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Advice From the Field in Educational Leadership for Female Principals

Carole Funk
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The number of female school principals in the United States continues to grow each year, and many of these women are evolving into outstanding educational leaders. Cultural and gender barriers, however, continue to limit their leadership effectiveness despite their overall achievements. Many of these women have not maximized their leadership effectiveness despite their overall achievements. Many of these women have not maximized their leadership effectiveness because they work in cultures that are not conducive to their transformational leadership styles. In addressing these issues, the authors of this article have provided a research synthesis regarding the female principalship in order to provide "advice from the field" for practicing principals that is designed to enhance their overall leadership effectiveness.

Introduction

"Over the last 30 years, the school principal has been identified as a key player in school improvement and change" (Smulyan, 2000, p. 10). During these years, the number of women who hold positions as school principals has increased significantly although research studies regarding women who serve as school leaders have yet to reveal a comprehensive picture of these administrators. The types of literature to date relating to women in school leadership positions "rarely address the influence of gender (or race or class) on an administrator's actions, interactions, tasks, roles, or skills" (p. 13), and existing research concerning female principals has also changed over time. In the evolution of the female principalship, researchers looked first at an under-representation of women in the field of administration, then examined differences between styles of male and female management, and more recently explored a set of studies regarding organizational and social
structures that perpetuate gender imbalances and other problems regarding diversity. These social structures often forced women to be more like their male counterparts, causing them to change their styles of leadership to a more masculine model. Moreover, Campbell (1993) found that these “socializations into male patterns of leadership come at a cost to the public schools as well as the individual” (p. 64) and delimit the effectiveness of females in the principalship.

Krumm and Gates (2000) conducted a descriptive analysis to determine gender differences and leadership styles between female and male principals. The result of these findings revealed that the majority of male and female principals were found to “possess high-task behavior and high relationship behavior as their primary leadership styles,” (p. 20). In addition, female school principals selected more appropriate leadership behaviors as representative of their behaviors than did male principals. The major conclusion of this study was that female administrators appear to be superior to male principals in leadership adaptability. As indicated by Krumm and Gates (2000), female principals appear to possess superiority in leadership adaptability, thereby allowing them to use their transformational leadership styles to prioritize relationship with all stakeholders. Servais (2003) also emphasized the power of female principals, noting that these women “are in a position to impact school reform, school culture, and school partnerships” (p. 401). Females can also attend to meaningful change even in complex organizations.

Because female principals are still concerned with many problems related to their gender, women aspiring to the principalship and those who now serve as principals should benefit from the wisdom of researchers in the field by becoming more successful in their roles as educational leaders. This study addressed problem areas in the principalship for women and provide them with strategies for success that provides critical insights into the do’s and don’ts for these school leaders.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to assist aspiring and in-service female principals to become more successful in their roles by providing a research base and a guiding framework for women regarding success in the principalship. Questions that relate to the overall purpose are presented below.

1. What are the most effective practices for female principals?
2. How do female principals overcome barriers to their success?
3. How can female principals become more effective in the political realm?
4. What are the major challenges for female principals?
5. How can female principals best utilize their “female advantage?”
6. How do female principals retain and use their distinctive voices?
7. How can female principals seek balance in their personal and professional lives?
8. How should female principals gain positive power and influence in their school districts?
9. What factors lead to future success for female principals?

This study involved a literature review regarding best practices for female principals. The review of problems and challenges for female principals was designed to provide assistance to aspiring and in-service administrators that will help them be more successful in their essential roles and responsibilities.

Advice From the Field

Effective Practices for Female Principals

Slick and Gupton (1993) reported that 300 female administrators were subjects in their research regarding women in school administration, and 75% of these administrators were principals. In this study, women in educational leadership positions gave their best advice, both reflective and specific, to assist aspiring and in-service female leaders. Their suggestions for success as administrators included: (a) being prepared with the necessary degrees and credentials; (b) becoming psychologically ready and politically aware; (c) working hard to be highly qualified; (d) being persistent, strong, firm, and fair; (e) learning from failure in order to be more successful; (f) having good people skills, including listening and showing genuine interest in the concerns of others; (g) being professional at all times; (h) developing and maintaining strong support systems; (i) believing in yourself; (j)
upholding and protecting your integrity at all times; and (k) maintaining personal ethics and values. These authors also provided “an up-to-date analysis of the evolution of issues underlying women’s inequitable representation in executive positions” (p. xiv) in the profession of educational leadership. In addition, a two-phase narrative study provided information that revealed how these women achieved their career successes.

