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A Pernicious Problem: The Absence of Women from Administrative Roles

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Women as School Executives: Realizing the Vision

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The Texas Council of Women School Executives

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Chapter 16

A Pernicious Problem: The Absence of Women from Administrative Roles

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*Waste not, want not, is a maxim I would teach.
Let your watchword be dispatch, and practise what you preach;
Do not let your chances like sunbeams pass you by,
For you never miss the water till the well runs dry.*

(Howard, 1876)

In 1972 Title IX, the vaccine against gender inequity, was unveiled. Title IX is a federal law making sex discrimination in schools illegal. Under Title IX, sex bias is outlawed in school athletics, career counseling, medical services, financial aid, admission practices, and the treatment of students. In 1974, Congress passed the Women's Educational Equity Act to fund research, materials, and training to help schools eliminate gender bias. In 1978, Congress broadened the Civil Rights Act to include educational services to eliminate gender bias. Under the re-designed civil rights legislation, ten sex desegregation assistance centers were created to assist teachers, parents, and students in developing nonsexist programs (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). In 1998, twenty-six years after the passage of Title IX, vestiges of gender inequity persist.

Although issues concerning the underrepresentation of women in school administration have been addressed in the literature throughout the past 26 years, the problem persists. This chapter chronicles the history of the inequities, the barriers to women as administrators, and outlines the means of reducing the inequities.

History of School Administration

Early in this century, women held a significant number of administrative positions. The nationwide decline in the number of women administrators has been greatest in the elementary schools, where, in 1928, women held over half (55%) of all principal positions. Even in secondary schools, women constituted at least twice the percentage of principals at that level in 1928 as they did in 1973 (Women in Educational Administration, 1928).

Following World War II, the balance changed when many men returned from the armed services and sought employment in school settings. Women steadily lost administrative ground in public schools. Throughout the United States, in the 1940s, approximately 41% of elementary principals were women; in the 1950s, 38%; in the 1960s, 22%. By 1980 the figure dropped to less than 20% (Paddock, 1980). Bobbitt (1993) provided information on employment of women as administrators in the United States. In 1990-91 there were 102,771 principals; of these 78,890 were public school principals and 23,881 were private school administrators. There were 59,351 assistant principals of which 48,238 were in public schools and 11,113 were in private schools. Seventy percent of the principals were men and only 30% were women. In another report on the principalship, about one in eight (12%) high school principals were women, and women held about 18% of assistant principalships (Pellicer, Anderson, Keefe, Kelley & McCleary, 1988). Underrepresentation of women, as well as of minorities, in school administration is indisputable: "The inequitable representation of women and minorities in education administration is a problem school board members, school executives, and leaders in education administration must address" (Jacobson, 1989, p. 19).

The struggle to gain leadership positions for women continues in the 1990s. A survey conducted by *The Executive Educator* and Xavier University showed that women are best represented among the ranks of elementary school principals (39.7%), followed by junior high/middle school principals (20.5%), and high school principals (12.1%). The lowest percentage (10.5) of female school administrators work as school superintendents (Natale, 1992).

The percentage of women holding superintendency positions is minimal when compared with the percentages of women in other school administrative positions. Many reasons for this disparity exist, but gender discrimination stands at the forefront. Sex, more than age, experience, background, or competence, still determines the role individuals hold in schools. Women are still battling the same myths they did years ago. Myths and stereotypes must be seen for what they are—discrimination.

Numbers of men and women graduate students in preparation programs in educational administration are nearly equal, yet the number of women in school administrative positions has not kept pace with the increase of women in administrator preparation programs (Grady & Bohling-Phillipi, 1987). Underrepresentation of women in administrative positions continues due to factors such as sex discrimination and myths about women's abilities. The "good old boys" club still exists among public school administrators. School administrators are disproportionately male, white, and older than their counterparts in other occupations.

