

Title: “Are women better than men in running elementary schools?” The parents’ perspective

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ABSTRACT

The role and effectiveness of female school principals is a topic of great interest given the importance of school leadership and the increasing number of females occupying administrative positions in education. However, research has revealed that teachers and officials have stereotypes about female principals. According to these stereotypes, leadership positions are generally for men and women lack the necessary qualities in leading schools.

This study examined the perceptions of parents in Cyprus regarding the effectiveness of female school principals. Parents are integral in a school’s operation and their views on school leadership are important. The sample consisted of 904 randomly chosen parents of elementary school children in the district of Limassol. A questionnaire was administered to parents in May of 2010, asking them to compare male and female principals in several dimensions of a principal’s job such as improving the school’s appearance and functioning, sound financial management, effective communication with authorities, establishing a school climate conducive to learning, leading lower and upper grades and building quality relationships with teachers, students and parents.

Data analysis (t-tests and multiple regression) showed that parents believe that female principals are better than male principals in all five leadership dimensions explored in the study. The study has practical and research implications. If female principals are better in running elementary schools then “feminine” traits of leading should be incorporated into leadership preparation. Future research should explore parental perceptions in further detail and include analysis at secondary education as well.

INTRODUCTION

This study is a part of a larger project aimed at better understanding effective school management and leadership. Given that principals are considered to be highly influential figures in education (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001), the purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of parents regarding the effectiveness of female school principals. The interaction between gender and school leadership is an important topic given the centrality of leadership to school success and

the increasing number of females occupying administrative positions in education. In this article, I report evidence suggesting that parents perceive female principals to be more effective than their male counterparts in various aspects of school management and leadership.

School leadership is widely recognized as one of the most important factors influencing student learning and school success (Cotton, 2000; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). Researchers have argued that school leadership is second only to teacher instruction in its impact on student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004) and that schools led by principals who make a contribution to staff effectiveness and student learning are the most effective schools (Bossert & Dwyer, 1982; Murphy & Hallinger, 1992). Working directly with students or mostly indirectly through teachers, principals exert significant influences on what students learn (Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010). In times of crisis and constant change, officials and policymakers seem to turn to school leadership for answers. The quality of school leadership is considered to be a key factor to continued organizational learning and improvement (Datnow, 2005; Murphy, Elliott, Goldring, & Porter, 2006).

The interaction between gender and leadership is important but surprisingly there is limited empirical research on how various school stakeholders (for example parents) perceive the role and effectiveness of female school principals and especially in comparison to male school principals. Parental beliefs and perceptions have been shown to be a strong predictor of parental involvement (Epstein, 2001). Therefore, if parents consider female principals to be less effective than men then they may have less frequent communication with female principals or shape erroneous judgments about them. This study addresses this knowledge gap by examining the perceptions of parents regarding female school principals. Also, this study aims to identify any parental demographic information that may shape parental perceptions. By adding to the existing body of knowledge on issues of gender and leadership, this study tries to advance our knowledge of how parents perceive the role, the functions and effectiveness of female school principals in Cyprus. Specifically, this study addressed the following two research questions:

(1) According to parents, are there any differences between the effectiveness of female and male school principals across a number of leadership dimensions?

(2) What personal factors have an impact on parental perceptions regarding the effectiveness of female school principals?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This article seeks to explore the perceptions of parents regarding the role and effectiveness of female principals. As a result, relevant research on the various aspects of effective school leadership, the interaction between gender and leadership and on perceptions regarding principalship is briefly reviewed.

Effective School Leadership

After years of research on effective school leadership, it is now widely assumed that school principals have both direct and indirect effects on student achievement and school success even though principals exert most of their influence indirectly (Leithwood et al., 2004). Even though the leadership practices that matter the most are highly dependent on context, there seems to be a general consensus on specific categories of leadership practices that are useful across many settings and schools. These categories are labeled somewhat differently by various researchers but their substance is essentially the same. In this review, I broadly follow the categorization given by Leithwood & Jantzi (2008) and present specific leadership practices falling into these categories.

Setting directions. An important goal of school leaders is to guide groups of people (teaching staff and students) towards accomplishing commonly shared goals. Researchers have reported that identifying and articulating a vision (Leithwood, 1996; Witziers, Bosker, & Kruger, 2003) and establishing goals and expectations (Leithwood, Jantzi, Silins, & Dart, 1993; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008) can help the leader towards this end.

