

Is a principal still a teacher?: US women administrators' accounts of role conflict and role discontinuity

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The authors examined 16 US women school administrators' experiences with role conflict and role discontinuity within their first one to five years of transitioning from teaching to administration. Findings from this theory-building, qualitative study indicate that this transition triggered role conflicts that emerged from the participants' movement from the relatively private and intimate domain of the classroom where they focused on instruction and students, to the public domain of the school and community where they shifted their focus to managerial and political responsibilities. In an effort to resolve this tension, the participants employed a cognitive strategy whereby they attempted to retain their identity as teachers. Study findings suggest that principal leadership programs should help aspirants develop strategies to cope with role conflict and role discontinuity. Alternative frameworks for conceptualizing school leadership (e.g. distributed leadership) may also help principals to manage these problems and challenges.

Although teaching is one of the most traversed pathways to the principalship, scholars have paid little attention to the interrelationship between the roles of teacher and administrator, particularly the structural constraints attendant in the transition from the former role to the latter one. The transition from teaching to administration may be especially stressful and discordant for women administrators who have spent long tenures as teachers and who value the intrinsic rewards of the teaching profession (Lortie, 1975; Adams & Hambright, 2004). Given that women are more likely than men to transition directly from teaching to the principalship as well as to spend longer tenures as teachers prior to their transition, this role transition may require more time for them to become familiar with and comfortable in this position (Doud & Keller, 1998; Spencer & Kochan, 2000). Yet with few exceptions, prior literature on women teachers' reluctance to leave the classroom to become principals has not been linked extensively to the potential for role conflict in the transition from teaching to administration (Kalvelage, 1978; Sikes, 1985; Grant, 1989; Polcynski, 1990).

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Not much is known empirically about how women administrators view the relationship between their current role and their former role as teachers. Do women administrators view the roles of teacher and administrator as being common or divergent? If indeed they do view the roles as being divergent, what types of role conflicts emerge for them in their transition from teaching to administration? What strategies do they employ to resolve these conflicts?

Background literature

The potential for role conflict among women who transition from teaching to administration may be traced back to historic structural barriers that have limited women's access to the principalship. Women's barriers to administration are rooted in nineteenth-century ideas about the teaching role as an extension of the domestic ideal (Shakeshaft, 1989, 1999). Women did not begin to make inroads into the teaching and administrative professions until the nineteenth century when they were recruited as cheap labor to replace the declining numbers of male teachers who were moving into industry and business (Grumet, 1988; Shakeshaft 1989, 1999). During this time, women were considered better suited to teach in, rather than to manage, schools, because teaching was viewed as an extension of the domestic ideal, particularly with its emphasis on nurturing and educating children; in turn, the classroom was viewed as an extension of the home (Weiler, 1989; Nelson, 1992). However, due to the structure of schools in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (i.e. one-room schoolhouses), women were often required to assume the roles of teacher *and* administrator. The separation of teaching and administration did not come about until around 1918 within the context of the emergence of larger, complex bureaucratic school structures modeled after cost-efficient businesses (Tyack & Hansot, 1982). This period in American education was characterized by a movement toward the scientific management of schools and the increasingly dominating belief that men were more capable of carrying out this newly defined management role; consequently, a sex-segregated hierarchy was instituted in which men were made administrators and women teachers (Tyack & Hansot, 1982).

The emerging scholarship on gender influences on school leadership suggests that women administrators have a strong orientation to the teaching role, particularly matters concerning instructional leadership, interact more frequently with students and teachers, and adopt an egalitarian leadership approach (Schmuck *et al.*, 1981; Shakeshaft, 1989; Andrews & Basom, 1990; Eagly *et al.*, 1992; Crow & Glascock, 1995a). A recent study on barriers to US women aspirants to school administration found that teacher leaders were put off from becoming principals primarily because of their concerns about losing contact with children in the classroom; in essence, 'their love for teaching overrode their desire for an administrative role' (Adam & Hambright, 2004, p. 210). International perspectives are similar. For example, Oplatka's (2001) study of Israeli women principals revealed that women who become principals at the same school where they were once teachers are especially vulnerable

to role conflict because of their close ties to teacher colleagues. Coleman's (2001) study of women secondary head teachers in England and Wales indicated that their progression to school leadership is hindered by the common stereotype that women are 'primarily bound up with the home, children, and domesticity, and will naturally take on a caring or pastoral role in school' (p. 89), which typically translates into teaching.