Barriers to Success

Timpano (1976) maintained that sex discrimination was practiced through "filtering methods" that filter out qualified women. "Recruiting filters" included limiting the announcement of a job opening to "within the district" when the district had few, if any, women certified as administrators. "Application filters" included downgrading an applicant for a top administrative position by suggesting that she apply for a lesser administrative or teaching position. "Selection criteria filters" included applying dual selection criteria by allowing men to skip one

or more rungs on the career ladder but requiring women to climb each step. Included in "interview filters" were questions such as, "Aren't you concerned about returning home alone late in the evenings from meetings?" Lastly, "selection decision filters" included rejecting a woman because she was aggressive but hiring a man because he was aggressive. Research and statistics indicate that sexual discrimination, whether overt or covert, does exist in hiring practices in educational administration (Lange, 1983).

Few internal barriers to women achieving administrative positions are noted in studies by AASA (1982) and Dopp and Sloan (1986). The internal barrier mentioned most often was lack of geographical mobility. Because nearby opportunities were often limited, the lack of geographical mobility strongly affected women. Personal factors such as marital status, number of children, and ages of children did not significantly affect upward career mobility.

Certified but not Employed

In a study of women in Midwestern states who held administrative certification, Grady (1992) reported the following. Of 196 respondents, 127 (65%) had not applied for any administrative position during the last five years. The 69 (35%) women who had applied for administrative positions submitted a total of 96 applications. These applications included: 43 for elementary principalships, 19 for assistant principalships, 17 for coordinator positions, 5 for secondary principalships, 3 for superintendencies, 3 for special education directors, and 3 for directors of student services.

Of the 69 respondents who applied for administrative positions within the last five years, 45 (65%) were interviewed. Of these individuals, 22 were interviewed 1 time, 9 were interviewed 2 times, 9 were interviewed 3 times, 3 were interviewed 4 times, 1 was interviewed 5 times, and 1 was interviewed 6 times. The 129 who had not applied for administrative positions most frequently cited the reason of liking one's current position (68%). Other reasons cited were: not interested in being an administrator (32%), family responsibilities (31%), no vacancies in the area (29%), no incentives to change positions (25%), unable to move (22%), don't want added responsibility (19%), not ready to be an administrator (14%), too old to be an administrator (13%), no reason (6%), and too young to be an administrator (3%).

The subjects were asked whether they had been encouraged to become educational administrators. Thirty-seven percent indicated that they had received such encouragement. All 196 subjects were asked a separate question regarding their willingness to move to accept an administrative position. Only 25% of the respondents indicated a willingness to move. To some extent, this expression of intent validates the reason given for not applying for administrative positions.

Chi square tests were used to ascertain whether there were significant differences in regard to selected characteristics between the group of women who sought administrative positions and the group that did not. No significant differences were found ($p < .05$) based on family responsibilities (e.g. husband's job, children in school) or age (23-30, 31-38, 39-46, 47-54, 55-62, and 63-67+). A significant difference in the groups was found ($\chi^2 = 5.75892$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$) based on encouragement. A significant difference in the groups was also found ($\chi^2 = 17.21301$, $df = 2$, $p < .05$) based on academic degree (Masters, Specialist Certificate, or Doctorate).

Estler's Three Explanatory Models

Estler (cited in Biklen & Brannigan, 1980) posited models to analyze the persisting underrepresentation of women administrators in schools. These three models were: (a) the women's place model, (b) the discrimination model, and (c) the meritocracy model.

Of the three models outlined by Estler, the women's-place model and the discrimination model together provide the best framework for understanding why women remain in teaching while men move into administration. Few women have been socialized to have a clear sense of a career track or to develop their leadership skills. They have also been denied the support, opportunity, and experience given to men (Lyman & Speizer, 1980).

The women's place model acknowledged different socialization patterns for young boys and girls that were institutionally reinforced. These patterns continued in adult life. The women's place model was based on the assumption that the absence of women in leadership positions was due to the different socialization patterns of men and women. As they grew up, women were taught to be the family caretakers and nurturers and that a woman's place was at home. Society did not admire the pursuit of a career requiring planning and many long hours of hard work that took women away from their families.

The discrimination model suggested that preferential hiring and promotional practices explained the sexist imbalance in educational administration. This model was supported by an examination of the number of years it took women to achieve the rank of principal or superintendent (Lyman & Speizer, 1980). This number was determined by the number of years in constant service in education. Estler's analysis showed that almost the same number of female and male teachers held the credentials to become administrators. However, the median number of years in teaching before appointment to the elementary principalship was 5 years for males and 15 years for females (Estler, 1975).

