

6-26-2019

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Qin, Lixia; Torres, Mario; and Madsen, Jean, "Building Pathways: Nurturing a Female Generation of School Leaders in China" (2019). *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership*. 217.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/jwel/217>

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Journal of Women in Educational Leadership, 2019

doi: 10.32873/unl.dc.jwel.192

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/jwel/>

ISSN 2379-2191



WOMEN IN HISTORY

Building Pathways: Nurturing a Female Generation of School Leaders in China

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International feminist perspectives recognize the continuing inequalities of power between men and women across all classes (Adler & Israeli, 1988; Alston, 2000; De la Rey, 2005). In China's male-dominant society, for example, women often have been inhibited from pursuing leadership positions (Wiseman, Obiakor & Bakken, 2009). Further, women's access to leadership positions is constrained within many social sectors (Cooke, 2005). In school settings, there is no doubt that women have greatly contributed to the changing practice of educational management in China since 1980s (Zhong & Ehrich, 2010).

However, despite recent changes, women are still vastly underrepresented in educational leadership positions due to a variety of reasons, such as their adherence to traditional gender roles (Coleman, Qiang & Li, 1998). One particular reason that has been drawing increasing attention across the world is the lack of appropriate training and guidance in young women's leadership (Su, Adams & Miniberg, 2000; Cooke, 2003; Barnett, 2004; Chen, 2005). This paper probes in greater depth one of the most important, yet largely overlooked aspects in the educational leadership of China – women's leadership roles in education and young women's leadership preparation.

It has been suggested that empowerment and leadership preparation are intertwined amid the process of realizing gender equality (Ross & Wang, 2008, p. 84). Thus, in order to enhance women's participation in educational leadership, it is necessary to emphasize young women's leadership development. Research suggests pre-service teachers are able to develop a leadership mindset from their early education training experiences (Sterrett & Bond, 2012). Therefore, to increase female involvement in school leadership, female students need leadership training and experiences during their teacher preparation phase. For instance, as Forster notes (1997), "teacher education institutions carry a particular responsibility by preparing teachers not only to understand and accept a leadership role, but to be able to effectively function in that capacity" (p.88). That is to say, learning to lead and learning to teach can occur simultaneously during teacher preparation (Bond & Sterrett, 2014).

Purpose

Drawing from published data, literature, and the data collected by the authors, this paper explores women's leadership roles in schools, the barriers to young women's leadership development, and builds a case for changes needed in teacher education in order to develop leadership capacity for future female teachers in China. Although there are past studies focusing on women's leadership in China (e.g., Ling, Chia, & Fang, 2000; Mok, Fan, & Pang, 2007; Woodhams, Xian & Lupton, 2014), relatively little is known about Chinese women in education leadership especially their leadership development in education (e.g. Coleman,

Qiang & Li, 1998; Madsen, 2010). This paper fills a gap in the literature and brings light to an overlooked aspect involving China's school leader development.

Methodology

Due to minimal Chinese scholarship in female leadership development, this paper relies largely upon Western research to contextualize the study. Young women in colleges are at a turning point moving into diverse careers and many of them may have leadership aspirations. However, the path for them to assume leadership opportunities might be full of unseen barriers (Roth, Purvis, & Bobko, 2012). The metaphor of the leadership labyrinth expands upon the notion of the "glass ceiling." Instead of fixed barriers, the "labyrinth" metaphor suggests women face complex barriers in each stage of their leadership journey (Carli & Eagly, 2007). The understanding of the various barriers that make up this labyrinth can be crucial for improving women's leadership participation (Carli & Eagly, 2007).

Regarding the factors influencing women's leadership development, Ragins and Sundstrom (1989) addressed four major factors impacting women's leadership aspirations: (1) individual factors (e.g. achievement orientation or career aspirations), (2) interpersonal factors, (e.g. relationships with peers, supervisors and if they have mentors or role models), (3) organizational factors (e.g. practices related to selection and promotion), and (4) social systems (e.g. gender stereotypes, girls socialization). Drawing on the metaphor of "leadership labyrinth" and Ragins and Sundstrom's approach, the paper analyzes Chinese women's leadership roles in school systems and the barriers to young women's leadership development.

