on their pathway.

As educators, the women modeled the importance of education through their accomplishments. Four of the six high school principals had obtained doctoral degrees, and the remaining two held educational specialist degrees. Two of the assistant principals held educational specialist degrees and were working toward doctoral degrees. These education levels are significant in that they indicate the need for women aspiring to the principalship to move beyond a master's degree, which is the basic requirement, and work toward a doctoral degree to make themselves stand out as exceptional candidates. These women recognized the necessity of being notably exceptional candidates to be able to compete with their male counterparts. Ragin (1987) contended that women must focus on equity in an attempt to change the distribution of power within the institution; therefore, to effect change, women must obtain advanced degrees to be able to compete on a level playing field. Interestingly, more than half of the women interviewed for this study came from a math or science background. Additionally 50% of the female high school principals came from a special education background. These findings emphasize

the importance of a building principal's being well versed in special education law and having deductive reasoning skills.

Two of the principals discussed how they considered their age to be a barrier in trying to enter the high school principalship. One perceived that she was overlooked because she was too young at the age of 36; the other thought perhaps she was considered to be past her prime at 51 years of age. Although both were ultimately appointed to the principalship, at one time each had perceived her age to be a factor. Principal Carol even mentioned her race as a barrier because the suburban district by which she was employed had never had an Asian principal before, either male or female. The administrators in some of the school districts in South Hampton Roads, Virginia had followed a traditional pathway: applying for a principalship, interviewing, and earning the position. Sunshine described how she had been interviewed for an administrative position 14 times but had never been moved into an assistant principalship before she left the district. Sunshine displayed the inability to break through the gatekeepers in this school district before being accepted by another school district. In the original school district in which she was employed, the good-old-boys network had a firm grasp on administrative positions. In order to promote change, university professors from educational leadership and administration programs could be included on the hiring committees of local school districts in order to promote equality amongst candidates and begin to break down the good-old-boys who have been in control for too long. Other principals discussed being asked to apply or being tapped for the position when the time was right. The impact of tapping reflects a long line of good old boys, whether or not they are acknowledged as such. When administrative positions are not open for application, they are being reserved.

Lorber (2005) challenged the perception of women's inferior status in educational administration and critiqued the cultural politics present in many school districts. Women must become change agents within their school districts and join together to alleviate discrimination.

### *Family*

Four of the six principals interviewed for this study had no children. The assistant principals had remained in the classroom when their children were younger and had not entered administration until their children were in school or, in some cases, until they were young adults. These female administrators admitted to the overwhelming workload of the principalship, as did the assistant principals, but they seemed to have found a way to not let it interfere with their families. Over and over again during the interviews, women discussed the importance of having spouses' and other family members' support to be able to serve successfully as principals. According to Sandoval (1991), women's voices reflect the circumstances revolving around their everyday lives, including their support systems; these study results affirm that assertion. Smith (1987) noted the strength in feminist theory, which allows women to explain their feelings about family without destroying the family structure.

Eight of the twelve interviewed women were married, thereby representing a phenomenon that has not been discussed often in the literature. There is a stereotype with which women must contend: If they are career-driven women, family is not usually a priority for them. It was not surprising to the researcher that four of the six interviewed principals had no children. According to Glasser et al. (2000), female principals, particularly high school principals, do not have children because they have chosen a



career track rather than the mommy track described in the literature. Only one of these female high school principals had children between the ages of 6 and 10 when she entered administration. All of the assistant principals had waited until their children were over the age of 11 before leaving the classroom; this finding is consistent with the literature (Loder, 2005). Effects of the time demands of high school principalship explain why women continue to choose one role or the other. Such women have been described as trying to be on both tracks simultaneously or waiting for the mommy track to end before embarking on the career track once again (Glass et al.). In order to promote change, and end the notion of the super-hero principal, school districts and university must attempt to develop co-principalships or dual principals where time is shared and cut back from 60 to 80 hours a week to 40 to 60 hours a week so a female can fulfill all roles including principal, wife, and mother. Critical feminist theorists have argued that women must begin to challenge the traditional framework of the father figure and the stay-at-home mom. They have asserted that understanding the family's dynamics and relationships allows some women to accept nontraditional roles (Smith, 1987; Allen, 2001)