The meritocracy model, however, assumed that people were promoted according to their ability. Therefore, it implied that men were more competent than women because men were chosen for administrative positions so often.

Gross and Trask, in *Men and Women as Elementary Principals* (1976), examined the relationship of gender and competence of elementary school principals. The authors' extensive analysis of data, collected from 91 female and 98 male principals, as well as 1,202 teachers in 41 cities in the United States during the 1960s, indicated that the professional performance of teachers and the amount of student learning was higher, on the average, at schools with female principals. As Estler discovered, there really was very little data to support the belief in the higher general competence of men.

When linked together, Estler's concepts provide an argument that demonstrates the existence of sex roles and occupational stereotypes. Considerable evidence supported the argument that sex role stereotypes and sex role socialization reduce the probabilities that women will actively seek leadership positions and that organizations will be responsive to those who do (Adkinson & Bouley, 1981; Dopp & Sloan, 1986). Although women may be well-qualified, some have psychologically accepted a secondary role in their profession because they are concerned about their family or because they lack confidence (Lange, 1983).

Research by Horner (1974) analyzed the tendency of women to lower their

expectations of themselves and their esteem. Rather than assume or even apply for non-traditional positions, women elect to avoid success by setting their occupational aspirations modestly low rather than be subjected to social antagonisms. There remains a psychological barrier, a subconscious occupational ceiling, that prevents women from actively pursuing success in the non-traditional roles of school administrators. Thus proportionately fewer women than men seek administrative positions, tending to disguise their ability and eliminate them from competition in a larger occupational sphere (Johnston, Yeakey, & Moore, 1980).

Women Superintendents

How do superintendents who are women view their jobs? According to Grady and Wesson (1994), women superintendents noted satisfaction in (a) making a difference, (b) making changes, (c) providing direction, (d) meeting children's needs, (e) having control, and (f) working with people. Women superintendents also reported a variety of benefits from the superintendency such as (a) working with people, (b) achieving a career goal, (c) having a chance for growth, (d) gaining skills, (e) enjoying the job, (f) enjoying a variety of work, and (g) enjoying financial benefits. The majority of women superintendents (65%) experienced "a great deal" of self-fulfillment from their work; 27% reported a "mixed" sense of self-fulfillment while only 8% had "little" sense of self-fulfillment from the superintendency.

Women's representation in the superintendency role, the perceived ultimate in leadership in public school environments, currently is receiving much attention. As indicated in preceding sections, women are not well represented in this area of leadership. Only a few women, relative to the number of positions available, enter the superintendency. Not only must progress be sustained in the attraction of women to this role, but attention must be given to the retention of women in the role. Current research indicates that women tend to leave the position after a period of time. Of course, some leave because they are invited to leave; others make the choice themselves. In considering those whose employment as superintendent is terminated, the question arises as to whether their leaving is truly a result of their inability to lead or is a result of a lack of networking, a lack of influence in information circles, a lack of networks/mentors, or perhaps, an overload of family demands that cause them to neglect duties. The characteristics of those responsible for terminating the superintendencies of women are necessarily suspect.

What do we know about those who leave the superintendency after gaining access to the role? Tallerico and Burstyn (1996) investigated women's entrance into superintendencies and their ultimate leaving of those positions. They reported that multiple factors contributed to the abandonment of the superintendency, but that four patterns characterized the "disenchantment" with the role: (a) deterioration of superintendent-school board relationships, (b) dysfunctional union-district relationships, (c) over-emphasis on non-instructional issues, and (d) moral or ethical clashes with board members. Differences were found for those who left voluntarily from those who left the role involuntarily (LaCost, 1995).

Reducing Inequities

The Genesis of Gender Inequity

As we search for solutions to gender inequities, we may be looking at the "wrong end" of the problem. In fact, the practices that lead to the underrepresentation of women in school administration begin at very early ages. The work by Sadker and Sadker (1994) demonstrates how the inequities begin. At very early ages, the practices that bar women from access to scholarships and professional careers begin. Through these biased practices we assure that there will be few women who seek roles as school administrators.