In their book, Gupton and Slick (1996) also described the need for a better support system for females in leadership positions and the quality of their educational preparation, their retention issues, making the “ultimate shift from access to equity” (p. xi).

Mullen and Patrick (2000) shared leadership practices in inner city schools and concluded that sharing the “human touch” was one of the most effective strategies for success for female school principals when confronted by complex problems that exist in at-risk environments. The strategies that one principal used to achieve success as a caring leader included her role as a change agent on behalf of children. Serving as a catalyst for change by building a shared vision allowed this school leader to develop an outreach program to connect her to the school and the neighborhood in the projects. Her motto was “hanging tough, being loving” (p. 37) as she worked to change the lives of her students in significant ways. The strategies that made her successful in her efforts on behalf of children involved increasing opportunities for children to be successful, empowering teachers, and changing the climate of the school. The specific strategies included: (a) applying a philosophy of management and discipline that values discipline with dignity (p. 38), (b) developing and utilizing a core group of teachers who care about children—the principal’s main support system, (c) precipitating changes in staff to ensure that the children had better teachers, (d) creating rituals of relationship and visibility, (e) applying Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs to aid with social acceptance and self-actualization, (f) designing educational and remedial programs new to the school, and (g) changing the traditional academic year to year-round schooling. The principal’s efforts in this program resulted in positive changes in all the areas in her plan.

Another successful principal noted the lessons that she learned as the first female administrator in a rough campus (Wilmore, 1998). School leadership was a stressful career for this young woman who learned that female principals must find ways to combine stress management and relationship-building in order to survive physically and emotionally. This undaunted principal also stressed the importance of mentoring connections with a trusted confidant by showing her the way, teaching her the unwritten
rules of the school community, and looking out for the well-being of the young woman she was mentoring.

Through her experiences at this school, the principal discovered that successful women should always be watching for new female administrators to bring through the ranks to provide the leaders of tomorrow, and she practiced what she preached. In addition, she suggested that successful women take care to prioritize their time in order to save for family and friends and to seek a daily time to meditate. Another strategy to reduce stress included exercising daily and pounding her frustrations out on her treadmill. She also noted the importance of a last piece of advice—find a hobby you really like and provide a time in every day to refocus and reflect on other important areas in your life. In conclusion, Wilmore (1998) noted that school principals must bloom where they are planted but should also seek ways to stretch out in the sunlight, walk with confidence, and realize their own personal visions. Through the themes identified above, those in female principalships as well as aspiring principals must understand the primary task in their leadership roles: to ensure that all children can and will learn in their schools.

**Barriers for Female Principals**

According to Helterbran and Rieg (2004), women who become school principals continue to experience many barriers to their success. The following barriers synthesized from the work of these researchers regarding female principals reveal the roadblocks that they will have to contend with in their roles as school leaders.

- Lack of encouragement from other administrators to assume leadership roles.
- Shortage of female administrators to serve as role models and as mentors.
- Beliefs that female principals must be better qualified than male candidates.
- Lack of assurance that female principals can handle discipline problems, especially regarding older, male students.
- Gender issues related to male resentment regarding working with or for women in administration.
- Relocation issues suggesting that women are reluctant to move.
- Difficulty in balancing home and family responsibilities.
Differences in male and female leadership styles.

Lack of desire for power by female principals.

Overall, these authors indicated that female school principals need strong support and encouragement from both males and females in educational administration to overcome barriers that many women continue to face in their roles as school leaders. Standards for males and females should be equal, and women should not be expected to be better qualified than males to be hired as a principal. In overcoming barriers, female aspirants to the principalship must also utilize their humanities skills in student discipline. Other areas to address in removing barriers to a principalship should include: create a sound career plan, be ethical, create relationships with stakeholders, be true to your word, lead with collaboration, and continue to learn the historical context regarding women in educational administration.

