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# Seeking Justice For All: The Special Concerns Of Women School Administrators

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# **Seeking Justice For All: The Special Concerns Of Women School Administrators**

Patricia F. First, J.D., Ed.D.

## **Abstract**

In this article the belief that there are special responsibilities for women school administrators based upon gender and the racial divide in U.S. schools is explored. Justification for women's special responsibility is discussed and examples are given, including the new issue of justice in schooling and differences in access to cyberspace. How the caring women administrator can make a difference is described in the concluding remarks.

## **Introduction**

I believe school administrators seek the best for all the children in their care. In this article I explore this belief and whether or not there is a special responsibility for women administrators in serving these children. Ethically there are issues that women school administrators need to give special attention to because of their gender.

The question of what really is best, or what is just and caring, for a child or a group of children is debatable. In faculty lounges, in school board meetings, in parent gatherings, and in the courts, wide ranges of opinion, legal interpretation, professional experience, and research are applied to the issues of the moment. The bottom line of these issues often amounts to ethical questions for leaders. Ethical questions for the principal or superintendent often present themselves and/or conceal themselves as legal questions embedded in gender and race (First, 2001). The challenge in handling these questions is to learn to understand the perspectives of those unlike ourselves. As Lorde (1995) reminded us:

There are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions that result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectations. (p.285)

By becoming aware of our history as women, our stories and the story of our gender, we can progress in understanding the perspective of others and do more to seek the best for all the children in our care.

## **Facing Race and Gender**

Morally and legally, issues of equity and fairness are among the most critical in contemporary schooling (see, for example, Grant, 1995; Grogan, 1996; Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 1999; Nieto, 2000; The Civil Rights Project, 1996). Race and gender statistics from the professoriate provide just one example. McCarthy (1999) cited the increase in women in the educational leadership professoriate (to 20% in 1994 from 2% in 1970) and the more dismal

representation of people of color (11% in 1994). School leaders cannot ignore their obligation to face the challenges of assuring social justice and equitable learning environments for racial and ethnic minorities as well as for girls and women. Despite focus on such things as school reform models, governance systems (e.g., choice, charters), and high-stakes testing, school leaders may remain ill-equipped to successfully lead schools unless they are engaged in the schools that struggle to effectively serve all students (Ridenour, First, Lydon, & Partlow, 2001).

In schools, the organizational context within which these obligations are faced is itself a confounding factor. Schools are situated at the nexus of stronger, centralized accountability pressures and decentralized, more collaborative theories of organizational power and governance (James, 1991; Murphy, 1999). Both these dynamics challenge school leaders to be informed, sensitive, and mature managers of diverse school cultures so that schools can effectively serve all students. When administrators delve deeply into these issues, they will acquire more mature cultural identities. Such growth can lead to administrators who manage schools with care of all children central to their leadership, and prepare leaders for more racially and ethnically diverse schools that value the lives of women and men equally. Addressing issues of race, gender, ethnicity, physical and mental challenges, class, and sexual orientation would serve to fill a communication void between school and a diverse community.

We bring our personal perspectives as women to those interpretations. Though we may bring common racial and gender identities, we bring widely different personal biographies. Alone, each leader's narrative tells one perspective, but from our collective story, that perspective becomes much more powerful. From the stories emerges a richer meaning of leadership in an increasingly diverse world. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) related the value of "social actors" telling their stories as a method of inquiry. They maintained, for example:

Social actors organize their lives and experiences through stories and in doing so make sense of them...How social actors retell their life experiences as stories can provide insight into the characters, events, and happenings central to those experiences. How the chronicle is told and how it is structured can also provide information about the perspectives of the individual in relation to the wider social grouping or cultural setting to which that individual belongs. (p. 68)

Stories can inform the work of educational administrators. These perspectives are important intersections to examine. Children and parents too often encounter an assumption of white rightness in a "dynamic of dominance" (Howard, 1999, p. 50). School leaders need to confront racism, sexism, and class bias that children encounter every day (Ridenour et al., 2001). If schools are to change, then those who lead and teach in schools need to change their thinking and attitudes and develop specific knowledge and skills about those different from themselves. Two questions arise: How do we effectively and meaningfully connect one's knowledge base with personal metamorphosis? How do we help teachers and administrators in one's organization to do the same?