Participation

One aspect of gender inequity is evident in participation or non-participation. The classroom consists of two worlds: one of boys in action, the other of girls' inaction. Male students control classroom conversation (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Girls grow quieter as they grow older. In coeducational classes, college women are even less likely than elementary and secondary school girls to participate in discussions. In the typical college classroom, 45 percent of students do not speak; the majority of these voiceless students are women (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). In fact, women's silence is loudest at college, with twice as many females as males voiceless (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). When the professor as well as most of the students are male, the stage is set for women to be minor players. Professors give males more nonverbal attention. They make more eye contact with men, wait longer for them to answer, and are more likely to remember their names. This creates what Sandler and Hall have dubbed, a "chilly classroom climate" (Sadker & Sadker, 1994, p. 170-171).

Self-doubt has become part of women's public voice, and most are unaware of it (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Women speak less at meetings, defer to men, and the phrasing of their contributions is often tentative. The more men present at a meeting, the more uncertain and powerless the women become.

Testing

A second example of gender inequity is evident in testing. Females are the only group in America to begin school testing ahead and leave having fallen behind. On the SAT exam, boys typically receive scores that are 50 to 60 points higher than the girls' scores (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Regardless of ethnic or racial background, all American girls share a common bond: a gender gap in test performance that leaves them behind the boys. Even on an ACT test designed to mirror school learning, boys' composite scores are higher and the gender gap persists. Achievement tests are a male landslide. Scholarship dollars provide a tangible ledger sheet of the cost paid by girls and women because of the gender gap in standardized tests. The very approach and design of standardized tests favors males. Boys do better on multiple choice questions and girls perform best on essay questions. Boys perform better in the beat-the-clock pressure cooker created by timed tests such as the SAT, while girls are more likely to succeed when the test is not timed. The GRE has three sections: verbal, quantitative, and analytical. As in the SAT, 200 is the lowest possible score and 800 is perfect. As in the SAT, on all sections, women score lower than men.

As test takers grow older, the gender gap grows wider. On GRE scores, males score 80 points higher than females on the quantitative math section. Men score

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21 points higher than women on the verbal section and 26 points higher on the analytical section—a 127 point male lead on the GRE (Sadker & Sadker, 1994).

Standardized tests are crucial in the competitive race for access to professional schools, including law, medicine, and business. A few points on these tests make the difference between acceptance and rejection and determine the awarding of scholarships. Women score lower than men on all of the standardized tests.

Like a thief in school, sexist lessons subvert education, twisting it into a system of socialization that robs potential. Consider this record of silent, devastating losses:

In the early grades girls are ahead of or equal to boys on almost every standardized measure of achievement and psychological well-being.

By the time they graduate from high school or college, they have fallen behind. Girls enter school ahead but leave behind.

In high school, girls score lower on the SAT and ACT tests, tests that are critical for college admission. The greatest gender gap is in the crucial areas of science and math.

Girls score far lower on College Board Achievement tests that are required by most of the highly selective colleges.

Boys are much more likely to be awarded state and national college scholarships.

The gap does not narrow in college. Women score lower on all sections of the Graduate Record Exam. The GRE is a requirement for entry to many graduate programs.

Women also trail on most tests needed to enter professional schools: the GMAT for business school, the LSAT for law school, and the MCAT for medical school.

(Sadker & Sadker, 1994, p. 13-14)

Textbooks

A third example of gender inequity is found in books. When girls do not see themselves in the pages of textbooks and when teachers do not point out or confront the omissions, girls learn that to be female is to be an absent partner in the development of our nation (Sadker & Sadker, 1994).

Several studies have shown that in basal readers the activity girls are most often engaged in is watching boys in action. In Prentice-Hall's 1992 *A History of the United States* by Boorstin and Kelley, only eight women have a paragraph or two written about them in the thousand-page book.

In Addison-Wesley's *Work History: Traditions and New Directions*, the index lists 596 men and 41 women, only four of whom are American: Ida Tarbell, Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton are mentioned together in a single sentence (cited in Sadker & Sadker, 1994).

These practices that begin at early ages are major factors contributing to the underrepresentation of women in school administration. Only when systemic gender inequity is addressed can women truly achieve equity as school administrators.