Grogan (2000) addressed other problem areas regarding women in the principalship, noting difficulties faced in the real world of schooling. The most important issue female principals have to address is how to maintain the difficult balance between their own personal backgrounds and the demands of stakeholders who have different role expectations for a female principal. In addition, she indicated that female principals must also address institutional barriers that are "both inside and outside of the boundaries of historically and socially defined norms" (p. 201). Other barriers encountered by women in the principalship include negotiations with superintendents, shifting roles and responsibilities, difficult leadership processes, overwhelming demands, and negative male rituals within school cultures. In addition, time demands are heavy, changing contexts emerge, and tensions within the system must be negotiated. Increasing demands are also placed on the time and energy of a principal who must oversee ever-shifting school communities and personnel and understand the contexts within which female principals can be successful. Other barriers for principals include navigating new conceptual networks in which they must operate within district and school hierarchies, understanding the dynamics of school leadership, assessing their own backgrounds and training correctly, and revisiting their beliefs, values, and interaction styles in order to understand their own visions of leadership.

According to Grogan (2000), the predominant gender issue for female principals included institutional and individual social structures that have a powerful impact on both their private lives and their work. Another problem for female principals occurs when they try to interact positively with male administrators but are rejected by their male peers. Other balancing acts for these female school leaders included (a) dealing with unplanned career
trajectories; (b) having problems with age (too old or too young); (c) trying to resolve work conflicts; (d) selecting approaches to leadership, family, and work contexts; (e) revealing mixed expectations of parents and teachers; (f) being an insider and an outsider in the educational system; (g) resisting changes in the hierarchical structures; and (h) balancing continuity and school reform. In conclusion, Grogan found that female principals must be able to adapt and work toward systemic change in order to be successful in their positions.

**Political Savvy for Female Principals**

In their research, Hill and Ragland (1995) found that many women in educational administration do not exhibit the political savvy necessary to be successful in advancing through the ranks to higher positions. According to these authors, male administrators cut their political deals on the golf course and use their strong networks through other male activities, leaving female administrators out of the decision-making loop. In a similar vein, Funk (1998) addressed the problems that female principals face in their roles and emphasized the need for women in school leadership roles to play the games “that mama taught you not to play . . . but doing so by establishing your own rules and limits based upon your principles” (p. 11). This author also concluded that women who know how to play the game in an *ethical context* can survive political intrigues, school district cultures, the infamous grapevine, bad or weak bosses, and knowing how to play power games. In order to play these games well, Funk noted that female principals must learn to win political games by using the following female-friendly strategies.

- Deal with politics on your own terms.
- Have something in common with the male administrators.
- Never say anything negative about your boss, superintendent, or your district.
- Be wary of “talking shop” with others—be careful or *what* you say every moment.
- Identify and get to know the movers and shakers in your district so you can get things done quickly and effectively.
- Control your own behavior at all times and follow the chain of command.
- Get help when you have a problem that you can’t solve.
- Take the job that the superintendent wants you to do even if you don’t want it.
- Build your own powerbase within your district and at state and local levels.
- Don’t expect organizations to be fair—they are amoral!
- Build you own power base by building your reputation as a leader.
• Learn from your mistakes through introspection and determine new strategies that work.
• “Never forget kids and their best interests are the bottom line in everything you do as an administrator—don’t be diverted from the principle” (p. 17-18).

Following these political rules helps female administrators to be more politically savvy in the difficult world of educational administration (Funk, 1998). Aspiring and practicing female school administrators must realize that “playing the game” is necessary if you wish to be successful as a school principal and that the world of school politics is a minefield that can be successfully traversed. Stepping stones to success in the political arena include: having a clear purpose—to ensure that all children learn, to gain a realistic understanding of the political and cultural aspects of school organizations, to develop a sense of power, and to believe that you have an entitlement to do things your way as a leader.

**Challenges for Female Principals**

In a qualitative study, Eckman (2003) found that women who are school principals continue to face conflicts and challenges regarding their careers, particularly problems related to gender in their schools. One of the main problems that emerged in her study of female principals revealed that the image of a principal for many people remains a “male image,” thereby continuing problems that women in principalships encounter who do not see a female in the role of the school principal. She also noted that critical factors in the success of these women included support from other female and male leaders who mentored them. The major themes found in the qualitative research study were: personal attributes, family support, mentors and mentoring, encouragement from university professors and leadership training programs, networks and support for women principals, role conflict and role balance, the image of the high school principalship, and leadership styles.