### ***Finding Our Stories in Leadership Classes***

Gender issues often surface in classes in educational leadership. One student wrote:

I had a professor a few quarters back who spent a great deal of time poking fun at the “battle of the sexes.” “Why couldn’t women just give it a rest?” he would say. Even though he was kidding, I think several women took offense at his comments. I wasn’t there yet, but I guess I learned that “deep down” many men of his generation truly believe these close-minded views to be OK. I hope my own three sons see the world differently in this regard someday.

She indicated that as she worked her way through the readings and assignments for the week, she realized that rather than just hoping that her sons would see the world differently, her position as a teacher required that she take concrete steps to make certain that the sons of all women view the world differently. In other words, gender questions and issues are part of teaching, and changes in curriculum are necessary if we are to address and transform attitudes and beliefs about gender (Ridenour et al., 2001). Gender questions and issues are also a component of administration and leadership. Issues based on race are also frequently expressed. Another student wrote:

I’m disturbed by the lack of African-Americans on our National Honor Society and the high rate of failures for our black children on the state proficiency tests. Perhaps our minority students feel left out, or, because of their culture, need to be educated somewhat differently? I’m deeply concerned and angry that most of our teaching and administrative staff don’t seem concerned or to even notice. When I bring up the topic of our black students, I am either stared at as an alien or defensive, ambiguous, denying comments are made.

Parks (1999) addressed the issue of racism in schools. She called on educators to carry out some of the most difficult human activities . . . willingness “to examine unconscious, often deeply held assumptions; to acknowledge their own privilege or resentments; and to recognize how their own values, priorities, and attitudes, and those of others of different ethnic or cultural groups, are expressed in community life and in school” (p. 14). Examining the unconscious is difficult enough, but perhaps, with enough tolerance and hard work, doable. Willingness is often the barrier. Advocates for antiracist schooling claim that the first step to bringing anti-discrimination and appreciation for multiculturalism to schools is for people making decisions in those schools to understand who they are.

Activities related to helping future leaders understand who they are from gender and racial points of view have been used in educational leadership classes (Ridenour et al., 2001). A few women in the classes were in their 40s and 50s. They had an awareness of discrimination against women in the job market that the younger teachers, both male and female, did not have. The classes discussed research findings related to gender differences and similarities in schools, including the lack of women at the highest levels of administrative influence, curriculum gaps in addressing women’s experiences, the absence of voices of black women and black men, personnel decisions related to gender, extracurricular activities, and achievement differences between males and females. Not only are girls and women ill-served by stereotypical expectations, boys can be restricted by stereotypes of masculinity. Bullying, violence, and body image problems were among the gender and racial issues that students in the classes openly discussed.

A problem surfaces in the lack of awareness and understanding of younger leadership students about the differences in opportunities and the blatant discrimination against women. Women’s history is lost. They are unaware of this history and not sensitized to the continued

presence of vestigial discrimination. This loss surfaces through discussing teacher-student interaction in the classroom. Boys are given more opportunities to talk, asked more questions, and given more substantive feedback (American Association of University Women Educational Foundation, 1995, 1999, Sadker & Sadker, 1986, 1994). After discussing this research in class, students who were teachers later reported that they paid special attention to their own questioning patterns and were surprised to find that they do favor the boys.

Readings and discussions about white privilege engender much discomfort in educational leadership classes. McIntosh's essay about unpacking whiteness (1989), McIntyre's *The Meaning of Whiteness* (1997) and Delpit's *Other People's Children* (1995) elicit energetic discussion and much protest. With the discomfort comes reflection and growth that leads to better leadership. Institutions must become comfortable about their own and other people's discomfort about race. "Learning to face racism and to talk about it transformatively with others requires compassion toward oneself and others and sufficient intellectual character to not abandon the effort as it becomes distressing" (Parks, 1999, p. 18).