The Search for Solutions

The attempts to identify causes for the paucity of women in administrative positions are legion. Solutions to the imbalances are found in actions taken by individuals and groups who seek to facilitate and advocate for the careers of women. Two actions that hold promise are sponsoring or mentoring women and providing professional development activities or workshop opportunities.

Avenues to Career Advancement

The entrance into school administration begins the moment educators enter the profession as classroom teachers. Having experience in classroom teaching is generally required as the basis for becoming school administrators. Binswanger (1987) advised aspiring administrators to work hard and become good teachers because teaching is a key to leading a school. One of the key roles that principals play is that of instructional leader.

Women and minorities can advance in school administration through (a) sponsorship, a mentoring program where senior individuals help individuals in lower level positions, (b) displaying their abilities, knowledge, and skills, (c) understanding the symbolic significance of a promotion, and (d) promotion of a specialization by getting really good at something and then promoting that set of skills in climbing the career ladder.

Erickson and Pitner (1980) affirmed that a mentoring program, or sponsorship, is a way that many male administrators rely on recruiting, training, and replacing one another. Glass (1992) reported, however, that women (59%) and minority superintendents (55%) had mentors more often than did male (48%) superintendents. Furthermore, 81% of the women superintendents indicated that they had been helped by the "good old boy or good old girl" network while 68% of minorities, 55% of males, and 56% of nonminorities said that they had benefited from such a network (Glass, 1992).

Erickson and Pitner asked women holding administrative positions for advice for women seeking administrative jobs. The four questions and responses to them were:

1. What is the single most important suggestion you have for women seeking their first job in school administration? Overall answers included: persevere, set goals, and increase one's visibility.
2. What advice do you have for overcoming the belief that administration is a male domain? The overwhelming advice was to demonstrate one's own competence.
3. How can male chauvinists best be dealt with? The two tactics suggested for dealing with chauvinism were either to ignore the person or comment, or to respond to the remarks. Women should remain professional at all times, particularly when faced with sexist comments from male co-workers. Women should always ask, "Is this person worth educating?" If the person making the comment is a supervisor, the answer is generally, "Yes." (Erickson & Pitner, 1980, p. 12).
4. What is the best career route for women seeking to enter educational administration? Recommendations were to get an early start in preparing to be school administrators and to use mentoring relationships.

Lessons Learned

Members of professional associations, school boards, and preparation programs as well as applicants and women can take specific actions to increase the number of women administrators.

Professional Associations: *Professional associations can provide a number of services for women seeking administrative positions.* Sponsoring workshops is a key activity for associations. For individuals seeking administrative positions, workshops on preparing career plans, interviewing, job searching, and developing administrative skills would be helpful. Associations can offer workshops that will aid all members of the profession. Topics might include dispelling myths and stereotypes about women administrators, identifying discriminatory practices, and recognizing sexual harassment.

Professional associations can advocate for women. One must remember, however, that directors of professional associations, who generally are men, may be reluctant advocates. Thus the advocacy task may rest with women who are association members or who hold leadership positions in associations.

School Boards: *School board members must be provided with opportunities to review the credentials of both female and male applicants for administrative positions.* When recruitment programs do not result in applications by females, aggressive efforts should be made to address any inequity. Because there is a significant pool of certified female administrators, there should be no reason why female applicants are not given consideration in searches for administrators. Assuring consideration of both female and male candidates would constitute affirmative action for both sexes.

As the number of women serving as members of school boards increases, attitudes toward hiring school administrators may be less gender-based. In 1988, 32% of school board members were women; five years later the percentage had increased to 40%. Women who demonstrate executive, leadership, and managerial abilities as members of school boards and other governing bodies may open the doors to administrative positions for women.

Preparation Programs: *Preparation programs can offer assistance to women students who seek administrative positions.* University professors have many contacts with school administrators and have the opportunity to recommend individuals for administrative positions. Professors need to recommend both female and male candidates for administrative jobs. In the past, it may have been possible to suggest that there were no qualified women candidates. That possibility no longer exists because of the number of women in educational administration programs.

Preparation programs, through practicum and internship experiences, can introduce students to individuals who can serve as role models, mentors, and sponsors. These experiences help students develop their network within the profession.

