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Women as School Principals: What is the Challenge?

Valerie R. Helterbran & Sue A. Rieg

From 1988 to 1998 the percentage of female school principals increased from 20% to 48% and continues to grow. The number of women entering school administration has grown as has the number of principal turnovers.

Women who seek positions in educational leadership face many issues. Ten barriers that continue to surface in the research are:

- little encouragement to assume leadership roles;
- lack of female role models;
- perceived need to be “better qualified”;
- women cannot discipline older, male students;
- resentment of males working for females;
- some educators prefer male principals;
- reluctance to relocate;
- long hours;
- women lack the desire for power; and
- leadership styles differ

The authors address these barriers and suggest ways to overcome them.

Principals are faced with complex tasks. The principal is expected to collaboratively create a school-wide vision and see that vision through successful completion. The principal is expected to raise the achievement levels of the students to meet state and national standards. The principal is to be the instructional leader who plans professional development opportunities for teachers and staff. The principal must handle discipline problems, making sure that punishments are issued fairly and consistently for all students. The principal must balance an ever-decreasing school budget, making sure teachers and students have what they need to maintain an effective teaching and learning environment. The principal must know the laws regarding

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special education, and teachers' and students' rights and responsibilities. The principal is expected to attend after-school meetings and school events. The principal is required to attend administrative meetings and keep up with current research and best practices in education. Along with these tasks, the principal must put out all of the fires that flame daily in the school setting.

Why would anyone want to assume these challenges? Educators take on these tasks because they care about educating children and preparing them to be successful members of society. Despite this motivation, principals choose to leave the field of school administration. Yerkes and Guaglianone (1998) identified factors that make the principalship stressful. These factors include:

- time: for most, a 60-80 hour week;
- workload and complexity of job;
- supervision of “unending” evening activities;
- minimal pay differential between top teacher and administrator;
- bombardment with high expectations;
- state and district mandates that require hours of paperwork; and
- complex society with attendant social problems

Gilman and Lanman-Givens (2001) addressed reasons why promising candidates resist pursuing careers as school principals:

- costly and irrelevant requirements to obtain principal certification;
- too many pressures—accountability, test scores, parents, special interest groups;
- too many hats to wear—community relations director, disciplinarian, business manager, safety officer, fund-raiser, social service agent, law enforcer, and more;
- not enough time; and
- too little authority

The “Typical” Principal

In 1998, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) conducted a study of 3,000 principals in K-8 schools. The “typical principal” was profiled as a 50-year-old white male who worked an average of ten hours per day and devoted up to eight additional hours per week to school-related activities. He has good morale (but could be better) and had no major concerns about job security. He spent much of his time supervising staff and interacting with and disciplining students. The “typical principal” worked with social service agencies, developed instructional practices and curriculum, and worked with site-based counseling. He was concerned about the fragmentation of his time, student assessment, students who were not performing to potential, staff development, and financial resources. He was also concerned about the ability of public education to attract quality people to replace him and others in the K-8 principalship (NAESP, 2002).

Much has been said and written about women assuming the principalship. In an arena that is still largely a “man’s world,” women are defining and redefining their roles and relationships in working with male administrative colleagues and predominately female teaching staffs. From

1988 to 1998 the percentage of female principals increased from 20% to 48% and continues to increase. However, although the number of women entering school administration has grown in the last ten years, so has the turnover of females in the principalship.

The United States is experiencing a shortage of principals due to the additional responsibilities and increased demands placed on principals by the public, central administration, and school boards. Women who seek or are already in positions of educational leadership often face barriers that lead to a change in career due to the difficulty of overcoming these obstacles.

Historical Perspective

Women's roles in society are constantly evolving. McPherson (2000) summarized the traditional roles of women—to follow, to obey, to support, and to provide. In the past, women were punished for speaking out publicly. They were strapped to a ducking stool and submerged in water, or they were muzzled in the town square. Women were seen as “ornaments” but never heard. McPherson symbolized gender as both a destiny and a decision—something that we must define, develop, and deploy in individual ways so that it enhances the talents, intelligence, and gifts that we bring. She asked, “Is gender an instrument to be used or an obstacle to be overcome or avoided?” (p. 150).

As Marshall (2000) reflected on the epistemologies framing research on women school leaders, she reported that in the 1950s and early 1960s there were few women leaders in education. In the 1960s and 1970s, researchers sought answers to why few women had entered and moved into administration.