The interviewed women discussed the importance of placing family before career. All of the women indicated that they put family first, stating that their employment atmosphere allowed them the flexibility to be able to attend after-school activities and family functions. ZT mentioned putting stress on herself early in her career to be able to keep her job as the priority. She reported putting only major life events, such as a death in the family, before her career, whereas the assistant principals discussed not missing their children's sporting events or choir rehearsals. Although all the women said they put

family first, their definitions of that concept were clearly on different levels. In addition, the women discussed being able to balance family and work. Over and over again, the administrators discussed finding a way to balance everything. Loder (2005) noted a woman's difficulty in trying to achieve balance between her domestic role and her role as a high school principal. Because of the women's difficulty in maintaining this balance, family and spousal support were crucial to their success. Women mentioned their husbands' taking on the domestic and child responsibilities while they were at work (Loder); this notion was clear in the literature, which described the high school principalship as being designed for a man with domestic support at home (Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006). Critical feminism emphasizes the importance of power for women in their family structure. According to Smith (1987), spousal support and other family arrangements can transform the lives of female principals.

### *Mentoring*

Findings from this study revealed that most of the female administrators did not have experience with formal mentoring programs specific to administration. Two of the principals that were new to the position each mentioned being formally placed with a veteran female high school principal. Their formal mentors met with them three times throughout the 1st year. Another assistant principal mentioned the same scenario with a veteran female assistant principal when she had first entered administration. It is important to note that these three women were all in the same suburban school district in South Hampton Roads. The findings in this regard are consistent with the literature reporting that many aspiring female administrators do not have experiences with formal mentoring programs (Sherman et al., 2008). Lather (1991) rationalized the importance of

critical feminist theorists' work to correct the invisibility of women, to alter the female experience, and to end women's inequality in positions of authority. Formal mentoring programs represent one way to better prepare women as educational leaders and balance their representation in secondary administration.

Other principals and assistant principals mentioned having to go through specific leadership academies before becoming administrators. Although leadership academies were mentioned in three of the school districts, there was some confusion over the purpose of these programs. One principal did not view the academy as a mentoring program, whereas an assistant principal in the same district did perceive it as such. According to the researcher's understanding, the leadership academy sessions were similar to leadership classes in which a school district describes the way things are done, with different sessions' being led by leaders in the district. No mentors are assigned to new or aspiring administrators. School districts in Virginia are providing these leadership academies to future administrators in their districts with the hope of growing their own to prepare for shortages. Programs vary across districts, but all strive to mold future leaders according to district expectations (Sherman et al., 2008). Goodman (1992) claimed that feminist theory becomes a form of cultural politics and resists the fight to produce a more democratic reality within the school system. Grow-your-own programs have the capability to create more democratic and just systems for women; however, these academies must make every effort to foster equality and not to revert back to the White male norm. It was interesting to note that one school district in the study did not post open administrative positions to the public. The idea of grow-your-own administrators within the district seemed to be that district's pathway.

In contrast, informal mentoring was noted by participants as a significant step to the principalship. According to Darwin (2000), informal mentoring has been used for centuries in trying to develop potential educational leaders. When asked to describe mentors who assisted in the attainment of a principalship, every female administrator discussed the importance of her informal mentor in encouraging her to become an administrator. Some of these informal mentors encouraged the women to take classes, whereas others taught them important skills in areas such as discipline, finance, and scheduling. Many of the women interviewed for this study indicated that their mentors initiated the relationships, whereas others found it necessary to seek their own opportunities for leadership. One assistant principal, Jean, described how she asked for leadership opportunities in her building. It is noteworthy that the majority of the participants were selected by informal mentors; they did not have to seek leadership opportunities. In a previous study conducted by Sherman et al. (2008), the female principals reported having to find their own mentors, whereas the male participants had been approached by district leaders for mentorships. Spender (1995) advocated diversity within the educational setting, noting the prevalence of a male-dominated viewpoint, which was also noted in the study conducted by Sherman et al. It appears that women are being considered more often than indicated by the literature. The findings of this study demonstrate women's empowerment and portray women's finding balance within the institution of education. High-level administrators in school districts are no longer passing over the women for male counterparts in their districts. Women are being at least informally mentored alongside males. These female principals reported unsolicited, but appreciated, encouragement from supervisors.