Institutions of higher education should assure that their programs include dimensions that dispel myths and stereotypes. Similarly, these programs must address issues related to discrimination and harassment as both issues of practice and academic topics.

Applicants: *Ultimately, the greatest task rests with applicants. Those who seek administrative positions must be persistent in their job searches.* Applicants must be willing to submit a great number of applications as well as to participate in numerous

interviews before acquiring administrative positions. Persistence pays and is a minimum requirement for administrative aspirants.

The backgrounds and experiences of one talent pool—women—need extra attention, examination, and consideration. Identifying women who have had experience as school administrators may be difficult because women are underrepresented in administrative circles. Women with administrative training may, however, have extensive administrative leadership and organizational experiences in nonschool activities related to community, family, religious, or youth groups; in volunteer work in agencies; and in other kinds of formal and informal organizations. Women must highlight their leadership experiences when they apply for administrative positions.

Applicants must work to develop a network of sponsors and mentors. Similarly, applicants must engage in activities that demonstrate administrative and leadership skills.

Women Mentors and Professional Development: *Women who hold administrative positions can serve a vital role in supporting other women seeking administrative positions.* Also, professional development seminars, courses, and workshops are important to women seeking administrative roles (Grady & Bohling-Philippi, 1987; Grady & O'Connell, 1993). Professional development sessions that focus on administration—the job itself and the changing administrative role—should be provided.

Programs should be designed to give women expertise in management and career planning, as well as to provide them with a supportive network. Programs should be highly accessible in terms of admissions policy, cost, and sites where the programs are offered. Career advancement as well as the development of leadership skills should be emphasized (Haring-Hildore, 1988).

Throughout the United States, the majority of the students enrolled in programs in educational administration are women (Grady & Wesson, 1994). Women who are certified as administrators and underemployed are a wasted resource to the education profession (Grady, 1992).

Mentors who guide, encourage, listen, and assess, should be provided for administrators. Mentoring is a collegial relationship wherein mentors share insights with their mentees (Richards & Fox, 1990).

Internship programs, coupled with relevant administrator preparation, provide another route for women who wish to embark upon a career in administration. Policy makers, mentors, supervisors, and other influential school administrators may propose the creation of intern positions so that fledgling administrators may have opportunities to work in administrative roles.

Filling Entry-Level Positions: *An increase in the number and variety of entry-level positions open to women in administration is essential if women are to have an opportunity to climb onto and up the career ladder in school administration.* As a key position for entry into administration, the assistant principalship is an important focus for policy concerns about equal opportunity.

Women teachers are more likely to be members of elementary school faculties where assistant principalships are few and far between. Although the assistant principalship has been a good career stepping stone for men, it has not been so for women. Policy makers and hiring officials need to examine the function of the assistant principalship.

Pellicer and Stevenson (1991) concluded that a more defined career ladder for building level administrators could be provided. Several alternatives, such as being designated as associate principal in charge of curriculum or executive vice principal for administration, could provide more recognition and status to administrators who have a major job responsibility in a building. Because the role of assistant principal is varied according to the culture of the building, the generic title of assistant principal is no longer adequate to recognize the diversity of critical roles played by building-level administrators other than the principal. In Pellicer and Stevenson's survey, nearly half the assistant principals who were questioned stated that they were not consulted when their job responsibilities were determined. A more sensible approach is for assistant principals to become partners with principals in deciding how the myriad tasks in schools should be accomplished. In this way, schools can be managed in a collegial, cooperative, and collaborative style that could increase effectiveness of a team of building administrators. Applicants for assistant principalships could seek to upgrade job titles, duties, and shared decision making so that such positions afford opportunities for assuming important, significant, and substantial responsibilities.

Encouraging women to apply for administrative positions and to continue their graduate studies, as well as persuading women that administrative careers are worthwhile, may be areas that individuals and organizations attempting to increase the number of women in administrative positions should emphasize.

Gender Vaccine: *We need to reintroduce the gender vaccine.* We need to assess classrooms, participation rates, testing practices, and textbooks to assure that girls and women, as well as boys and men, are given an equal education and equal access to the professions. Given the findings reported by the Sadkers based on their years of study, it is no surprise that few women aspire to roles as school administrators.

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