Well-intended programs to “fix women's deficiencies” focused on public relations, finance, and politics. In the 1970s and 1980s, equal employment policies were developed to help eliminate the barriers faced by women in educational leadership. Women continued to work hard as public educators and, during the late 1980s and 1990s, began entering careers in the field of educational administration in greater numbers.

Issues Cited in the Literature: Research Findings

Women continue to face barriers in educational administration. These barriers may arise in a woman's quest to provide effective leadership. However, the researchers indicate that these barriers are familiar and are encountered by women in varying degrees as careers unfold. The question remains: How central are the following barriers to women administrators?

1. Little or no encouragement to assume leadership roles: Do typical administrative social “bonding” activities, by their nature, raise the discomfort level for women?

Eakle (1995) mentioned that when she attended administrative meetings she sensed a feeling of the “Good ol’boys” club as the men discussed their tennis games, traded jokes that they had heard from the service clubs to which they belonged, and complained about the teachers union. She believed that women who did not belong to the same organizations or clubs as their male counterparts had little opportunity for promotion or advancement. In her study of beginning principals in South Wales, Dunshea (1998) observed that men often viewed women principals as social butterflies, or worse, if they attended meetings at bars or other social clubs. She found that women received “backhanded” remarks from male administrators insinuating that women got their jobs solely because they were women, not because they were deserving or had earned their positions.

2. A lack of female role models and mentors in educational administration: Are women willing to do what it takes to network, mentor, and extend themselves to women who display leadership potential and/or women already in a position of leadership?

Concerning role models and mentors, Eakle (1995) found that the school board was not supportive of her during her tenure in administration. She experienced isolation when moving from a predominantly female teaching atmosphere to a predominantly male administrative environment. She perceived that the female staff members lacked confidence in her and were afraid that she would fail, reinforcing the idea that women cannot cope in the administrative field.

Klauke (1990) contended that professors of educational administration could help to overcome the obstacle of role stereotyping by assuring school boards that women can be effective and competent administrators. She suggested placing women on search teams and providing mentors for female administrators.

3. The perceived need to be “better qualified” than male counterparts: Do women need to work “twice as hard to be half as good?”

In educational leadership, women face different expectations and their actions are judged differently than men. Females must be extraordinary leaders in order to be successful and face the difficulties

of the job (Dunshea, 1998). Eakle (1995) found that women needed to be tenacious and assertive to get promoted—in other words exhibit more male-like qualities than female qualities. Growe and Montgomery (2001) stated that, “American women believe that they have to be twice as good and better than others with the same aspirations” (p. 2).

4. Women cannot discipline older students, especially males: *If women successfully discipline male students in the classroom, why does this belief surface administratively?*”

In many instances, parents and community members believe that males can more effectively discipline male students than can women. Hatton (1996) found that in one community, people believed that a male, preferably a *large* male, was the only appropriate choice for selection as principal because if a fight broke out, it would be better to have a male around to handle the situation. In Australia, Sachs and Blackmore (1998, p. 3) quoted a parent as saying, “Why should Johnny listen to you, you are only a woman, he does not like women?” Myths about female administrators include that women are too emotional and too weak physically to discipline older students (Whitaker & Lane, 1990).

5. The resentment of males working with and for females: *What can be done to alleviate gender friction?*

Dunshea (1998) found that males are often patronizing to females and want to tell them how to do their jobs. She stated that teachers and others deliberately kept information from the female administrator in an attempt to make her appear less competent than a man. At one principal’s Parents and Citizens meeting, she noted that a motion was made that included the statement, “It’s ungodly and unnatural to have a woman in charge of a man” (p. 7). Coffin and Ekstrom (1979) found that one of the reasons that women candidates were given for not being hired in a position for which they believed themselves qualified was that men do not want to take directions from a woman.

6. Some educators prefer a male principal: *Is this due to experience, perception, or envy?*

McGrath (1992, p. 62) cited Folmar’s (1989) research that suggested, “School board members see female leaders as less effective than their male counterparts.” Bredeson (1991) suggested that male

teachers continue to take on nearly twice the number of leadership roles in schools; thus, women need to take on more leadership opportunities on top of their regular teaching responsibilities. Bredeson stated that these quasi-administrative experiences might contribute to the preparation, credentials, and confidence women need to assume administrative roles in schools.