A few of the female administrators discussed mentors who ultimately became barriers to their development. The notion of a mentor's becoming a barrier was also reported by Sherman et al. (2008). Participants in this study reported that their mentors (male and female) ultimately became jealous of their success and tried to inhibit their advancement. These mentors resented their mentees' not needing them and, ultimately, discontinued contact. This phenomenon was noted in the literature as the queen bee syndrome, a situation in which female administrators feel threatened by other females (Shakeshaft, 1989). A male mentor's becoming resentful of his female mentee was not discussed in the literature. Nevertheless, the literature did address the gender issue between male and female educational administrators and the phenomenon of men's wanting other men to be promoted (Tallerico, 2000). In this case, it appeared that the man sought out the woman as a mentee but did not like her quick rise to power. In a 1996 study, Morris aimed to develop women's awareness and encourage them to evaluate the male-dominated structure that had restricted them from administrative appointments and to strive to establish a gender balance in mentorships.

The principals in this study viewed themselves as mentors to their assistant principals and to college administrative interns. The significance of women's mentoring other women lies in their ability to offer insight into the principalship from a woman's perspective. These principals mentioned wanting to give back to the community and develop future generations of women leaders. Within feminist theory, there is a sense of connectedness between women. Allowing women to share their stories and become role models for future generations depicts the desire to end inequality for women (Barber &

Allen, 1992). It is critical that this trend continue to even out the ranks of the high school principalship and other secondary administration positions.

### *Networking*

Women are networking within the educational setting; however, their definitions of networking vary as well as their perception of its importance. Being afraid to seem too assertive is just one of the negative stereotypes associated with networking for women. Only one high school principal participant discussed the importance of networking in a manner similar to that of a man; she had taken action to do so through athletics. This female principal is being forced to network within the male dominated system, instead of networking in her own way. Maher (1987) theorized that critical feminism develops women's awareness so that they can critique an oppressive, male-dominated society in an attempt to balance the female identity. Another researcher detailed the importance of women's networking as men do to be successful in the administrative hierarchy (Evans, 2001). The other study participants viewed networking only as an opportunity to meet with people at district or area events. Sherman (2005) described the varying definitions of networking and the misconceived notions of what networking truly entails. Many of these participants discussed the importance of sharing stories with one another and helping other women within the district. One assistant principal had extended her efforts in this regard beyond those of the other administrators: She had established a female networking group for assistant principals in her district. The ripple effect of a network for female administrators is far reaching and wide spread. Every school district should begin a network specifically aimed toward female school administrators in order for them to become powerful change agents within the district and could continue state or even

nationwide. Grogan (2004) explained that traditional networking excludes women from administrative positions, asserting that new networking techniques need to be developed. These findings and literature citations illuminate the vision necessary for women to ascend the career ladder as well as the importance of networking themselves within the district.

One particular school district in South Hampton Roads reflected a very strong presence of the good-old-boys network. Three of the female principals in this study were asked to accept their current positions. The idea of tapping an individual for a position indicates that the high school principalships are being reserved for specific candidates. Ironically, only one of these three women perceived that a good-old-boys network existed in her school district. Tallerico (2000) described these secret channels through which administrators pass to determine who is in and who is out. The remaining two participants did not believe any of the good old boys were still around. Clearly, some of the good old boys were still operating separately in all three school districts if candidates were being tapped for positions, not following a traditional route of applying for the position, interviewing, and being selected. Importantly, women must understand that candidates are being tapped for positions; women's interviewing for positions does not necessarily mean the positions are truly available. Furthermore, it appears that gatekeepers often reserve the administrative positions for the candidates they believe will do the best job (Tallerico). Traditionally, gatekeepers have been male and have reserved administrative positions for their male counterparts (Tallerico); however, as discovered in this study, gatekeepers are also reserving positions for selected females. Patton (2002) examined the past injustices experienced by women attempting to enter school

administration. According to critical feminist theorists, the notion of tapping reflects the politics and gender favoring involved in networking (Patton).