Understanding the dilemmas that women administrators confront as they transition out of the teaching force may raise policymakers' awareness about the factors underlying their under-representation in this position as well as the current principal shortage. Even though women constitute 73% of the teaching workforce in the US, they are represented in fewer than 35% of all principalships (US Department of Education, 1997). The US Department of Labor estimates that 40% of the nation's 93,200 principals are nearing retirement, and that those retirements will increase the demand for new principals through 2005 by 10–20% (Griggs, 2001; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004). Yet many school districts across the country have reported severe shortages in the labor pool for K-12 principal positions, with potential candidates citing low pay, job stress and burdensome time commitments as major deterrents (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1998). In spite of this dire picture, there is promising news that women's enrollment in educational administration programs has significantly increased so that women students now outnumber men (Logan, 1998). These trends point to a critical need for scholars and policymakers to gain a better understanding of the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and external structural constraints associated with women's transition to the principalship.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework that guides this study draws from two perspectives in sociology, i.e. role theory (Merton, 1957, 1968; Goffman, 1961) and the life course concept of role discontinuity (Neugarten, 1969; Bengtson, 1996), as well as recent scholarship on the role of cognition in interpreting the behaviors and practices of administrators (and teachers) (Drake *et al.*, 2001; Spillane, 2000, 2002; Spillane *et al.*, 2002).

Role theory

Under the umbrella of role theory, we discuss the interrelated concepts of role, commitment and attachment, inter-role conflict and role distance.

Role. The concept of *role* is central to understanding professional transitions because transitions are constituted by changes in roles. As Van Gennep (1960) observed, 'to live is to act and to cease, to wait, to rest, and then to begin acting again, but in a different way' (p. 189). People in western society typically occupy

multiple roles in family and work, and each of these roles entails rights, duties and constituencies.

Commitment and attachment. Goffman (1961) described these two types of role salience in his writings on social interactions. *Commitment* is defined as ‘impersonally enforced structural arrangements’:

An individual becomes committed to something when, because of the fixed and interdependent character of many institutional arrangements, his doing or being this something irrevocably conditions other important possibilities in his life, forcing him to take courses of action, causing other persons to build up their activity on the basis of his continuing in his current undertakings, and rendering him vulnerable to unanticipated consequences of these undertakings. He thus becomes locked into a position and coerced into living up to the promises and sacrifices built into it. (pp. 88–89)

Hence, commitment is the extent to which an individual’s options are limited—typically by ‘others’ or what Merton (1968) referred to as *role partners*—by constraints on his or her time, energy and resources. In contrast, *attachment* refers to subjective aspects of the role such as the sense of competence and self-worth that the role brings to the individual. In this sense, an individual is ‘attached’ to a role because it resonates with his or her sense of self.

Inter-role conflict. Role conflicts generally arise when commitment and attachment to roles do not match up. For example, individuals who transition from teaching to administration may find that the commitments associated with administration (e.g. longer hours, the assumption of new role partners with conflicting and competing interests, increased political and managerial responsibilities coupled with a decreased emphasis on instruction) are incongruent with their attachment to teaching (i.e. a strong identification with the tasks of teaching such as an intimate and sustained contact with students).