In terms of the leadership preparation, Van Eck, Volman and Vermuelen's "management route model" (1996) noted that there were three phases in the path to educational leadership. According to this model, the first phase was the anticipation phase. It was the stage to prepare women for management and leadership. In this phase, the emphasis was on development of leadership knowledge and skills through formal and informal training and practice. The model focuses on females'

early stages of leadership development – particularly, college. As a critical time for developing leadership, the college has been viewed as an important point for female students to find voice, and identify themselves and their future career aspirations (Cooke, 2004; Madsen, 2010). During this crucial developmental period, female students may benefit significantly from exploring feminine leadership styles, role models, and the empowerment to lead (Madsen, 2010).

The data in this paper were drawn from two types of data sources. The first was the published official statistics, policy documents, and academic literature (both English and Chinese). One of the major data sources was the “*Report on Major Results of the Third Wave Survey on the Social Status of Women in China*” (2011). It is a nationwide survey carried out jointly by the All-China Women’s Federation and National Bureau of Statistics of China. The survey has been conducted respectively in 1990, 2000 and 2010 (referred to here as ACWF-1990, ACWF-2000, and ACWF-2010). In the most recent survey (ACWF 2010), the response rate was 99 % and 29,698 questionnaires were available. The survey covers the nine aspects of Chinese women’s social status: health, education, economy, social security, politics, marriage and family, lifestyle, legal protection and awareness, and gender awareness and attitudes.

Besides the published data and research, the present paper also uses the data collected through the authors’ prior research. Researchers used information related to demographic data about administrators in top 10 teacher education institutions of China, a content analysis of program plans, and survey data collected in 2013. The survey explored student teachers’ experiences and perception of their teacher preparation and commitment. The participants in the study were enrolled in the Free Teacher Education Program (FTEP) at one of the largest normal universities in China. Out of 701 participants, 433 were females.

Using these data sources, the paper provides an overview of women’s leadership roles in education and the barriers to young women’s leadership aspirations, highlights gaps in young females’ leadership preparation in China, and identifies the implications for future research and practice. By capturing these views, insights and knowledge, the paper explores the promise and potential of nurturing a new female generation of educational leaders.

The paper begins by describing the changing context of women in educational leadership of China and a reflection on the distribution patterns of women leaders in school systems. Next, the paper turns to barriers which may inhibit young women's leadership aspirations and development. The paper then analyzes the current situation with respect to female students' leadership preparation within the teacher education sector of China. A discussion of how the paper's findings might inform female leadership preparation and development in China is discussed in turn.

Overview of Women in Educational Leadership of China

In discussing the changing contexts for women educational leadership and the distribution patterns of women leaders in school systems, this section provides an overview of Chinese women's educational leadership in China.

The Changing Contexts for Women in Educational Leadership in China

With the development of society and increasing emphasis on social justice concerns in China, progress has been made towards gender equality and women's empowerment since the early 1980s (Howell, 2006). For example, women's employment in China has improved tremendously since then. As of 2013, 34,640 employed women, accounted for 45% of the employment sector (China Statistics Yearbook, 2014). Meanwhile, as part of modernizing reform, women's education has also made large strides. For instance, literacy rate among females increased from 10% in 1949 to 77.4 % in 2000 (Liu & Carpenter, 2005). According to ACWF (2010), by 2010, the average years of education for women aged 18 to 64 was 8.8, 2.7 years more than average in 2000. More than 54.2% of women in urban areas and 18.2% in rural areas have received a high school education and above. Findings also showed that 25.7% of women in urban areas had received a college education or above, which reflected an increase of 13.3 % compared to 10 years prior (ACWF, 2000; ACWF, 2010).