Developing people. Principals are generally not actively engaged in day-to-day teacher practices but their actions can have powerful effects on how teachers teach and what teachers learn (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Wahlstrom, 2008). Hence, a critical component of leadership is to facilitate teachers' work and provide constant support. Practices that help principals in this area include offering intellectual stimulation, providing support, encourage and participate in teacher learning and development (Robinson et al., 2008).

Redesigning schools. Organizational culture and structures should serve teachers' needs and help schools adapt to environmental pressures for change and improvement. A primary leadership task is to establish the conditions and structures that enable teachers to adapt and make a positive direct impact on students (Lieberman, 2005; Marzano et al., 2005). Practices typically associated with this category include the modification of school structures, the establishment and nurturing of a school culture conducive to learning (Bossert & Dwyer, 1982), transforming schools into professional learning communities, creating a safe and collaborative environment for teachers and building effective collaborations with the wider school community (Sebring & Bryk, 2000).

Instructional Leadership. Accountability pressures have increased in recent years and principals are held responsible for the instruction taking place at their schools. Principals are key to instructional program implementation and the delivery of quality instruction (Matsumura, Sartoris, Bickel, & Garnier, 2009; Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001) and recent studies have shown that in schools where the principals were rated high on instructional leadership students had significantly improved results (Marsh et al., 2008). Recent research has found that certain leadership practices can have a significant impact on effective teacher practice such as sufficient knowledge of the curriculum (Supovitz & Poglinco, 2001), understand the tenets of quality instruction (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008), planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching (Robinson et al., 2008), and providing instructional support (Leithwood et al., 1993)

Gender and Leadership

Assumptions of gender equality in leadership led to limited interest in the relationship between gender and leadership until very recently (Chemers, 1997) but the increasing number of female researchers, along with an increase in women occupying administrative positions in education and various

other fields has sparked a renewed interest in the interactions between gender and leadership (Northouse, 2007). Interest has now turned to leadership differences between men and women and whether women or men are the most effective in leading. There is great diversity in opinions on this issue with some researchers supporting that women's leadership is more effective (Book, 2000) and others claiming that gender has little or no relationship to style and effectiveness (Engen, Leeden, & Willemsen, 2001). According to Northouse (2007), the only robust gender difference in all the studies examining differences in effectiveness is that women lead in a more democratic, participative manner than men. However, there is evidence that women appear to be more effective in leadership roles that are congruent with their gender. For example women appeared to be more effective in education and social service roles and in roles that interpersonal skills are highly valued (Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, 1995; Northouse, 2007).

Perceptions of Leadership

The world of leadership has been primarily dominated by men until very recently. This resulted in a generally held view that leadership is a male trait (Cunha & Cunha, 2002; Kanter, 1977). Given this widespread belief, women in education face stereotypes according to which they are better suited for teaching and not for leading schools (Coleman, 2002). A recent study conducted in Greece showed that negative attitudes and prejudice towards women in leadership positions are shared by both men and women (Taki, 2006). Also, in research among university students, the majority (65%) said that men are more suitable for school leadership and only 5% supported female principals. Students attributed success for men to capacity and knowledge but success for women was due to effort and luck (Schein & Davidson, 1993). Even within their own profession female principals are faced with stereotypes. A recent survey in Greece revealed that teachers treat female principals with suspicion and believe men are better suited for school leadership positions (Papastamatis & Kantartzi, 2006).

METHODOLOGY

Survey Participants and Data Collection

The population of this study was the parents of approximately 8500 students enrolled in 42 elementary schools in the district of Limassol in Cyprus during the academic year of 2009-10. Data collection took place during May of 2010 in three phases. First, the study gained approval by the Ministry of Education. Second, an assistant researcher visited seven randomly chosen elementary schools. The researcher met with principals and teachers in all seven schools, explained the study's rationale, clarified questions and was granted permission to administer the surveys. Most of the teachers agreed to collaborate by administering the surveys to the parents through their students. In order to increase the return rate, a cover letter accompanied each survey explaining the study's goals and assuring that surveys were completely anonymous, the schools were not involved in developing the survey and that responses would be held confidential. Finally, a total of 1650 surveys were administered and returned surveys were collected during two visits made by the assistant researcher. Overall, 1029 surveys were returned and the final sample consisted of 904 parents who correctly completed all survey items.