### ***An Issue of Justice: The Digital Divide***

Equity issues surface in evolving cyberspace law. The "digital divide" is the new measure separating society into "haves" and "have-nots" (First & Hart, 2002). The "digital divide," as used here, is the separation of members of United States society into those with, and without, access to computers and the internet. In addition to opportunity for access, lack of opportunity to learn the skills to make use of this portal to the world is the reality for large numbers of the poor and the educationally underserved (Taglang, 2002). The groups most affected by the digital divide parallel those groups who have fought for civil rights in other areas of society: racial minorities, the disabled, those for whom English is a second language, the homeless, and those with low incomes (First & Hart, 2002).

People with a disability are half as likely to have access to the internet as those without a disability: 21.6% compared to 42.1%. Only 23.6% of Hispanic households have access to the internet compared with 41.5% of households nationally. Only 23.5% of Black households have access to the internet (Secretary of Commerce, 2000). Also increasingly separated from the larger society, and even from activity in their own communities, by the digital divide are those over the age of 50. As access to cyberspace is surveyed each year the gaps between groups are growing larger though the number of individuals gaining access to cyberspace increases each year across all groups (Secretary of Commerce, 2000). Justice for children requires that schools and educators take a positive stance in applying the principles of federal and state constitutional provisions, statutes and cases to cyberspace access. There are social and economic reasons as well as reasons related to justice for the schools to do so.

Support for the saliency of race and ethnicity exists. The 2000 report found that differences in income and education do not fully account for race and ethnicity differences in the digital divide. Regardless of education or income level, African-Americans and Hispanics had lower rates of access and use. In 2000, when about a third of the United States population used the internet at home, only 18.9% of African-Americans and 16.1% of Hispanics used the internet from the home.

The rates of personal internet use at any location provide a similar picture. The internet use rate for whites was 50.3%, African-Americans 29.3%, and Hispanics 23.7%. The internet use

patterns for children 3 to 8 years old were as follows: whites 18.5%, African-Americans 10.2%, and Hispanics 8.7%. For those 9 to 17 years of age, the internet use rates were: whites 63.1%, African-Americans 34.2%, and Hispanics 31.4%.

Almost 60% of people with a disability have never used a computer while only 25% of people without a disability have never used a computer. In terms of internet access, 26.1% of people with a disability have access to the internet while 42.1% of those without disabilities have access. The type of disability also makes a difference. Those with impaired vision and manual dexterity problems have lower rates of internet access and are less likely to use a computer than those who have hearing difficulties.

The data show the disadvantage African-American and Hispanic students face in terms of access to the internet. The problem, however, is not only access. It is also that the technology is not handled equally well by all educators and is not equally useful to everyone in education as it is presently structured. Another problem is related to a lack of identification with the digital future among most minority members. Education's response to the digital divide will either bridge the gaps or make them larger. Technology touches education at its core because it is inextricably connected with the primary goals of education. For decades one common purpose of education was the preparation of an educated citizenry. Technological literacy is key to functioning and participating in democracy (First & Hart, 2002).

## Handling the Legal/Ethical Questions

Given that ethical questions for the school administrator often present themselves as legal questions, what can the women administrator do to alleviate the problem and the pain? In the midst of an upsetting incident or a real crisis, a family can be confronted with legal jargon and offensive posturing in defense of the district unless the administrator acts with sensitivity and knowledge of others.

If administrators conceptualize the issue, decide the answer to the problem, and communicate the districts' stances in a legalistic way, they are then bound to positions that may need defending all the way to the Supreme Court. As a dispute proceeds, central aspects of a school's operation can be affected in many ways. Lawyers may ignore the educational dimensions of a legal dispute, even though they may be as important as its legal aspects (Heubert, 1999). No matter who eventually wins, the needs of the child and family have not been met, the administrator's time and the district's money is committed for years to confrontations that could be avoided by a transformed attitude toward children and their families and a transformed conceptualization of these problems.

An example of the consequences of taking the antagonistic, legalistic stance is found in *Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education* (1999). When a parent asked to have her daughter's seat changed to remove her from the easy reach of a teasing (later harassing) classmate, three teachers and a principal backed by the superintendent refused to do so, making their stand a legalistic one of not being required to make such a change. A parental request ballooned to become a peer sexual harassment case heard before the Supreme Court. The implications of the decision for both children and schools are still being analyzed. There are many such school law cases. Only a small percentage of filed cases go to the appeals court level and even fewer are heard by the United States Supreme Court (*Judicial Business of the United States Courts*, 1998). The cases that reach the appeals courts indicate the extent of these problems in the schools.