Inter-role conflict refers specifically to conflict that arises between different roles (e.g. administrator and teacher) (Merton, 1957, 1968). A major source of this conflict is the differing sets of expectations and images associated with different roles. For example, there are both internally and externally driven expectations of what it means to be a ‘good teacher’ and a ‘good administrator’; yet these expectations may conflict. One aspect of being a ‘good teacher’ is to be attentive, caring and nurturing to the needs of one’s students. On the other hand, being a ‘good administrator’ is generally understood to mean being an effective manager and leader of both students and adult professionals and community members. Some may argue that ‘good principals and assistant principals’ care about their students; but in reality, principals and their assistants are responsible for large numbers of students and cannot be effective if they try to offer individual attention to each and every student. Hence, administrators cannot embrace the student as a ‘total child’ in the same way that teachers might be able to.

In order to resolve inter-role conflict, individuals may use attachment as their guide. What role matters most? If something must be discarded, what must go?

Role distance. If certain roles are incompatible with an individual, yet there are constraints imposed by his or her commitment to the role, then that individual may opt to distance him- or herself from the role, rationalizing that 'that person is really not me'. Here the individual is not denying the actual role but rather those attributes of the role that conflict with his or her self-image or perception; hence, *role distance* refers to actions or behaviors that convey an individual's disdain from some aspect of the role that he or she is expected to perform (Goffman, 1961). One illustrative example of role distance highlighted in this study is the employment of a cognitive strategy whereby women administrators attempted to retain those aspects of their former teaching role (e.g. spending time with children, classroom teaching) in an effort to distance themselves from those commitments of their new administrative roles that alienated them from these more gratifying dimensions of their former role (Meier, 1985).

Role discontinuity

When individuals occupy different roles across time, a temporal dimension of role conflict must be considered, i.e. how *continuous* or *discontinuous* are the former and current role that individual occupies (see Bengston, 1996; Neugarten, 1969). Do these roles share common expectations, demands and functions or are they divergent?

Role continuity between teaching and administration has been the subject of much debate in the educational leadership scholarship. The roles of teaching and administration are viewed by some scholars as being more continuous than has been portrayed in the literature because both roles share similar functions, i.e. instructional, managerial and political (Cuban, 1988). Cuban contended that distinctions between teaching and administration are ahistorical given the common genealogy of these two roles. He argued further that attempts by scholars, policymakers and practitioners to maintain this distinction undermine efforts to build coalitions between teachers and administrators to enact successful educational reforms. Other scholars overwhelmingly perpetuate the view that the roles of teacher and administrator roles are discontinuous with respect to their divergent work domains (i.e. teachers work primarily in the classroom whereas administrators work within and across the domains of the school, community, school district and the general public); responsibilities (i.e. teachers primarily teach whereas administrators must manage and lead); and the nature of their relationships (i.e. teachers work intimately with students whereas administrators supervise teachers as well as work closely with parents, superintendents and increasingly, members of the business, corporate and local community) (Wolcott, 1973; Lortie, 1975; Lortie *et al.*, 1983; Jackson, 1990; Consortium on Chicago School Research, 1992; Strong *et al.*, 2002;

Matthews & Crow, 2003). Given these inherent discontinuities, some scholars and practitioners have argued that it is imperative for beginning administrators to discard their former role as teachers—reminiscent of the biblical allegory of shedding old wineskins to make room for new wine—in order to effectively enact their new role as administrators (Crow & Glascock, 1995b; Sigford, 1998; Browne-Ferrigno, 2003).

Role of cognition in administrator practice

This perspective seeks to understand and describe how administrators' (and teachers') cognitive scripts (i.e. their reflection on existing knowledge, experience and practice) shape their interpretation and response to their own practice as well as to efforts by policymakers and governing entities to change their practice (Spillane, 2000, 2002; Drake *et al.*, 2001; Spillane *et al.*, 2002). But, to date, this work has not examined how beginning administrators use their experiences as former teachers to make sense of their new administrative and leadership roles; thus, this study is theory-building in nature, as it extends this work to this unique educator subpopulation and professional context.