Challenges for females in principalships are described in the words of the women in this study regarding their lives as school leaders. “I try and lead by being a leader with instruction and curriculum . . . many of the males that I work with . . . were hired and their roles had been very different—they were managers” (Eckman, 2003, p. 196). Another principal stated that “she relied ‘more on relationships than the men I’ve worked for. I spend a lot more time listening . . . I think that this is a female characteristic. I use a lot more feeling words. . . .’” (p. 197).
Other principals indicated that “women are much less concerned about power and . . . have less of that kind of ego connected to it” than males do (p. 193). Recognizing the support from family members was also reported by one principal who stated, “I couldn’t have done it all alone” (p. 189). In a similar vein, the support needed from others was voiced by a principal who said, “I go to work all the time and anytime, and if I had a husband who didn’t understand . . . it never could have happened” (p. 189). Help from a mentor provided a boost to her mentee by telling her, “You stick to your guns. You’re doing the right thing. And you’re going to make it” (p. 199). In contrast, some female principals revealed that they were making a difference in the eyes of young women. As one woman stated, “I’m very proud of being a high school principal. I’m very aware when I walk down the halls of being a role model for girls” (Eckman, 2003, p. 191).

Problems with “good old boys” networks, role conflicts, and role balance that were revealed by the women in this study “acknowledged that the ‘good old boys’ network was alive and well” (Eckman, 2003, p. 192). These principals also noted that they “felt that their concerns were different from those of the male administrators in terms of needing people to talk to their mutual concerns” (p. 192). With regard to her role conflicts, another principal noted that “the number one issue is time commitment . . . you’re the organizational person” . . . and “it’s stressfull!” (p. 193). Finding a balance between work and home was an issue with a different principal, who stated, “I work 70 hours every week . . . it’s a minimum of a 12-hour day, and it’s very often 15 hours and another 8 hours on the weekends” (p. 193). The workload for one principal caused stress and she noted that my health has not been as good as I want it to be. I’ve gained weight in the three years that I’ve had this position . . . If I had to do this for a long, long time, I think that it would have a detrimental effect on my health. (p. 193)

Gender differences between male and female principals led another principal to note that “gender was affecting my career path” (p. 194). Another agreed, indicating that “the people who hire high school principals ‘don’t see a woman as somebody who manages the building and deals with discipline . . . they feel that men are better at that’” (p. 195). Overall, the voices of these female high school principals revealed the challenges in their roles, especially problems, and stresses that they face in their positions as school leaders. In their reflections regarding their personal challenges, they indicated a need for feedback, balance, support, mentoring, networking, role models, self-confidence, and their own distinct leadership styles.
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The Female Advantage for Principals

Funk (1993) noted specific advantages for female school leaders; 74% of the respondents in the study were school principals. When asked to respond to the advantages that school leaders had because they were female, these women indicated that their gender roles made them more effective and affective leaders. Specific characteristics noted by these women in administration were: being nurturing, giving, adaptive, collaborative, intuitive, flexible, peace-making, empathic, able to compromise, sensitive, humanistic, responsive to others' needs, strong communicators, active listeners, and collaborative. The conclusions regarding the advantages that women have because of their gender indicated the following:

- The experiences of women in their roles as girls, mothers, daughters, and sisters had a significant impact on their leadership behavior.
- The major strengths that women brought to their leadership roles were empathy, sensitivity, caring, nurturing, supporting, compassion, and patience.
- Female school leaders viewed assertiveness, confidence, high self-esteem, strength, and competence as the most important characteristics of effective women in school leadership roles.
- Motivational styles of female school leaders reflected their strong beliefs in the importance of praise, rewards, and modeling, within a school culture that values professional growth, input, and teamwork.

Overall the advantages indicate that female school leaders "see leadership as a shared process in which all work together toward synergy and view the work-team of the school as a family, treating people with respect, not telling them what needs to be done" (Funk, 1993, p. 41). They also acknowledged the importance of caring as well as competency and brought their "real selves" and their unique strengths to school administration.

Voice and the Female Principal

Villani (1999) described women in the principalship as leaders who take care of the needs of others but are also expected to put their own needs last and silence their voices. Because of this phenomenon, "women often swallow their voices and try to keep the peace" in their multi-faceted roles (p. 26).
Quotations that represent the voices of women principals are powerful tools that bring forth a richness that generates affective emotions, thereby personalizing the issues, concerns, and successes regarding female principals. The following quotations are presented in order to hear the voices of female principals in their own words.