### *Solutions*

All study participants agreed on the following: To become a high school assistant principal or principal candidate, a woman must increase involvement and visibility within her school district. It is important to earn the proper credentials and continue one's education. Additionally, as a woman, one must be able to balance work and family life. The participants described the importance of having a good personality and being involved with the community. One assistant principal provided the example of being a sponge: A woman should absorb as much knowledge as possible from her building administration. According to the female high school principal participants, the key to becoming a high school principal is sound instructional leadership. Loder (2005) emphasized the need for a collaborative approach to the principalship, offering alternatives to attempting to be a super-hero principal. Moreover, the notion of being the right fit for a principalship was discussed by several of the participants, but raises many questions. What does the right fit mean? Is it based on age, race, leadership styles or instructional leadership? Waiting to be the right fit for a school or school district puts female administrators at a disadvantage and allows for fewer opportunities when a position becomes available. According to Stacki and Monkman (2003), understanding the point of view of the female high school principal promotes a more complete understanding of the female perspective, including the barriers that exist within the educational institution.



### *Limitations*

The limitations of this research include the researcher's knowing one of the interviewees, who was responsible for observing the researcher. The researcher saw the interviewee and worked with her on a daily basis and might have developed a bias toward the interviewee. The researcher purposefully selected these interviewees because they met the criteria needed for the study and they responded to the e-mail the researcher sent asking for participants. To avoid these biases in the future and eliminate possible prejudgments of the administrator or the researcher, the researcher should select candidates she does not know on a personal level. The researcher encountered difficulty with regard to the response for reflective journal entries. Less than half of the female administrators (five of twelve) returned the reflective journals, and only four were fully completed.

### *Future Directions Based Upon This Research*

As Shakeshaft (1999) noted, there has been insufficient research on female principals, perceptions, common hiring practices, and women's pathways to administration. In the future, a qualitative study on formal and informal mentoring programs might determine which type of program is more beneficial to women. Formal mentoring programs should be mandated and tracked by universities with educational leadership and administration programs. Additionally, because so many female administrators mentioned leadership academies offered by their school districts, these academies could be explored further to determine their value for women's obtaining administrative positions. Additionally, leadership academies could be studied to determine whether or not there are gatekeepers to these academies, who applies to the

academies, who is accepted, and who is promoted into administration. Finally, school board members could be interviewed to determine whether or not good-old-boys networks exist within their districts and to determine their perceptions regarding the hiring of female principals.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, the women interviewed for this study had experienced obstacles on their pathway to the principalship or assistant principalship. There is a negative stereotype that women do not want to be educational leaders because they are married or have children. Additionally, these women had been successful in finding informal mentors; however, school districts need to adopt formal mentor programs to increase the number of female administrators. A few of the female principals confirmed existence of the good-old-boys network in South Hampton Roads. Possible solutions to women's underrepresentation in the field of educational leadership include increased involvement, visibility, networking, instructional leadership, advanced degrees, and being in the right place at the right time. Stereotypes, unrealistic expectations, the lack of formal mentoring by school divisions, and the demanding workload have all been obstacles to the school principalship for female candidates. The themes identified in this study need to be addressed not only by school districts but also by universities who prepare these women to enter the field. Universities must begin to develop networking opportunities for women within their perspective school districts and sponsor networking opportunities for female students in educational leadership programs and successful female school administrators. To promote female sovereignty, women must begin to understand the oppression under

which they have lived and begin to develop their own voice as they embark along a pathway toward empowerment (Asch & Fine, 1988).

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## APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT

### Pathways to the Principalship:

#### Female Perspectives of the High School Principalship

#### **Letter of Consent for Principals and Assistant Principals**

Dear Ms. \_\_\_\_\_:

I am a graduate student under the direction of Dr. Karen Crum in the Department of Educational Leadership at Old Dominion University. I am conducting a research study to determine the pathways to the high school principalship as experienced by female principals and assistant principals.

Your participation will involve answering open-ended questions pertaining to your experiences from undergraduate school to your current position. You will also be asked to write four reflective journal entries on a specific topic chosen by the researcher. I will analyze and compare your answers with those of other participants to look for common themes and patterns. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, you are free to do so. The results of the research study will be published, but neither your name nor any identifying information will be used.