Methodology

The participants

This purposive sample consists of 16 women who were one to five years into their positions as assistant principals ($n=6$) and principals ($n=10$). The sample is a subset of a larger study sample collected by the first author where she explored the divergent professional pathways and life experiences of an intergenerational sample of aspiring and practicing women principals in the Chicago metropolitan area (Loder, 2002).

Data collection and analysis

Interview data was collected by the first author in the spring and summer of 2001. The first author recruited participants for the study through personal and professional contacts developed partly through the assistance of local professional organizations and universities. The first author also developed a semi-structured interview protocol with open-ended questions designed to elicit more free-flowing conversation between the first author and the participants (Reissman, 1993). Questions were developed to assess perceived structural constraints and opportunities that women confronted on their way to becoming principals, as well as their subjective perspectives of their roles as former teachers and administrators. Interview questions were further developed after initial piloting. All interviews were conducted and tape-recorded by the first author and transcribed by a professional transcriber.

Data analysis was ongoing, open-ended and inductive (Reissman, 1993). Analysis of interview questions included qualitative and content analysis techniques (Miles &

Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Prior to the transcription period, the first author reviewed each tape and developed summary memos and follow-up questions (Huberman & Miles, 1994). After receiving the typed transcriptions, the first author reviewed the tapes again and edited each transcript for accuracy of audio to typed translations. The second author and another faculty researcher independently read one-third of the interview transcripts and shared insights which helped to inform the first author's data analysis procedure.

To maintain the agreement of anonymity, each participant was assigned an ID number and a pseudonym. All personal and institutional identifications have been assigned fictitious names.

Report of findings

Inter-role conflict emerging from discontinuous work domains and responsibilities

Becoming an administrator required the participants to expand their purview from the intimate and private domain of the classroom to the larger and public domain of the school. As teachers, their world of work revolved around the classroom. The small, relatively private space of the classroom allowed women to foster close relationships with their students. In the classroom, they had considerable autonomy in how they worked with students, organized their classroom space, and presented their lesson plans. They were also allowed to shut their classrooms off from the hustle and bustle in the hallways. Becoming an administrator, however, opened up a whole new world beyond the classroom. As Annette, a second-year principal, explained, one of the biggest adjustments she had to make as an administrator was to broaden her purview of the work domain.

As a teacher in the classroom, you're pretty much just familiar with what's taking place in your classroom. You're not aware of what's taking place on the outside, in the office, and so forth in terms of daily operations of the school. So that was quite a big step for me in terms of the transition.

Some participants indicated that they assumed managerial and leadership functions when they were teachers; yet even with this experience, they learned that they were still naïve about how schools were run. For example, Marsha, a first-year principal, thought she had a good handle on how schools operated because as a teacher, she served as a team leader and had responsibilities that extended beyond her classroom. However, when she became an administrator, she was surprised to learn that she really did not 'have a clue' about how schools operated. She noted that becoming a principal required her to look at the 'big picture'.

I think your eyes open up to kind of the big picture. I thought I had a really good sense of how schools ran. I'd been in schools for years and I felt like I was pretty active and involved in how things went, and was pretty understanding about what it was like to be an administrator. But I had no clue, no clue. You all of a sudden have this big picture.

Becoming a principal also resulted in an abrupt shift in work tasks and responsibilities. As principals, they assumed managerial tasks such as budgeting, bringing in additional resources and managing building facilities; the demands of existing work tasks also increased, namely paperwork. Their focus on managerial tasks often hindered them from concentrating on instructional issues, one of the few aspects of their administrative role that was consistent with their former role as teachers. As Marsha explained, principals are sometimes so inundated with managerial tasks that instructional issues get put on the back burner.

The juggling act is really hard because as an administrator, you've gotta be able to take care of the day to day stuff. You gotta talk to people, you gotta get the heat on, you gotta get the air conditioning on, you gotta get the window fixed, you gotta take care of all those things. You gotta make sure the building is running well. But then there's this instructional leadership piece that can easily get shoved to the side—if it's not as pressing and in your face—thankfully. If it is, then you're in trouble.