As women's social status has enhanced in China (Croll, 1995), more women have expressed interest in leadership (Jie, 2000). Meanwhile, in order to enhance women's participation in leadership, the State Council of PRC (2001) issued a 10-year (2001–2010) national plan for enhancing women's decision-making and leadership roles in state and social affairs. As more women fill leadership positions in China, long established hierarchies become vulnerable to critique, whereby male dominance in the workplace faces greater scrutiny (Korabik, 1994). For example, there have been more opportunities for women to pursue leadership positions in government organizations through competence examinations instead of quota systems, which stress gender preference in organizations (Cooke, 2005).

As far as educational leadership, since the 1980s, far-ranging education reforms have been launched to promote economic growth and social development in China. Among these education reforms, the changing governance arrangements in schools have given administrators greater authority to manage schools. In addition, improving educational quality has become the focus of school administrations (State Council of PRC, 2001). These changes together now require shifts in school leaders' roles from government officials to professionals (Zeng, 2014). However, so far the public schools in China still lack leaders who hold modern leadership knowledge and skills dealing with rapidly changing social and educational contexts (Zeng, 2014). Moreover, with the development of education in the 21st century, more women are gradually assuming more educational leadership positions (Su, Adams & Miniberg, 2000). Therefore, given the shortage of excellent school leaders, like other countries, China cannot afford to restrict women's access to leadership roles (Carli & Eagly, 2007).

The Distribution Pattern of Women Leaders in China's School System

The percentage of women school leaders has increased in certain areas of China since 2000. For example, in one Beijing school district, the number of female principals has increased by 15% during 5 years (Contemporary Education Daily, 2015). Yet, this increase does not necessarily reflect an increase in the number of female principals in public schools

in China proper. The figure, however, may reflect a growing number of women who aspire to play key roles in China's public school system.

There are no national statistics detailing the numbers of female school administrators. The current available evidence points to a low proportion of females in educational leadership within China (Xu, 2009). In Chinese public schools, the majority of elementary teachers and more than half of middle school teachers are women (MOE Educational Statistics, 2013). However, according to the first national survey on principals conducted in 2008, China had 536,000 school principals; among them approximately 87% were male and only 13% were female (Xu, 2009).

Besides the underrepresentation in general, the distribution of women in educational leadership in China also varies with grade levels. It seems China's education system has more female leaders in preschool and elementary level schools while men continue to dominate the positions in secondary education (Qiang, Han & Niu, 2009). In middle schools within a Midwest province, for example, women represent 21% of principals, whereas they make up 63% of the teaching staff. In high schools, women constitute 51% of the teaching force but they hold 14% of principal positions (Shanxi Education Statistic, 2011).

The gender unbalance becomes even more apparent in some settings. In a very typical middle school in northeast China with a staff of 307 school teachers, 166 of them are female teachers. However, among 29 of the lower level school administrators, 11 are women (37.93%); 4 of 12 middle-level administrators are women (33.33%); 1 of 6 senior leadership positions is held by a woman (Zhang, 2010). Fewer women hold higher position ranks. Research reveals other distribution patterns. For example, there tends to be less female leadership development in contexts having a greater number of minority students. Meanwhile, women are still rare in major positions of school leadership. Also, instead of principals, most women leaders are vice principals (Chang, 2005; Chen, 2005; Long & Fu, 2007; Zhang, 2003).

Even though legislation (*Teachers Law of the People's Republic of China*, 1995) has tried to ensure female teachers have an equal right access to administration positions in public education, the chances of women obtaining school leadership positions continue to be considerably less than men. The gender differences in the distribution of educational leadership of China are marked. Thus, despite the passage of

equal opportunities legislation and policies, like most countries, male teachers are more likely than female teachers to be promoted to administrative positions (Schmuck, 1996; Jie, 2000).

On the whole, attempts to achieve equality between men and women in China have met only limited success (Korabik, 1993; Jin, 2002; Tsang, Chan & Zhang, 2011). Although there are no legal constraints on women's employment in China, and women are theoretically and legally recognized to have equal rights and access to advancement as men do, the social and cultural settings still favor men significantly; men still dominate the major leadership positions in China (Jie, 2000; Cooke, 2003). Hence, the understanding of women's under-representation requires an examination of the barriers to women's pursuit in leadership.