Instrumentation and Variables

Instrument components and variables. The survey instrument used in this study was developed specifically for this study since no appropriate instrument was available. It consisted of items developed to measure parental perceptions regarding the effectiveness of female school principals and demographic information questions. The majority of the survey items measuring perceptions of leadership asked parents to compare male and female school principals by indicating how much better or how much worse female school principals perform certain leadership/principalship functions. In answering the survey items, parents used a 5-choice scale as follows: -2=*much worse*, -1= *worse*, 0= *the same*, 1= *better* and 2= *much better*.

The survey items were clustered in five sections: School environment (SE), school management and leadership (SML), principals and teachers (PT), principals and parents (PP), principals and students (PS). The SE section included four items measuring female principal's relative ability to improve the school's internal and external environment and create a school climate conducive to student's learning. The SML section included 17 items measuring female principal's relative ability to manage school's financial resources, implement innovations, manage and lead elementary or secondary schools, manage teaching staff and lead in a democratic, unbiased way. The PT section included seven items measuring female principals' relative ability to establish good working relationships with teaching staff, support teachers in instructions and empower teachers. The PP section included seven items measuring female principals' relative ability to establish good relationships and effective communication with parents, involve parents in school processes and gain parents' trust. Finally, the PS section included seven items measuring female principals' relative ability to establish school discipline, establish good relationships with students, support students with special learning or other needs and cultivate respect.

The last section of the survey included eight items for collecting important parental demographic information such as gender, number of children, age, educational attainment and children's grade level. Before data analysis, three new dichotomous variables were created based on parents' personal characteristics. These variables indicated whether parents were under 35 years old or older, whether parents had a child in the three lower elementary grades or not and whether the combined parental educational background per household was higher than Lyceum or not.

Content validity. Measurement of content validity is important for all empirical research. A considerable effort was made to ensure that the survey items asked parents to compare women and male principals in the most important aspects of a principal's work. The following steps were taken:

First, the literature on effective school leadership was reviewed in order to identify the principals' practices and functions that are most relevant to school success. This literature review resulted in more than 20 leadership dimensions that provided a representative sampling of effective leadership practices.

The second step in establishing content validity was the initial development of survey items. In collaboration with 4 employed or retired elementary school principals, five leadership dimensions were selected as the most appropriate for the purposes of the study (School Environment, School Management, School Leadership, Principals and Teachers, Principals and Parents, Principals and Students). For each leadership dimension, relevant survey items were constructed, resulting in more than 100 survey items. Further discussions reduced the survey items to 71.

The third step was content validity assessment. Two professors of educational administrator and two supervisors were asked to review the survey items in order to assess the extent to which the survey items captured the essence of school leadership. Based on the experts' assessment, 9 items were deleted reducing the final number of survey items to 62.

The final step was pilot testing. Forty-two (conveniently chosen) parents of elementary school students participated in the pilot study and completed the survey. The purpose was to identify errors in items' wording and items that were probably difficult to be answered by parents. Based on the results of the pilot study, a few changes in 6 survey items were made in order to enhance content validity.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out in three stages. In the first stage, Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the reliability of five survey constructs. Then, descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviations) for each survey construct were used to explore parental perceptions regarding the effectiveness of female school principals relative to male school principals. Finally, t-tests and multiple regression analysis were used to determine which personal characteristics of parents have a significant effect on their perceptions towards female school principals in each of the five survey constructs.

RESULTS

Instrument Constructs and Reliabilities

The items in the five survey sections were combined to formulate five separate constructs: School Environment (SE), School Management and Leadership (SML), Principals and Teachers (PT), Principals and Parents (PP), Principals and Students (PS). Reliability analyses were conducted by using Cronbach's alpha on the five constructs. Table 1 reports the internal reliabilities of the scales used to measure each of the five leadership constructs.

TABLE 1
Reliabilities for survey constructs

| <i>Construct</i> | <i>Cronbach's Alpha</i> |
|--|-------------------------|
| School Environment (SE) | .74 |
| School Management and Leadership (SML) | .89 |
| Principals and Teachers (PT) | .90 |
| Principals and Parents (PP) | .93 |
| Principals and Students (PS) | .88 |

The reliability coefficients for the five constructs were between .74 (SE) and .93 (PP). These results of Cronbach's alpha confirm the high reliability of all five leadership constructs.

Survey Participants Characteristics

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics of the 904 parents participating in the study.