Inter-role conflict emerging from discontinuous relationships with students and teachers

Relationships with students. Becoming an administrator marked a dramatic shift in relationships with students and teachers. This shift was especially difficult for women who had formerly enjoyed the intimacy of the classroom which allowed them to get to know their students personally. In contrast, becoming a principal physically distanced these women administrators from, and changed the nature of their relationships with, students. As administrators, their relationships with students became more compartmentalized, particularly because they were now more directly responsible for student discipline. Indeed, the fear of being sent to the principal's office reminds us of the often strained relationship between principals and students.

Charlene, who had been an assistant principal for nearly four years, said that she missed the intimate relationship she used to have with her students in the classroom. When she became an assistant principal, she saw her students less frequently and interacted with them in limited ways.

[As an assistant principal] you miss the kids because you see children either because you're giving them a certificate because they've done something fantastic, or you're talking to them because they've misbehaved. Or you see them on playground duty or that kind of stuff. But you really don't get the interaction that you do in the classroom.

Joenetta, who had been an assistant principal for nearly five years, said that becoming an administrator was very difficult because she was close to her students and considered herself to be their friend. But as an assistant principal, she found it difficult to maintain a close relationship without compromising her authority as an administrator. Her account indicates that unlike the classroom, the public domain of the school does not lend itself to fostering intimate relationships with students.

It's more difficult with children because I'm used to being their friend. As a teacher I was their friend and it's not so hard [in the classroom]. They know, 'Okay, Ms Reed is serious now', so then they do what they're supposed to do. It's easier to do that with a classroom of 30 than it is with a whole school because [the other students] don't know you as well as the 30 knew you . . . Children either see you as the assistant principal or they see you as a teacher. Sometimes they have a difficult time meshing the two. As do I sometimes . . . It was hard for me this year.

Clearly, the commitment of being an administrator, especially a principal, undercut one of the most rewarding aspects of their previous roles as teachers: working closely with students and getting to know them as 'total' individuals.

Relationships with teachers. Participants also reported that their relationships with teachers changed when they became administrators. Once they became administrators, the participants were no longer viewed as colleagues or friends, but as 'bosses' who were responsible for hiring, firing and evaluating teachers. Consequently, as Annette acknowledged, some administrators were viewed antagonistically when they crossed over 'to the other side'.

I found out that your colleagues look at you differently—as a freed individual more so in the administrative area. You weren't a part of them anymore—you were on the other side.

It was especially difficult for participants who became administrators in the same school where they taught and had established longstanding relationships with other teachers. For example, Samantha became a principal at her school after teaching for 25 years and serving four years as the assistant principal. She was initially reluctant to take the post but her outgoing principal—an older woman who had become her mentor—tapped Samantha to be her predecessor. Samantha recalled that the most difficult adjustment she had to make was in how her former colleagues began to view her.

I think that's a difficult transition, you know, stepping over that line from teacher to administrator—even as assistant principal, people look at you differently. Not that they look at you as the enemy; but (laughs) a lot of times you can be the enemy in their eyes. And I think it was difficult for people here because we were friends and I still wanted to be friends, but now I'm your supervisor so we have to draw the line.

Marsha recalled that she felt like she was being 'pushed outside' when she became principal. This was especially difficult for her because she had been considered a teacher leader in her school and had good success with getting teachers to support her ideas. But she sensed that the collegial atmosphere changed when she became a principal.

The first time I walked through the teacher's lounge and it got quiet I was like, 'This is so weird'. And I thought, 'Oh, I know what this is. I used to be the teacher sitting in the lounge and the principal would walk in and we wouldn't even be necessarily talking about the principal, but just by the fact that he came in the lounge, it'd get kind of quiet'. Or I'd show up at a door, kind of peek in a classroom, and the teacher

will say, ‘Well, what do you need?’ And I thought ‘I’m just looking’. It’s a very different role.