Barriers for Young Chinese Women's Leadership Development

An understanding of Chinese young women's leadership preparation must necessarily include the discussion of the barriers to their leadership development. Some scholars have identified barriers to women's career paths in management in China (e.g. Korabik, 1993; Curry, 2000). Korabik (1993) analyzed historical, political, and social factors which posed stumbling blocks to the leadership advancement for Chinese women. Two decades later, the situation has improved, but many of these factors still exist including cultural stereotypes, gender discrimination, and restricted opportunities (ACWF, 2010). One dimension the ACWF (2010) survey inquires upon is the barriers women face in pursuit of leadership careers (Chart 1). The results from this study suggest young Chinese women attributed underrepresentation in leadership positions to factors at the personal, social and organizational level. Thus, this paper focuses on the barriers to young women's leadership aspirations in China.

Gender stereotype remains one of the enduring barriers hindering women from pursuing leadership (Coleman, 2003; Sanchez & Thornton, 2010). Some Western scholars suggest the masculine nature of the leadership culture serves to marginalize and isolate females. Thus, women may opt not to seek leadership positions because the deck is stacked against them (Marshall, 2000; Coleman, 2005). Chinese women's participation in management is also often blocked by gendered stereotypes



Chart 1. The reasons of women's underrepresentation in leadership positions (%). Source: Third Wave Survey on the Social Status of Women in China (ACWF, 2010)

about who can and cannot be a manager (Zhong & Ehrich, 2010). Many Chinese young women have been traditionally socialized to be shy and unassertive (Judd, 1990). Some women question their own capabilities to be educational leaders due to a lack of confidence (Coleman, 2001, 2005; Wrushen & Sherman, 2008).

Meanwhile, the embedded Chinese social convention expects women to play a supporting role to men instead of being independent and having their own career (Croll, 1983; Korabik, 1994; Cooke, 2003), which is a finding consistent with the ACWF (2010) survey. Figure 1 shows that more than 67.5 % of respondents reported women were held up by their heavy household chores because they were supposed to support their husbands' career. This gender stereotype seemingly impacts young women's self-identify and future career plan. In a nationwide study on "women in higher education in the twenty-first century," the findings show that 65% of college students agreed that men should focus on career and women focus on family. Eighty-six percent of participants believed that being a leader is a man's business. Among those 1977 total participants, 86% of them were female college students (Cooke, 2005).

Constraints preventing Chinese young women from pursuing leadership opportunities also include gender prejudice and discrimination, which may exist in many ways and have multiple effects (Cooke, 2005).

In school settings, gender prejudice has been viewed as “a syntax of sexism so elusive that most teachers and students were completely unaware of its influence” (Sadker & Sadker, 2010, p.2). In the ACWF (2010) survey, 57.6 % of the participants stated that social prejudice directly resulted in women’s unwillingness to pursue leadership. In a study investigating gender differences in leadership in China, the results revealed 37 % of male participants and 33 % of female participants believed women did not have the abilities to pursue leadership opportunities. It was suggested that 22 % of males and 28 % of females did not believe women were engaged in their work and sufficiently motivated (Attané, 2012).

The limited number of Chinese women leaders cannot be explained solely by prejudicial views. However historical and traditional gender prejudices have had significant cultural impact on women’s leadership aspirations and development. In addition, the gender prejudice may have reinforced young people’s negative beliefs towards female leadership (Ross & Wang, 2008). For example, Frank (2001) found Chinese college students perceived women as “more incompetent, slower, weaker, more a follower-than-a-leader” (p. 316), despite a surfeit of evidence revealing the contrary (Zeng, 2004; Lin, 2007; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011), Chinese young women tend to view leadership in traditional terms and are hesitant to identify themselves as leaders or unwilling to pursue future leadership roles (Chang, 2005).

The absence or limited leadership preparation may also be reasons for women’s low representation in educational leadership. Due to insufficient leadership preparation, young women may not aspire to be leaders (Mistry & Sood, 2012; Kaparou & Bush, 2007). In China, young women also tend to have less training or fewer opportunities for leadership development than men, which has significantly discouraged them from seeking leadership positions in education (Coleman, 2001).