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts if you agree to participate in this study.

Although there may be no direct benefit to you, your participation will benefit the research study and females desiring to be high school principals in the future.

If you have any questions concerning this research study, please call me or e-mail me.

Sincerely,

Tracy S. Skinner

\* \* \* \* \*

I give my consent to participate in the above study. I understand the interview will be recorded and used for further research and possible publication.

\_\_\_\_\_ (Signature) \_\_\_\_\_ (date)

If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Committee, Institutional Review Board, through the Vice President for the Office of Research at (850) 644-8633, or you may contact Ed Gomez at Old Dominion University at (757) 683-6309.

**Contact Information:**

**Name of researcher:** Tracy S. Skinner

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**E-mail Address:** [tskin004@odu.edu](mailto:tskin004@odu.edu)

**Name of Director:** Dr. Karen Crum

**Phone Number:** (757) 683-6698

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## APPENDIX B: OPENING SCRIPT

## Opening Script:

Hello. My name is Tracy Skinner. I am a graduate student from Old Dominion University. Thank you for meeting with me today; this interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes. Currently, I am writing my doctoral dissertation on different pathways to school administration as experienced by females. Thus, I am talking with female high school principals and assistant principals all over Hampton Roads. Here is an information sheet with my contact information in case you have any questions after I leave today. I also have a confidentiality agreement that discusses the ways in which the information I collect will be treated and reported. Everything you say here today will be held in confidence. No comments will be reported in ways that can be connected to you, and your identity will be hidden. In fact, I'd like you to choose a made-up name that we can use on your files. (Wait for them to make up a name). I urge you to talk candidly today. This confidentiality agreement is my commitment to you that I will keep your comments and identity in confidence. If you are comfortable with this arrangement, please sign on the line. I would like to audio tape our interview so I can concentrate on our conversation and not on taking notes. Would that be ok with you? Thank you again for agreeing to meet and talk with me. Do you have any questions before we begin?

## APPENDIX C: PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### Interview Guide for Pathways to the Principalship

#### Principal's Protocol

- I. Personal History
  - A. Please tell me about yourself.
  - B. How did you become a principal?
  - C. When did you first want to be in a formal leadership position?
  - D. How did you make your career aspirations known?
  - E. How many times did you apply for this position?
  
- II. Familial Support
  - A. Tell me about your family.
  - B. How did your family help you become a principal?
  - C. How did your family prevent or hinder you from becoming a principal?
  - D. Have family obligations ever interfered with your job? How so?
  - E. Has your job ever interfered with your family? How so?
  
- III. Mentoring
  - A. Do you have or have you had a mentor who encourages or supports your career aspirations?

Tell me about them and in what ways they have supported you.
  - B. How was the mentoring relationship initiated?

Was it specific to administration?
  - C. Describe your relationship with your mentor(s).
    1. How often do you communicate?
    2. What media do you use for communicating?
    3. What is the time investment?

D. What is your role in the relationship(s)?

E. Was there someone in your career that seemed to be a mentor early on, but ultimately presented obstacles to your development? If yes, Can you describe how?

F. Have you had any experiences with formal mentoring or leadership programs? Please describe them.

#### IV. Networking

A. Do you feel as though there is a “good-old-boys” network in your school district?

B. If so, do you feel that was a resource or barrier to becoming a high school principal?

C. How do they act as “gatekeepers” to administrative positions in the school district?

D. How did you use networking when attempting to become a high school principal?

#### V. Solutions

A. What was one contributing factor that allowed you to become a high school principal?

B. What advice would you offer to women who aspire to become high school principals?

C. Are there any other suggestions that you would like to offer to aspiring administrators?

D. Were there any barriers to becoming a principal that we did not talk about that you would like to add?

#### VI. Demographic Information

A. What is your current marital status? What was your marital status when you obtained your current job title?

B. Do you have children? If so what are their ages? How old were they when you obtained your current job title?



C. How many years of experience do you have in your current role? How many years total in education? How many years experience do you have in administration? How many years were you in the classroom before becoming an administrator?