TABLE 2
Demographic information of participating parents

| Characteristic | n | % |
|-----------------------------|-----|------|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 174 | 19.2 |
| Female | 730 | 80.8 |
| Age | | |
| Under 35 years old | 328 | 36.3 |
| 36 – 45 | 511 | 56.5 |
| Over 45 years old | 65 | 7.2 |
| Number of children | | |
| 1 | 118 | 13.0 |
| 2 | 456 | 50.5 |
| 3 or more | 330 | 36.5 |
| Educational attainment | | |
| Bachelor's degree or higher | 572 | 31.9 |
| 3-year College degree | 407 | 22.5 |
| Lyceum | 667 | 37.3 |
| Gymnasium or lower | 149 | 8.3 |
| Children's grade level | | |
| Lower grade (1-3) | 434 | 48.0 |
| Higher grade (4-6) | 470 | 52.0 |

The majority of parents were female (80.8%), most likely reflecting the fact that mothers compared to fathers are generally more involved in their children's education. The overwhelming majority of parents are considered to be young since only 7% of them were 45 years old or older while more than a third of parents are under the age of 35. More than half of the respondents had one or two children (63.5%) and approximately a third of parents had earned a bachelor's or a post-graduate degree. Finally, 48% of the parents had their children enrolled in one of the three lower elementary grades. Overall, the sample of parents is considered to be representative of parents in Limassol.

Parental Perceptions across the Leadership Constructs

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics of overall mean scores and standard deviations for each of the five leadership constructs. Given that the survey items were measured on a scale from -2 to +2, mean scores of 0 indicate that parents perceive female and male principals equally effective in a specific leadership construct. For example, a mean score of 0 on the leadership construct of School Environment would indicate that both women and men are perceived by parents to be equally effective in improving the internal and external school environment. Mean scores below 0 would indicate that parents perceive women to be *less* effective than men and mean scores above 0 would indicate that parents perceive female principals to be more effective than male principals.

TABLE 3
Means and Standard Deviations of the Leadership Constructs

| <i>Leadership Construct</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|--|----------|-----------|
| School Environment (SE) | 0.83 | 0.62 |
| School Management and Leadership (SML) | 0.27 | 0.55 |
| Principals and Teachers (PT) | 0.39 | 0.60 |
| Principals and Parents (PP) | 0.46 | 0.68 |
| Principals and Students (PS) | 0.42 | 0.59 |

All five mean scores were above 0 which shows that parents perceive female principals to be more effective than male principals in all five leadership constructs. Female principals seem to enjoy the greatest relative advantage over male principals in establishing and improving a school's environment ($M=0.83$). On the other hand, female principals seem to have the smallest advantage over men in school management and leadership.

In response to the second research question, *t*-tests were computed to determine the relationships between parental perceptions and their personal characteristics. *T*-tests were computed to determine the strength of relationship between four parents' characteristics (gender, age, children's grade level and educational attainment) and parental perceptions on the five leadership constructs. Table 4 presents the results from these analyses. Three of the parents' personal characteristics (age, children's grade level and educational attainment) were significantly related to certain leadership constructs while parents' gender was not significantly related to any of the five leadership constructs. However, it should be noted that male parents, compared to female parents, perceive female principals in a more favorable way across all five leadership constructs.

TABLE 4
Mean scores of Leadership Constructs by Parental Characteristic

| Construct | Gender | | Age | | Grade Level | | Educational Attainment | |
|-----------|--------|------|-----|-----|-------------|--------|------------------------|-------------|
| | Female | Male | <35 | >35 | Lower | Higher | Low | Medium/High |
| SE | .81 | .88 | .91 | .78 | .71 | .92* | .90 | .79 |

| | | | | | | | | |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|------|-----|------|
| SML | .25 | .33 | .36 | .21* | .19 | .33* | .36 | .22 |
| PT | .37 | .50 | .48 | .35 | .32 | .45 | .52 | .33* |
| PP | .45 | .51 | .52 | .43 | .40 | .53 | .58 | .40* |
| PS | .40 | .55 | .48 | .40 | .36 | .48 | .48 | .40 |

Note: SE=School Environment, SML=School Management and Leadership, PT=Principals and Teachers, PP=Principals and Parents, PS=Principals and Students

* $p < .05$.