7. Women are often reluctant to relocate: *Does a woman's commitment to her family differ from that of a male's?*

Women are still typically seen as primary caregivers to their children. They are often up in the middle of the night with sick children, calming fears, and getting their young ones ready and off to school in the morning. If men devote several evenings per week to various school or community functions, it is seen as part of the job; however, if women are away from home, they are neglecting their families (Eakle, 1995). Shakeshaft (1989) suggested that a lack of motivation for women to become leaders may be an accurate reflection of reality in light of home and family responsibilities and job opportunities. Women were expected to continue to do the majority of the work inside the home while working outside the home. Shakeshaft suggested that the difficulties of juggling family responsibilities with administrative tasks might not seem worth it to some women. Sachs and Blackmore (1998) suggested that networking was especially challenging for women because balancing the demands of work and home were difficult and often had to be completed on the run.

8. Principals work long hours: *Is it possible to balance home and career demands and be effective in both arenas?*

Goeller (1995), referring to Educational Research Service data, noted that “. . . a majority of both school board presidents and male superintendents believed that pregnancy and administration are incompatible” (p. 106). She further suggested that family and home responsibilities were barriers to women. Glass (2000) corroborated that, “the role of mother probably restrains many women teachers from pursuing the principalship—a position they are well acquainted with” (p. 5).

9. Leadership styles differ between men and women: Is this a problem or an asset?

Males and females carry out the same tasks as educational leaders but they often focus on different aspects of the job. Women tend to embrace relationships, sharing, and process; men focus on task completion, achieving goals, and winning (Chliwniak, 1997). Women tend to accept disagreement as a natural occurrence, not suppress it (Shautz, 1995). Females typically desire a collaborative and site-based approach to school management, males often desire a top-down approach. Andrews and Basom (1990) affirmed leadership differences and suggested that this is expressed as women being more instructional-oriented in the school.

According to Grove and Montgomery (2001), good school administration is more attuned to female than male leadership behavior. She stated that the female attributes of being nurturing, sensitive, empathetic, intuitive, compromising, caring, cooperative, and accommodating are associated with effective school administration.

10. Women often lack the desire for power: Is establishing authority related to one's physical size and/or personality?

Many times women do not feel the need for power. They prefer a more democratic and collegial form of leadership (Sachs & Blackmore, 1991). Shautz (1995) found in her study that 88% of the females preferred a collaborative style of supervision based on problem-solving approaches where the supervisor guides the process. In contrast, according to Oplatka (2001), to make assumptions that women in the principalship “. . . are supposed to use predominately ‘feminine’ management styles” (p. 230) is simplistic and unrealistic. She cited six headteachers in her study who described themselves as “assertive, centralist and task-oriented in their relationship with staff and parents.” To further complicate, yet illuminate, the issue of power, Smulyan's (2000) study participants, three female principals, asserted that they did not believe their “gender made much difference in their lives and work”

(p. 598). The power differential issue seemingly appears to vary from woman to woman.

Conclusions and Applications: Overcoming the Obstacles

We have faced some of these obstacles throughout our years as principals. We found the following strategies helpful in overcoming the issues faced

by other female administrators and offer these suggestions based on our experiences:

- Like the “Little Train That Could,” we knew we had the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively manage a school and reminded ourselves, “We know we can, we know we can. . . .” Possessing confidence, courage, and determination was invaluable in entering and navigating the male-dominated world of public school administration.
- We sought out effective mentors, female and male, with whom we chose to collaborate and commiserate. These mentors had long-standing positive reputations in our districts and surrounding districts and were always willing to listen and share ideas.
- We networked with our female administrators, enjoying professional and social occasions, as we discussed school issues.
- Delegating responsibility was another way we balanced and managed the demands of home and school. We realized the importance of hiring accomplished, qualified staff members who could effectively dispatch their duties. We recognized teacher leaders and their many strengths, and we offered opportunities for these teachers to assume meaningful leadership responsibilities.
- *And possibly the most important suggestion*, we acknowledged that we benefit from the differences between our leadership styles and those of our male counterparts.

Success in the principalship appears to be highly idiosyncratic for both male and female principals. Principals with the knowledge, attitudes, dedication, and stamina to assume the school’s top job are the only individuals who stand a chance to survive, and indeed flourish, in a position that rivals any other in the importance and service of educating and serving children. Schools are a mirror of the society that created and supports them; this includes gender issues as well. The pressure of society plays a large role in determining work of the principalship. Women who are interested in becoming principals should recognize these challenges. Differences and difficulties may exist in the perceptions of women in the principalship. The charges for women are to winnow through the issues and tasks, to identify what is hindering performance, and to face hinderances and work to diminish them.

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