D. Where did you earn your bachelor's degree? What was your field of study? Where did you earn your master's degree? What was your field of study? Do you hold any higher degrees?

E. What current state certifications/license do you currently hold?

## APPENDIX D: ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### Interview Guide for Pathways to the Principalship

#### Assistant Principal's Protocol

#### I. Personal History

- A. Please tell me about yourself.
- B. How did you become an assistant principal?
- C. When did you first want to be in a formal leadership position?
- D. How did you make your career aspirations known?
- E. How many times did you apply for this position?

#### II. Familial Support

Let's talk a little bit about your family.

- A. Tell me about your family.
- B. How did your family help you become an assistant principal?
- C. How did your family prevent or hinder you from becoming an assistant principal?
- D. Have family obligations ever interfered with your job? How so?
- E. Has your job ever interfered with your family? How so?

#### III. Mentoring

Now I'd like to talk to you about mentors and mentoring relationships.

- A. Do you have or have you had a mentor who encourages or supports your career aspirations?

Tell me about them and in what ways they have supported you.

- B. How was the mentoring relationship initiated?

Was it specific to administration?

C. Describe your relationship with your mentor(s).

1. How often do you communicate?
2. What media do you use for communicating?
3. What is the time investment?

D. What is your role in the relationship?

E. Was there someone in your career that seemed to be a mentor early on, but ultimately presented obstacles to your development? If yes, Can you describe how?

F. Have you had any experiences with formal mentoring or leadership programs?

Please describe them.

#### IV. Networking

Again, thanks so much for taking the time to talk with me. Now I'd like to shift gears and talk about networking.

A. Do you feel as though there is a "good-old-boys" network in your school district?

B. If so, do you feel that this will be a resource or barrier to becoming a high school principal?

C. How do they act as "gatekeepers" to administrative positions in the school district?

D. How will you use networking when attempting to become a high school principal?

#### V. Career Aspirations

A. Do you aspire to become a high school principal? Could you please describe your career aspirations?

B. Are there any barriers you have faced in trying to obtain this position?

Please describe them.

C. How do you plan to overcome these barriers? Are there resources or support for you?

## VI. Solutions

We are almost done. I'd now like you to talk about suggestions for other women who might want to become high school assistant principals.

A. What was one contributing factor that allowed you to become a high school assistant principal?

B. What advice would you offer to women who aspire to become high school assistant principals?

C. Are there any other suggestions that you would like to offer to aspiring administrators?

D. Were there any barriers to becoming an assistant principal that we did not talk about that you would like to add?

## VII. Demographic Information

A. What is your current marital status? What was your marital status when you obtained your current job title?

B. Do you have children? If so what are their ages? How old were they when you obtained your current job title?

C. How many years of experience do you have in your current role? How many years total in education? How many years experience do you have in administration? How many years were you in the classroom before becoming an administrator?

D. Where did you earn your bachelor's degree? What was your field of study? Where did you earn your master's degree? What was your field of study? Do you hold any higher degrees?

E. What current state certifications/license do you currently hold?

## APPENDIX E: REFLECTIVE JOURNAL PROTOCOL

### Reflective Journal Entry Protocol

Please answer each question to the best of your ability. Please type each journal entry in Microsoft Word. If using Microsoft Vista please save as 97-2003 file. E-mail your journal entry to [skinntsh@cps.k12.va.us](mailto:skinntsh@cps.k12.va.us) with subject Journal Entry 1 for week one, and so on. Attach the Microsoft Word file to the e-mail. Please answer the journal entry topic within 48 hours of receipt.

#### I. Familial Support

Describe ways in which your family has helped and/or hindered your career advancement and/or development. Did your career have any effect on your decision to have children? Please explain.

#### II. Mentoring

Describe ways in which a mentor supported you or hindered you along your career path. Describe ways in which having a mentor would have helped you advance.

#### III. Networking

Is there a “good-old-boys” network within your school district and what role do they play in career advancement of administrators? Did anyone act as a “gatekeeper” along your pathway to administration? Please explain.

#### IV. Solutions

What recommendations would you make to aspiring female principals or administrators?