Retaining a teacher’s perspective: a cognitive strategy for managing role conflict and role discontinuity

In an effort to alleviate inter-role conflict, the participants employed a cognitive strategy whereby they attempted to retain their perspectives as teachers in one way or another. This strategy included turning their schools into classrooms, reclaiming their teaching practice, staying connected to students, ‘doing what’s good for kids’, and espousing an egalitarian leadership approach.

Turning schools into classrooms. As discussed previously, becoming an administrator required the participants to broaden their purview of their workplace. They could no longer focus on what was going on within the four walls of their classrooms. Some participants managed to retain a teacher’s perspective by shifting their perceptions so that, as Marsha described, the school became an expansive version of the classroom where they could continue to assume the role of teachers.

I see myself as a teacher to a bigger classroom and the ages have expanded. I have not only 6th, 7th and 8th grades. I have adults who are anywhere from you know 21 to 65, or even some of them older than that in terms of different life stages.

Marsha’s account illustrates that the role of the administrator encompasses the supervision and guidance of adult staff. Some participants were able to retain a teacher’s perspective by viewing their teachers as ‘older’ students. For example, Sandra, who had been an assistant principal for less than two years, had a lot of anxiety when she became an assistant principal because she believed that the intrinsic value and rewards of her work were derived mainly from teaching students in the classroom. Sandra was motivated to become an administrator because she believed she could effect change on a broader scale than she could do as a teacher. However, when she became an assistant principal, Sandra realized that she had been socialized to view teaching students as the only way to make a real difference in her profession. This view was reinforced by her former teacher colleagues who often questioned her decision to leave the classroom. In order to make her work matter, Sandra began to view herself as a *teacher of teachers*, a role in which she would, in turn, benefit her students.

I didn’t understand how what I was doing in my office benefited the children. It didn’t seem to be benefiting the children as much as I thought it would. I felt, at that time, I needed to be teaching math. I needed to be teaching science. I needed to be teaching in order to make a difference. By the time January came around through the end of the school year I really understood how what I did actually made a difference. It’s me who makes sure the classroom teachers have materials and the resources that they need in order for the children to be successful. It’s me who guides the teachers to go out and be involved in staff development and graduate level classes so that they remain current and effective—which again, will benefit the

children. It's me who gives teachers sensitivity training to different issues such as children who are poverty stricken and how that affects them when they come to school on a daily basis. It's me who motivates the teacher who's been teaching for 20 years and is burned out, but still has ten years left.

Sandra's efforts to transform her perceptions of her administrative role expose the problems that many principals and their assistants confront when they attempt to become instructional leaders in their schools. Often with little or no formal induction to school administration, new administrators often find it difficult to transfer the skills, knowledge and experiences so highly lauded in their former roles for improving instruction to their new roles.

Reclaiming the teaching practice. Some participants attempted to maintain continuity between their current and former roles by returning to the classroom. For example, before she decided to become a principal, Valerie consulted her current principal about how she could stay connected to the classroom.

I had a lot of talks with my current principal at that time. I said, 'Mark, you know I love teaching. How did you decide to make the move from classroom to administration? How do you handle the urge to be in the classroom with the kids and making a difference?' He said, 'You become a principal who's always in the classroom'. And I said, 'Okay. I'll do it'.

Over the course of her five years as an assistant principal, Joenetta managed to keep one foot in the door of the classroom by assuming an ongoing role as a teacher.

I teach a reading class here on Wednesdays and Fridays during one period. And I love it! I think it keeps me in touch with what teachers are feeling. You know what they need, what they go through. And I think that's an integral part of being an effective administrator. You have to know what it's like in the classroom.

To her delight, Ronda, a fourth-year principal, learned that her teachers were happy to have her teach them about new technology. But she learned that up until this time, her teachers did not see her as being a teacher because in her role as principal she no longer taught in the classroom.