The overall pattern is that younger parents, parents with children in a higher elementary grade and parents with less educational attainment perceive female principals to be more effective than male principals in all five leadership constructs. However, statistically significant results appeared in only five of the twenty comparisons. Younger parents perceive female principals as more effective in the general school management and leadership construct. Parents with children in higher grades perceive female principals to be more effective in improving school environment and school management/leadership and finally parents with low educational attainment perceive female principals to be more effective in interacting with teachers or parents. It is worth noting that the only leadership construct with no statistically significant results is the PS construct.

The last step in data analysis was to perform multiple regression analysis in order to determine the collective effect of parental characteristics on perceptions regarding the effectiveness of female principals relative to male principals. Table 5 presents the results of the regression of two leadership constructs (SE and SML) on the four parental characteristics (results of the regression of PT, PP and PS are not shown because there were no significant predictors). Both regressions feature significant predictors but it should be noted that as a group the four parental characteristics explain only 5% of the variance in SE or SML. In both regressions, parents' age and children's grade level appear to be significant predictors of parental perceptions. Controlling for other predictor variables, parents' age is negatively related to SE and SML while children's grade level is positively related to SE and SML.

TABLE 5
Regression of Parents' Characteristics on Leadership Constructs

| <i>Construct</i> | β | <i>t</i> | <i>Sig.</i> | R^2 |
|------------------------|---------|----------|-------------|-------|
| SE | | | | |
| Female | -.068 | -.63 | .529 | |
| Age | -.181 | -2.03 | .044 | |
| Grade Level | .232 | 2.77 | .000 | |
| Educational Attainment | -.079 | -.90 | .371 | |

| | | | | |
|------------------------|-------|-------|------|-------|
| | | | | 0.053 |
| SML | | | | |
| Gender | -.105 | -1.08 | .280 | |
| Age | -.179 | -2.24 | .026 | |
| Grade Level | .163 | 2.16 | .032 | |
| Educational Attainment | -.106 | -1.34 | .182 | |
| | | | | 0.054 |

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

Main findings. This study addressed two research questions. The first question asked whether parents perceive female and male school principals to be different in terms of effectiveness. According to the results, parents perceive female principals to be more effective than male principals in all five leadership constructs. The results are in agreement with the recent popular view that women are superior than men in leadership positions (Book, 2000). Female principals appear to significantly outperform male principals in establishing and improving a school's environment (SE) but their leadership advantage is also sizeable for the other leadership constructs examined in this study. A possible explanation for the substantial difference between female principals' effectiveness in SE and the other constructs is that SE is probably the one aspect of a principal's work that is more visible to parents and the general public. Simply by walking into a school, an outsider can get a "feel" about the school's atmosphere and climate and evaluate the aesthetics and condition of a school's internal and external environment (classes, walls, paintings, school yard etc). On the other hand, it is certainly more difficult for parents to evaluate principals' ability to establish and maintain good working relationships with teachers or students or have reliable knowledge on many aspects of school management and leadership.

The second question asked which parental characteristics have an impact on their perceptions regarding the effectiveness of female and male principals. Two personal characteristics have a statistically significant relationship with parental perceptions: age and children's grade level. Younger parents (aged 35 years old or younger) and parents with children in the higher elementary grade levels appear to give female principals an even greater advantage over men in SE and SML. A possible explanation for these results is that female principals' way of managing and leading seems more appealing to younger parents and to parents whose children are getting prepared for secondary education. Perhaps the "feminine" traits of managing and leading schools are more appropriate for children getting ready for secondary education. It is also worth mentioning that male parents, compared to female parents, perceive female principals in a more favorable way across all five leadership constructs even though the differences were not statistically significant.

Implications and future research. The findings of this study have practical and research implications. If female principals are indeed significantly more effective in managing and leading elementary schools then probably we could do a great service to future educational leaders by incorporating these "feminine" traits into leadership/principalship preparation programs to a greater extent.

Future research should be designed to explore parental perceptions even further. This study examined only a small number of parental characteristics influencing perceptions of leadership and

certainly some critical variables are missing from the analysis. For example, it would have been very informative to have information about parents' communication and interaction patterns with the principal and information on principals' practices promoting or suppressing these patterns. The R^2 in two regression analyses presented in this article are slightly above 5% which further indicates that important variables influencing parental perceptions were not included in the analysis. Future research can take the form of qualitative research with in-depth interviews with parents that could shed more light on why they perceive female and male principals in a particular manner. Finally, future research can also be conducted with parents whose children are in secondary education and compare parental perceptions by children's level of education.

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