One female school principal felt a need to persevere "in the face of the animosity I experienced, but I was determined not to leave without having had a fair chance to succeed at what I was trying to do." (Villani, 1999, p. 26)

... the principal is like the pilot of the B-29 bomber in the South Pacific ... the job alternates between the routine and boredom of a long flight—and stark terror. (Campbell, 1993, p. 61)

One time, in search of the principal, a visitor came to the front office. First he looked at the office clerk and asked if he was the principal. When the clerk, a man my age indicated that he was not, the visitor turned to the secretary. Upon learning that she, a woman older than I, was not the principal, the person at last looked at me. He asked, "Where is the principal?" (Villani, 1999, p. 5)

Women administrators are more willing to listen, not "shoot from the hip" as men do—but be aware—when we are forced to shoot, we usually shoot to kill. (Funk, 1993, p. 35)

I'd make two pages of things I needed to do. Then, be totally frustrated because of the interruptions ... I didn't get anything done. (Campbell, 1993, p. 61)

When I went to the interview for this job, you know, Dr. (male superintendent) said why would you ever think I'd put a woman there ... it's a big school, you need to start at a small one. (Campbell, 1993, p. 63)

For many, men remain the leaders and women the caretakers in schools. (Villani, 1999, p. 27)

Because women have become such a vital part of the administrative team, I think the rules have changed? (Funk, 1995, p. 64)

There are three reasons why she shouldn't be principal. First, she's a first-grade teacher and this is a school for fifth and sixth graders; second, she's 5 foot 4 and weighs 117 pounds; and third, she's a girl! (Villani, 1999, p. 9)

He walked over to the telephone that had once been his and dialed the other principal. "Hello, Mike, this is Sam. I'm in the new little girl's office." (Vallani, 1999, p. 10)

"I simply couldn't comprehend that people ... would be so purposefully hurtful. They must really hate me to do such a thing," was what kept coming to mind. I tried to tell myself that I was not in Junior High and that I needed to rise above their pettiness and remember why it was happening. Yet I felt so distinctly isolated and rejected that this was hard to remember. My mind tried to reassure me, but I still felt the pain of their exclusion. (Vallani, 1999, p. 19)
Women are expected to attend to others’ needs, and in fact are sometimes criticized when they put their own needs or ideas first. As a result, women often swallow their voices and try to keep the peace. Although I struggled to be perceived as a leader who spoke up, my uncertainty was probably evident. I had temporarily lost my voice. (Vallani, 1999, p. 26)

Putting my head in the sand wasn’t going to make their confusion go away. By not directly confronting the issue, I missed an important opportunity. I didn’t model strength or courage. (Vallani, 1999, p. 26)

Becoming an administrator opened me to a level of scrutiny that was daunting. It seemed that everything I did was being observed and analyzed. It became clear that I would never please everyone with anything that I did. This seems obvious, yet because I was on the receiving end of the disapproval, it was hard for me to take the criticisms in stride. I needed to remember that I couldn’t please all of the people all of the time, although the teachers clearly expected me to please each of them. (Villani, 1999, p. 39)

Carr (1995) revealed the importance of communication skills to female principals as a “critical element in the exercise of influence” (p. 49). Carr noted that male dominance is “built into the very structure of society, including language and speech” (p. 49), signaling the importance of communication styles in the principal’s world. She found that the female subjects in her study admitted to having influence but not power because they saw these connotations as aggressive and pushy as related to power. The women agreed that they wanted to do the right thing rather than doing things right. They were also very effective when using micro-political strategies that allowed them to have mutual exchanges with others as well as utilizing mutual decision-making and collegiality in improving schools. Carr revealed a view of female principals who are not subordinate “but are strong and influential principals whose practice reflects clearly the behaviors associated with effective school leaders” (p. 55).

Sacrifices and Successes

Krajewski, Matkin, Chance, & Galletti (1998) studied three female administrators who felt that “administration is one of the most rewarding parts of their lives even though sacrifices and tough decisions are regular, everyday occurrences” (p. 182). The principals summarized the following lessons learned from their experiences.