### ***Where The Difficulty Lies***

In a busy superintendent's day, choices must be made about what is important—what is worth the superintendent's time and attention. A school administrator needs practical wisdom to make these decisions for the good of children.

Practical wisdom—the ability to know the right thing to do—has two indispensable functions. First, it enables us to know not only the *means* to certain desired ends but also which *ends* are worthy of desire . . . Second, practical wisdom enables us to exercise those virtues we need to exercise in order to attain both the *specific good* internal to any worthy practice and the *general good* toward which all worthy practices tend . . . (Tong, 1993, p.27).

The effective school administrator transforms the school district into a place where decisions to treat children well are made with practical wisdom.

Most educators see the kind of incidents that become court cases as internal to the life of the school as challenges to their rules and authority. They do not see them as symptoms of deeper issues outside the school (Gordon, 1998). Thus, educators do not see or appreciate the general good to which their responses and their work can contribute. There is too often an inability, even an unwillingness, by teachers to see the larger context of children's lives (Denscombe, 1985; Gordon, 1998, 1991; Noddings, 1984). In too many instances, children and families are not treated with respect in schools. But effective school administrators can see the general good as well as the specific good for treating children and families involved in incidents with justice and care. They can make decisions that keep educational problems out of the courts.

A case like *Davis* (1999), both in the substance of the harassment and the process of not working with the parent and child, does not represent an unusual or isolated instance in the schools. Only a tiny percentage of problems go to courts at all and a minuscule number go to the Supreme Court (*Judicial Business of the United States Courts*, 1998). Given examples like *Davis* (1999), we know that teachers and administrators often take a legal stance when their methods and/or authority are questioned. But there are other models of behavior and ideals to which school administrators can strive.

School administrators, though powerful in their own systems and communities, can feel (and be) just as powerless as everyone else when dealing with multistructural government and rigid bureaucracy (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). Other pressures make it difficult for administrators to provide the transformational leadership needed to provide other than legalistic responses. Those who have a different conception of leadership may try to force administrators to behave according to their expectations (Regan & Brooks, 1995). The pressure can be intense. In a study by Grogan (1996), participating superintendents mentioned many occasions when they had experienced a dissonance between who they were and the kind of leader they were expected to be as superintendents. Resisting the pressure is crucial because it is integrity to one's own beliefs and style that makes a superintendent visionary or transformative. "It was only when their style met strategy, that is, when their actions became consistent with their beliefs, that they emerged as visionary leaders" (Regan & Brooks, 1995, p. 37).

## ***How To Do It Better and Differently***

Havel (1997), writing about political leadership, called it “the art of the impossible, namely, the art of improving ourselves and the world” (p. 8). The leadership provided by the school administrator is equally important and it often looks impossible. School leaders are some of our most important societal leaders.

To correct the ills of sexism, racism and cultural insensitivity, school administrators must change how their institutions function. Such fundamental change requires the reexamination of the ethical structure under which these leaders have been operating. New concepts of family involvement with the schools and of the leaders interaction with families are required. School leaders must change their approach and recapture the spirit of family involvement and partnership with the schools.

Care orientation in conjunction with a justice orientation has been discussed by educators. The cases that go to court and the pyramid of behavior underlying them give evidence that the care orientation has not spread in schooling. The concept of an orientation of care provides a checkpoint for behavior and decision-making useful for the school administrator.

According to Rawls (1991), justice is the set of principles that all rational human beings would select to govern social behavior if they knew that the rules could potentially apply to themselves. Although the “. . . justice orientation focused on identifying and prioritizing conflicting rights or claims” (Gilligan, Ward, & Taylor, 1988, xxi), the care orientation focuses on “. . . identifying needs and creating a solution responsive to the needs of all involved” (Gilligan, 1982). Think how differently the story of *Davis* (1999) would have turned out if the school administrator had focused on creating a solution that responded to the needs of all when the problem reached the administrator’s desk.