This finding has also been reinforced by the ACWF 2010 survey. The survey suggests 60% of participants thought lack of preparation was a pivotal factor that inhibited pursuit and commitment to leadership positions (ACWF, 2010). It might be described as a vicious circle. Chinese women are underprepared for leadership roles and do not have the necessary professional training for these roles. Due to this, they lack confidence and are not perceived as having the ability to lead (Tallerico, 2000).

Another barrier mentioned by scholars and practitioners is the shortage of role models and mentors for young women (Zhong & Ehrich, 2010). Van Linden and Fertman, (1998) noted that leadership development for young people must include the observation of others. Research also confirmed that mentors were essential for women to overcome gender related barriers to advancement (Burke & McKeen, 1990). However, some studies discovered Chinese women reported more difficulties in finding mentors than their male counterparts. Women usually have fewer formal and informal opportunities for developing mentoring relationships than men (Zhong & Ehrich, 2010; Thornton, 2015). Moreover, due to the limited number of female leaders, it might be especially challenging for young women to find female mentors or role models. In a survey of more than 200 university students, professionals and managers were asked to identify at least seven women leaders. According to this study's findings, 60% of participants could not finish the list (Jin, 2002).

Recent research serves as evidence to support the labyrinth metaphor. Chinese women, even young women, have to face a variety of barriers to pursue leadership opportunities. As noted above, barriers for young women's advancement in China can be categorized into the multiple factors including personal, organizational or social. Meanwhile, China's unique cultural values and traditions serve as a context for understanding why women are grossly underrepresented in leadership roles (Tsang, Chan & Zhang, 2011; Howell, 2006). These factors, formed by cultural norms and belief systems favoring men in leadership, continuously disadvantage women. Based on the analysis of barriers to Chinese young women's leadership aspirations and readiness, the next section examines the prevailing challenges facing female students' leadership preparation.

Female Students' Leadership Preparation in the Teacher Education Sector of China

This section explores the importance of preparing female student leaders during their college years and the challenges for effective female leadership training in the teacher education sector of China.

College: Early Stage of Leadership Preparation

Research suggests leadership can be nurtured and learned. Leadership traits, such as responsibility, effective communication skills, task completion, problem solving, decision making, vision, self-awareness, confidence and experience, can be developed in any individual, regardless of gender (De la Rey, 2005). In a study of women's construction of their leadership persona, Curry (2000) found participants developing their leader persona during their formative years. Hence, to enhance women's career motivation and prepare them for future leadership roles, young women need sufficient leadership training and experiences even before entering the workforce.

In a study focusing on female principals' leadership journey in China, all participants confirmed college was a crucial time for developing leadership aspirations. During these years, they benefited from various leadership experiences, participating in activities associated with student affairs and associations (Madsen, 2010). In terms of the teacher education sector, leadership identity and ability among female students in the teacher education program were heavily influenced by guidance of instructors.

The Need for Female Leadership Preparation in Teacher Education

No studies directly addressed Chinese female students' leadership preparation within the teacher education sector. Literature regarding student leadership in China focused largely on the need for training programs to develop students' leadership skills in public schools (Chan, 2000; Ross & Wang, 2008). Other research assessed the effectiveness of training programs, which helped to improve secondary school students' leadership skills (Chan, 2003). Other studies point out Chinese girls in schools are not typically encouraged to develop leadership skills (Chan, 2000). Among Western scholars, studies confirm the more experiences young women have in leadership, the more likely they will pursue leadership roles (Forster, 1997; Richardson, 2003). In addition, as a result of the changes in Chinese society along with reforms in educational policy and practice, school leaders in China now face a new set of complex and diverse demands. Thus, nurturing the next generation of leadership in China matters not only for realizing gender equality but also the future of China.

The new generation of females in China is expressing greater career commitment and wants more advancement (Woodhams, Xian & Lupton, 2014). The researchers conducted a survey study in one of the major teacher education institutions in 2013. Based on a survey of 701 student teachers, the results suggest female student teachers reported more positive attitudes toward the campus-based courses and their relevance to actual practice. Findings from the survey also suggest a greater interest and aspiration with respect to a future teaching profession among females than males. Thus, for those students who hope to become teachers, teacher education programs should seek out opportunities to enhance leadership among females. .