After I did the first inservice a teacher came to me and said, 'You can tell you were an excellent teacher and still are because of what you did in that inservice was to make sure everybody knew what they were doing, but you didn't hold back the ones who did know'. So they saw me as a teacher.

Staying connected to students. Some participants made efforts to connect with students that extended beyond the classroom. For example, Ronda actively sought out creative and fun ways to stay connected to students.

I do 'lunch with the principal' for the kids. Every room earns it. They get tickets for good behavior. So the primary room with the most tickets and the intermediate room with most tickets wins lunch with me. And the PTA supports it. They pay for the ice cream—and once we did pizza!

Joenetta believed that it was important to stay connected to popular youth culture in order to better relate to her students. So she sometimes used popular slang to remind her students that she is still a 'real person'.

You know it's a funny thing. But I think [speaking slang] makes me more of a person for them. And that's an experience that administrators haven't had in the past. I think this is more of the new thing, you know, to be a person and also to be an administrator. And it's a balancing act and I'm not sure I've reached the balance yet . . . It's certainly a learning experience.

'Doing what's good for kids'. As has been discussed, administrators, especially principals, were constantly bombarded with the competing and conflicting demands of multiple role partners. In the hierarchy of role partners, students arguably have the least influence. Notably, the participants were very reluctant to admit the likelihood that they could not always make their students a top priority. When they were confronted with the dilemma of placing the needs of others above the needs of their students, a common mantra for the participants was that they were 'doing what's good for kids'.

Ronda explained that her teachers often approached her with requests which she believed served their own best interests rather than those of the students. When confronted with this issue, she attempted to ground her decisions in what she felt was good for kids.

We're here for one reason and that's what's good for the kids. And if it's good for kids, then I'm going to do it. I'll support it 100%, if it's good for kids. If I have any doubt about it being good for kids, I'm not going to do it. Because the bottom line is what's good for the kids. The teachers know that.

Annette worked hard to achieve consensus among her staff. During her first year, Annette confronted a lot of infighting among her staff while she was under pressure from the Board of Education to raise her school's test scores. Annette surmised that the best way to rally her staff around improving test scores was to get them to focus on students' needs. This proved to be a critical strategy because, as she admitted, principals cannot improve achievement by themselves.

[I told them] let's work towards that common goal which is to make sure that these children excel and are prepared to deal with day-to-day life in the society . . . Within that process, many of them began to see that I stood for right, and my only focus was to make sure that these children excel and that I needed help. I could not do it alone. I needed them to assist and join hands with me and cooperate with me to make sure that it happened.

Espousing an egalitarian leadership approach. As discussed previously, becoming an administrator changed the participants' relationships with their teachers. They were no longer colleagues but rather their boss. Some women talked about how they were impacted emotionally when their former colleagues—some of whom they considered to be friends—perceived them as crossing over to the other side, or worse yet, as an

enemy. These altered relationships put all of the administrators, but especially the principals, in a very isolated and vulnerable position. However, this is not merely a personal matter but also a serious professional concern. Principals, in particular, are charged with the enormous, and sometimes daunting, task of trying to get their teachers on board to support their vision for the school. If they do not establish a sense of solidarity with their staff, they cannot do their jobs effectively. As Marsha observed, some teachers resent the idea of taking directives from former colleagues whom they no longer see as being on the same team.

When I was a teacher, I was a leader in my building, and I could say, 'Hey let's go and do this', and you were one of the people [who did it]. And so it was like, 'Oh. Okay. We'll go and do this *with* you'. When you're the administrator, and you say, 'Hey let's go and do this', they look at you like, 'Yeah, but the reality is you're not gonna be the one that's doing it, you want us to do it'.

In order to mobilize teachers to support their vision, it was important for principals to convey a sense of solidarity with their staff. Thus, principals generally espoused an egalitarian approach to leadership. They often talked about the importance of making decisions collaboratively and emphasized that they could not do their jobs alone. Although some principals said that they did not shy away from using their positional power, they generally espoused an egalitarian approach to leadership.