The concept of care needs to include an emphasis on “. . . concern and connectedness” (Martin, 1992). Justice entitles each child to care, concern and connection in a supportive environment. Each child is entitled to an adequate education in the presence of this care, concern, and connection. These are the important rights of students and their families, the ones to which administrators should strive. These are the rights worthy of the ethical attention of the school administrator.

At times, an educational leader’s personal preference conflicts with what society has deemed acceptable ethics for the profession. For example, racial discrimination toward any child is not legally (rights denied), ethically (justice denied), or morally (care and concern denied) defensible in a school no matter what personal beliefs any teacher, principal or superintendent may hold. Yet the system tolerates both subtle and blatant examples of such prejudice within the school rooms and halls. Such discrimination raises the question of institutional ethics and the moral responsibility of the principals who lead the schools, of the superintendents who lead the school districts, and of the local school board members who provide legal guardianship for the children’s schools (First & Walberg, 1992).

## ***The Unthinkable at School***

There are horror stories from the court records of school cases. There is the case of Christine Frankline, repeatedly taken from her class and raped at school by a coach and teacher, with the documented awareness of school officials (*Franklin v. Gwinnett County Public Schools*, 1992). There is the Doe case of a high school freshman who was one in a long line of girls molested by



a biology teacher. There had been reports of these molestations to the principal (*Doe v. Taylor Independent School District*, 1994). How can these things happen to children at school? And, since court records document that these things do happen, that these cases are not isolated instances, do we not as women administrators have a special obligation to change things?

I used to think that horror stories such as these could at least be understood, while certainly not accepted, by such organizational and political theories as “the problem of many hands” (Thompson, 1987). Thompson described hierarchical and collective models as the conventional ways of ascribing responsibility in politics. These are also the ways responsibility is usually ascribed in schools.

In the hierarchical model, responsibility is expected to fall on the person in the highest position in the formal or informal chain of command. But in the real world, acceptance of responsibility is mitigated by the fact that implementation and further decision-making is passed through many levels up and down the chain of command. Under the collective responsibility model, outcomes are the product of the actions of many different people.

These two models taken together help us understand how educators, who may as individuals decry the kind of immoral situations we have been discussing, allow such situations to occur in their own schools and classrooms (First, 1995). Educators are kind, humane people who enter the profession because they like kids. They must be powerless within their organizations or they would not let these things happen. They do not know what to do to change things for children. Such explanation is no longer acceptable to me to any degree. As Dewey wrote,

Less and less do men accept for others or for themselves ignorance as an excuse for bad consequences, when the ignorance itself flows from character. Our chief moral business is to become acquainted with consequences . . . Our freedom lies in the capacity to alter our mode of action, through having our ignorance enlightened by being held accountable for the neglected consequences when brought to accountability by others, or by holding ourselves accountable in subsequent reflection. (Dewey & Tufts, 1908, p. 464)

I ask the women school administrator not to leave her values of justice and care, concern and connection for every child on her doorstep when she goes to work each morning. I ask her to hold herself accountable. In 1938, Virginia Woolf invited us to stand with her on a bridge and watch the procession of men that moved from private home to public world each morning and back again each night. In 2003, if we focused on school administrators, we would watch both men and women leaving their private worlds each morning. But the kinds of questions Woolf asked as she watched the procession are the same kinds of questions we should ask today about the women and men leading the schools. On what terms do they join the public world each morning? As they cross the bridge do they remain “civilized human beings?” Do they bring with them the private world values of care, concern and connection (Martin, 1992), or do they enter today’s “real world” of possessiveness, jealousy, pugnacity, and greed, a world where the children in their care have become their enemy? Do they feel powerless about such immense problems because of the hierarchical establishment they face and the tradition of collective responsibility in our profession? School administrators must bring along private world values even if the work world does not support them. Individual responsibility can play a giant role in changing climate and attitudes in the schools. School administrators are not powerless and need not feel powerless.