• Administration is one of the most rewarding segments of their lives in spite of the sacrifices and hard choices.
• It’s always difficult to come home at a certain time of day because of problems that need immediate attention.
• The hours for a principal are long, the pace is rigorous, and the day is unpredictable. Nobody is concerned about what meetings you may have had the night before.
• My salary as a principal is calculated on how long I have worked in the system, not on my merits.
• A principal’s life must be reassessed, new goals must be set, and any priorities must be adjusted.
• Being a principal has to be more than a job—it is a calling.

The three principals, who started at the ground floor and moved into higher and loftier roles, offered the following advice. Administration is one of the most rewarding segments of their lives in spite of the sacrifices and hard choices that occur everyday in their lives. These women said that keeping balance in their lives was the key to their successes. Time for these women was critically important and had been protected as the role demands increased. Females in the principalship must spend time deciding what is most important to them.

When giving advice to others, the principals noted the following important aspects that must be considered as a school principal.

• Balance your life if you want to be successful.
• Learn to use your time well because your role demands will increase.
• Don’t ever sacrifice being professional, moral, and ethical.
• Always be optimistic and maintain a healthy sense of reality.
• Keep your sense of humor and maintain your perspective.
• Be a lifelong learner in order to grow both personally and professionally.
• Spend time deciding what’s important to you.
• Make the hard choices on behalf of children.
• Be a lifelong learner in order to grow personally and professionally.

Learning from the sacrifices as well as the successes of female administrators provides real-life stories of women school principals. Passing the torch to those who practice these lessons can serve as a gift from those who blaze the trails in the role of school principal.
Summary and Conclusions

The number of female principals in the United States continues to grow each year, and these individuals are evolving into strong educational leaders. Further research regarding this role for women is essential. Barriers of all types still exist for women in educational administration. Additional research regarding female principals would help level the playing fields for females and males in educational leadership. As the aspiring women administrators enter their first principalships, they should be prepared through innovative, transformational preparation programs that target the unique needs of women who plan to institute humanistic school reform practices on behalf of the children they serve. Researchers must provide a stronger knowledge base regarding the differences in male and female leadership styles in order to individualize graduate school education for students of both genders. Providing school leaders with cutting-edge knowledge, tools, and visions will be necessary in a time when school funding is insufficient for the increasing number of students in the schools.

Conclusions

1. Although female school principals continue to face barriers that limit their success as school leaders, many women in principalships are providing strong leadership in their schools.
2. Female principals have distinct advantages in their roles as school executives because of their humanistic and collaborative leadership and they are changing the negative perceptions of female principals.
3. Female principals are successful, empowering leaders who serve as change agents, treat everyone with respect, care about children, provide a positive school culture, and make a difference in the lives of the children in their care.
4. The success of female principals can be enhanced through mentoring, building strong relationships with all school clienteles, taking care of their personal health issues, being confident, and learning from their mistakes.
5. Female principals must use their powerful individual and collective voices in order to make a difference in the lives of children.
6. Female principals have learned that leadership is very rewarding and they enjoy their roles as school leaders.
7. Effective communication with all stakeholders is a “must” for successful female principals.

8. Female principals must seek balance in their personal and professional lives through physical exercise, enjoying hobbies, and making time for family and fun in order to be renewed for the next crisis.

9. The latest picture of a female principal is an effective school leader who is strong and influential in her position as leader and who involves others in the important decisions within the school.

10. Female principals must learn to use their powerful “voices” to persuade others to support their schools and use their referent power to provide the best opportunities for the children they serve.

11. Female principals must develop stronger support systems at local, state, and national levels.

12. Female principals should create a personal vision for their roles as school leaders that correlate with their school-wide vision and that of the district.

13. Female principals should use politics effectively to obtain a power base within their school districts.

14. Female principals should be strong communicators and active listeners in order to build relationships with all stakeholders.

15. Female principals must understand and use referent power to be truly effective as school leaders.

16. Female leaders should honor, preserve, and protect their integrity and maintain their ethical character.

17. Female principals should create a career plan for their next steps into higher-level administration.

18. Female leaders should be more accepted as principals as more women move into the principalship, thereby erasing the “male image” from the minds of stakeholders.

19. Female principals bring their true selves and their unique strengths into the world of school leadership.

References