As part of fulfilling professional responsibilities in education, preparation programs must stress the acquisition of leadership concepts and skills before female students head on to their teaching career (Forster, 1997). There is the argument all teachers should be leaders regardless of position or designation (Harris, 2003). When female teachers are given leadership skills, they will be more willing to engage in collaborative leadership with school administrators and better understand school realities and contexts (Richardson, 2003). It may eventually help them to grow in leadership. Although there is an urgent need for female students to receive formal and informal leadership preparation as part of their undergraduate studies, the current prospects are bleak.

The Challenges to Female Students' Leadership Preparation in Teacher Education Sector of China

Typical teacher education programs in China mainly place emphasis on pedagogical knowledge and teaching beliefs. Little attention has been paid to leadership preparation in current program plans (Zhou, Tang & Gong, 2011). The authors investigated program plans in five of the distinguished teacher education institutions within China. According to the program plans for the 2013-2014 school years, student leadership development has not been clearly addressed in the program's mission statements or professional development plans, or as a benchmark or general goal. Public speaking techniques and organizational ability were vaguely represented in one of the program plans.

Regarding the curriculum, a study focusing on 192 undergraduate teacher education programs from 30 universities and colleges revealed

that the curriculum mainly emphasized subject matter courses which count for 47.1–52.0% of total credits and general education courses (e.g. political matters courses, foreign language, and computer science) which count for 25.6–29.5% of total credits. The professional education courses (e.g. educational psychology, pedagogical content and educational technology) have a small portion (8.6–10.5%). Among 30 teacher education institutions, only few of them offered courses such as instruction strategies, leadership, communication, and classroom administration. Among the 192 sample programs, only four of them provided courses concerning education reform and current public school issues (Zhou, Tang & Gong, 2011).

Besides the lack of leadership preparation in general, female students are especially at a disadvantage regarding leadership experiences and training. As some Western literature notes, teaching content (e.g. textbook), the pattern of student-teacher interaction, and the different treatment female students receive in comparison to male students all tended to socialize woman to be cooperative, nurturing and dependent (e.g. Adler & Izraeli, 1988; Mahoney, 1993; Bryce & Blown, 2007). The Chinese education system—from public school to higher education, is built to disadvantage female students and retain the status quo (Hui, 2003; Wong, Lau & Lee, 2012). Female students have typically been perceived as unsuitable and not robust enough for the challenging political nature of administration (Schein, 2001). Some Chinese scholars report professors giving male students more chances to express themselves in the classroom and male students are given more attention (e.g. collaborating on projects with male students) (Liu & Li, 2010). Male students also may receive more leadership opportunities in student organizations within universities (Liu & Li, 2010).

Although female college students are routinely shunned, the ACWF (2010) survey showed that 62.4% of female college students demonstrated excellent academic performance – 9.7 % higher than male students. Be that as it may, gender prejudice still exists even though most faculty and students are not aware of its influence (Liu & Carpenter, 2005). Gupton & Slick (1996) suggest unfair treatment of females in school environments makes female students feel inferior and inhibit aspirations for leadership.

Another concern is the lack of mentoring and role models. Female principals in Madsen's study (2008) reported that they had been deeply

influenced by individuals during their college years (e.g., faculty members, academic leaders, peers). Without appropriate mentoring and aspiring role models, female students face increased difficulty in navigating the organizational culture and climate and being prepared for leadership positions.

Women in university leadership positions may also serve an important function for socializing the next generation of female leaders in China. Female academics often have greater discretion to address issues of social justice through gender equality. However, because women are woefully underrepresented in leadership, it might prove challenging for young females to find role models. In 2001, research investigating women in higher education leadership roles in China found only 30 women served as university presidents (most of them deputies) among 1,000 universities (Cai & Wang, 2002).