The school administrator crosses the bridge each morning to lead an institution erected for children, an institution entrusted with children's care and education and growth. The school administrator of character will not allow the problem of many hands to take charge in the schoolhouse. Thompson (1987) argued that the conventional hierarchical and collective-responsibility models, "are not satisfactory responses to the problem of many hands; and that personal responsibility, properly interpreted, can be imputed to officials more often than these models imply" (p. 40). School administrators must face the problem of many hands and assign individual educators the expectation and responsibility of doing what is right for the child.

## **The Women Administrator Can Transform the System**

If we do not keep stressing care for the children, educational leaders can slide into a perverse pride in protecting the institution instead of the children. They may celebrate winning a challenge from a parent, rather than cooperating with the parent to do what is best for the child. The woman administrator can lead a change in school culture to one of more respect for children's families that includes acceptance rather than condemnation of families different from us on any dimension. Pestalozzi (1885) wrote, "You should do for your children what their parents failed to do for them." But while doing so we must demonstrate respect and acceptance of the child's loved ones.

Petersen (1999), studying five successful instructionally-focused California superintendents, found that they articulated a personal vision for the education of children and through different leadership styles successfully wove that vision into the mission of their districts. By making careful personal decisions and operating through shared decision-making they were able to create an organizational structure that supported that vision. They used a variety of hard and soft indicators in assessing progress toward their goals. These successful superintendents had taken on as personal responsibilities, rather than delegating them, the establishment of an instructional vision, risk taking, being highly visible, modeling and signaling examples of district-valued behavior and acting as a district cheerleader.

The woman administrator can lead educators in the district to expand concepts of family and to indicate respect for the variety of family forms from which the children come. Educators must accept and work with a broad array of family types (such as blended families, extended families, adoptive families, arrangements of guardianship and fostering, chosen families, and all other supportive kinship systems) if they are to provide justice and care for all children.

The woman school administrator can formally work with the staff in staff development for ethical decision-making for children at all levels of the organization. The administrator must back the teacher who makes a decision for the child, especially when the choice becomes child or institution/district. Good staff development programs can help people to learn moral reasoning and to recognize when to apply it. Good programs can help people recognize the ethical dilemmas of their society and consider how schools and educators can contribute to the solutions.

. . . it is crucial that people be able to reflect ethically on their choices and their actions. This is especially important when individuals have power and influence over the lives of others. We can think of few areas where it is more important than in the administration of schools. (Strike, Haller, & Soltis, 1988, p. 6)

The timing is right for the woman administrator to do what must be done to transform the schools into welcoming places that are respectful of children and their families; that operate from a relational ethic where “deliberations focus on the human beings involved in the situation under consideration and their relations to each other” (Noddings, 1988, 218). Society as a whole and its organizations are in the middle of a shift from the bureaucratic to the democratic ethos. The difficulty of today’s ethical questions is not an issue unique to our field.

## Concluding Thoughts

A change to the care orientation can change the school administrator’s attitude and behavior toward children and families. The spirit of caring can lead the school administrator to bring the true meaning of students rights, both legal and ethical, to all children.

On sunny days, I am hopeful about possibilities for using law to redress historic oppression and mistreatment of disempowered groups . . . On rainy days, I see retrenchment in civil rights, rising antigay legal and political activities, and defunding of services for people with disabilities, and of legal services generally. I see the real problems in legal remedies that were supposed to be successes. (Minnow, 1997, p. 82)

May the woman school administrator and leader use the law wisely and well, with both justice and care, to bring more sunny days to our school systems. May she lead us to assume responsibility for an adequate education for all children. We must face the fact that many people, acting via their state governments, do not want to assume responsibility to provide an adequate education for all of our children. What Charles Black (1997) wrote about hunger is equally applicable to education: “‘How much?’ or ‘Where will you draw the line?’ (So many people are more anxious about ‘drawing the line’ than about getting food out to hungry children.)” (p. 136).

There are formidable obstacles facing those who challenge the status quo in the improvement of schools. But there are many who recognize the immense value of education (Galbraith, 1996). We can only keep working toward the changes and the political action that the good society demands. There will always be something more immediate, but there will never be anything more important than providing an adequate education for all children (Verstegen, 1998).

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## About the Author

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