Conclusion and implications for research, policy, and practice

In this article, we addressed role conflict and role discontinuity as potential barriers to women aspirants to the principalship, a topic that has been woefully under-explored in prior literature. The transition from teaching to administration marked a movement from a relatively private, semi-professional role to a public, highly professionalized and political role. These roles were strikingly different in terms of work domains, responsibilities and expectations. To alleviate this conflict, women administrators employed a cognitive strategy to achieve continuity between these two roles. This strategy entailed efforts to retain a teacher's perspective, which indicates that these participants were strongly attached to the teaching role. However, this strategy was difficult for the participants to employ due to their *commitment* (i.e. Goffman's denotation) to the administrative role, and the perceptions of former teacher-colleagues and students that they were no longer teachers.

Findings from this study challenge scholars and policymakers to revisit the question of whether the roles of teacher and administrator are continuous or discontinuous, and perhaps to recast that question as not an either/or but rather a both/and question: How are the roles of teacher and administrator both continuous and discontinuous? Going against the tide of much of the scholarship in the field, Cuban (1988) has argued that these two roles are more similar than dissimilar because they share the same origin (i.e. the role of administrator evolved from the role of teacher) and core functions (i.e. instructional, managerial and political).

However, findings from the present study suggest that from the perspective of a core of US women administrators less than five years into their position, the commonalities between teaching and administration are not as straightforward as Cuban has portrayed them. Although some aspects of both roles are perhaps *somewhat* continuous, for example the shift from *teaching students* to *teaching teachers*, our findings suggest that women administrators' efforts to retain their teaching identity and practice may be an attempt to manage role conflict and role discontinuity—efforts easily subsumed by administrative tasks such as paperwork. We acknowledge that these women's perspectives may be influenced by the newness of being in the position, and that over time these tensions might be resolved or made peace with. However, in light of high attrition and transfer rates among principals (Hertling, 2001), the first few years in the principalship is a critical 'make or break' period.

Future research should explore the extent to which these findings are gender-related. Do men administrators experience the same type or intensity of role conflicts? Or do stereotypes of the principal's role as being inherently 'male' buffer them from these conflicts? These questions cannot be directly addressed here given the limitations of our single-gender sample, but we surmise that issues outlined in this paper are perhaps uniquely problematic for beginning *women* administrators who have had long tenures as teachers, a pool from which these administrators are typically drawn (Doud & Keller, 1998).

Future research should also address differences between the experiences of assistant principals and principals. The focus of our study was not so much on differences between these two roles but rather between the roles of teacher and *administrator in a generic sense*. However, we recognize that assistant principals and principals often assume different responsibilities and tasks as well as confront unique challenges and problems associated with their respective roles.

Our analysis suggests that a critical challenge in recruiting teachers to the principal's office and retaining them will involve addressing the role conflicts and role discontinuity that women (and possibly men) experience in the shift from teaching to principaling. Specifically, it seems critical that leadership preparation programs and professional development programs identify the challenges, problems and tensions that arise from role continuity and help prospective and practicing administrators develop strategies for coping with these concerns. It seems especially important to create support structures for new administrators as they struggle with these tensions (Strong *et al.*, 2002).

Alternative ways of thinking about school leadership, such as the recent interest in leadership as a distributed practice may also provide a fruitful avenue for addressing these tensions (Spillane *et al.*, 2004). Specifically, helping principals and their assistants think about how leadership is distributed in their schools, and then developing their ability to strategically distribute responsibility for leadership tasks and functions so as to minimize, or at least manage, the tensions associated with role continuity. If our analysis is roughly right, then thinking about how leadership is distributed in schools is a key concern and we should be figuring out ways in which principals and assistant principals can create spaces that enable them to distribute

leadership among their teaching staff—as well as retain those aspects of their former teaching roles which might enhance their effectiveness as instructional leaders—so that it enables those in administrative roles to manage the transition tensions more effectively.

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