In 2015, the authors studied women's senior positions (presidents, vice presidents, secretaries of the Party committee) in the top ten normal universities (teacher education focused). The results revealed 108 men holding 90% of the major leadership positions compared to 12 females (10 %) and none of them were president. The low proportion of women at senior management levels in higher education undoubtedly places female students at a major disadvantage for having female mentors and role models who can inspire and guide them into leadership. These challenges raise important questions about what teacher education institutions should do to effectively prepare female students for leadership.

Implications for Preparing Chinese Female School Leaders

Teacher education connects students to their future educational career. In terms of leadership preparation, it is a fragile connection especially for female students in China. In current China, the new and more dynamic public education and the new requirements of educational policies have created a new situation in which the traditional teacher education trainings are not so much in demand. The new situation requires individuals to be more prepared for not only teaching but also leading in various school contexts. In terms of enhancing women's leadership participation, future teacher education should recognize the importance and possibilities for preparing female students for futures as school leaders.

Situated in deep-rooted as well as changing cultural values, this paper explored women's leadership roles in public education in China. This paper provides much insight into prospects for female leadership preparation in China. To enrich the analysis we drew from previous studies and current data, which together led to a number of observations. So far little has been published which informs educators, researchers, and practitioners on understanding factors impacting Chinese females' leadership promise and potential. Much work is needed to design and develop more customized and effective leadership development programs and mentoring strategies for young women. This paper is an important contribution in that it suggests the importance of the period of teacher education in preparing females with leadership skills, identifying leadership roles, and raising awareness of the cultural and organizational barriers that discourage female leadership.

Young women's awareness of gender identity and gender equality needs to be permeated throughout Chinese education preparation. Gender identities have not been adequately explored and reconstructed in educational settings of China (Lin Choi, 2013). It may require an understanding of women's perceptions of education leadership as a career and how traditional cultures and values impact career aspirations. Professional development should include a dynamic conversation exploring what leadership really means. The discourse should include how gender stereotypes and prejudice might lead to inequity and injustice (Marshall, 2000).

Given the complexity of gender identity and career aspirations, a variety of methods may be employed. One method is the establishment of a mentoring relationship (e.g. Atkeson, 2003; Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006). Female role models may impact leadership participation by increasing female students' engagement with management activities. Research suggests young females are more likely to express an intention and interest towards leadership when they see women serving in high-level positions (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006). Male and female students in China should be encouraged to appreciate and value the accomplishments of women who have succeeded in traditionally male-dominated fields.

Additionally, China education programs should increase the visibility of female leadership preparation and make it into a key institutional goal. The literature has confirmed women's entrance into educational leadership depends on their career aspirations, leadership orientations, experiences, and the support they gain during study and training (Orr, 2010). Leadership development should aim to improve female students' learning ability by providing equal access to leadership courses and activities. To create an environment where female students feel empowered and respected, universities must provide structured opportunities for female students to engage in leadership.

Further, it is important to invest time and effort in nurturing leadership among female pre-service teachers. Teachers and professors must use their influence and wisdom to encourage leadership aspirations. Once the shift to a leadership perspective is realized, the more likely females will pursue such positions (Xu & Patmor, 2012). Forster (1997) suggests universities and public schools should closely collaboratively to nurture pre-service teachers' leadership so that they are willing to perceive themselves as potential leaders (p. 93). In the real school contexts, female students can learn how to plan, organize, manage, and make decisions. They learn facilitation and teamwork skills that are essential for future jobs (Bond & Sterrett, 2014). If conditions permit, the programs can provide female students the opportunity to work with school administrators through a form of practicum. Female student teachers develop more informed views on personal and administrative matters as they interact with individuals from different groups. Subsequently, they have more opportunities to synthesize and integrate knowledge and skills presented in both formal and informal leadership aspects (Bond & Sterrett, 2014).

Gender is also mediated by various factors such as social, system and institutional cultures (Collard & Reynolds, 2005). The development of young females' leadership in China requires supports well beyond higher education, but also from society and family. To more effectively enhance female students' performance and growth as leaders, practitioners and educators must become increasingly sensitive to gender and leadership in educational settings.

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