

# Women in Primary and Secondary Education Administration: Navigating Spheres of Subordination

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## Abstract

While women maintain an overwhelming majority of teaching positions at the primary and secondary levels, their presence in administrative roles is extremely underrepresented. Many scholars have identified barriers-to-entry for women to enter these positions of power. Though my research touches on these issues, the overall goal of this article is to better understand the lived subordination of women who have already attained administrative positions, and in what ways they combat it. I interviewed four women in Wynberg Community Schools who shed light on the discrimination that is both blatant and overt, however rampant. In exploring this qualitative research, an enhanced and more personal understanding of how marginalization has affected these women, can be showcased. My conclusions aim to set a better environment for women in the education workplace, by highlighting the way gender functions in school administration. By discussing these issues widely, changing the way language is used, positively encouraging women to apply to positions of power, supporting women in those positions of power, and given women spaces to thrive, it is certain that the education system will be much more diverse, nuanced, and conducive to equality.

## Author's Note

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## 1. Introduction

In the all-too revealing article entitled "Why do Women Teach and Men Manage?" Myra Stobel describes the dissociation between female teachers and leadership positions in primary and secondary education administration. Published in 1980, Stobel's provides a great supplement to the most recent statistics on this disparity in which females hold approximately 72% of teaching positions, but only 44% of administrative roles (U.S. Department of Education 1). Many scholars have described the barriers-to-entry women face in the education sphere, but have failed to describe the women's after attaining such positions. I interviewed four successful women who work in education administration in the Wynberg Community School (WCS) district. Each woman

expressed a unique testimony that not only further defined barriers-to-entry, but also shed light on lived (?) subordination in the workplace. The accounts of these women, combined with my primary analysis, present a better understanding of how women navigate around masculine administrative norms in primary and secondary education. The anthropological methodology of qualitative research allows for a better consideration of the nuanced environments in which women are not welcomingly accepted. Through in-depth interviews, it is much easier to depict the range of coping mechanisms and strategies women regularly employ in order to deal with their underrepresented status. The interviews were conducted in a loose and free-flowing style that allowed each interviewee to discuss her specific passion and interest. While the questions were tailored to elucidate how the women rose to their particular positions, the ultimate goal of the interview was to better understand the lived experience of women in education administration. The findings will show that women not only face the rigor of prestigious positions of power, but also attempt to achieve this success in a revolutionary way. Their contributions stifle existing patriarchic norms that might have continued had they not become leaders. In addition, these women have now entered a space of power in a permanent way; while their employment may change with time, the simple fact that women have held these crucial leadership positions is powerful. Not only do these women thrive in a male-dominated system, but they also bring unique leadership styles that morph the overall tone of the school district. The names of the women, along with the names and locations of their places of employment, have been assigned pseudonyms as a means of protection.

A key aspect of grasping the intricate topic of women in primary and secondary education administration is synthesizing the distinctive contextual background. Many scholars have identified issues for women in higher education administration; examples include Lavonia Smith in, "African American Women in Higher Education Administration," and Victoria Jo in, "Voluntary turnover and women administrators in higher education," who offer an array of engaging materials that help in defining the barriers-to-entry for collegiate females who steer through spheres of oppression (Smith 1 & Jo 1). While this information is invaluable, the academy is missing primary research on women in positions of power in elementary and secondary education, and more specifically their current opinions about their positions. My research is aimed at helping to bridge this gap in information by conducting deep and engaging interviews that allow for a fuller understanding of each woman's experience in this professional realm.

In planning my interviews, I aimed to select a diverse group of women whose stories are likely unfound in other areas of academia. My first instinct was to contact Christy Williams, who is

the only Indian-American administrator in the district. I felt as though her perspective as both an immigrant and a woman of color would offer precious insight. Alisha Davis is one of two African-American female administrators in the district and holds the highest position of the women interviewed, with her office located in the Board of Education. Davis is a strong influence in the district on both micro and macro levels, so I sought to better understand her approach and methodology in completing her duties. I felt that Betty Smith would also be a unique interviewee because of her transfer status; rather than being a product of this district, she happily taught in another district for years and moved to Wynberg area with a different set of skills and experiences. In reading her testimony, it will become increasingly apparent why she was chosen. Finally, I contacted Diane Johnson who is the youngest of the principals interviewed. I was interested in learning her story, especially considering her ability to balance her professional life with her family life, a balance that seemed invaluable to me. The four women selected were chosen because of their demographic information, as well as recommendations from other respected administrators in the district. In conducting these interviews, I did not have a specific thesis in mind, nor did I intend to ask any leading questions. The arguments that I created about women in education administration were drawn from the women's testimonies and from secondary research. With the selection of this diverse (by means of race, ethnicity, experience, age, etc.) group of women, I feel that my qualitative research incorporates a unique array of women who offer interesting insight behind the closed doors of WCS.

## **2. Literature Review**

A study by Mary-Lyn Jones showed a number of barriers-to-entry for women in education administrative positions. Jones sent a questionnaire to 25 primary school teachers and performed a small number of interviews of both men and women. Her four foci included career-planning strategies, attitudes toward promotions, relationships between work and home, and perceived differences in leadership. She first noted that there was much controversy in her quantitative research (questionnaire) – some teachers found that the questions were leading and contained gender biases. The contentions that Jones drew included the perceived notion that “women teach and men manage,” due to patriarchal norms (Jones 11). She argues that the appeal of men for promotion is financially related, while the reason women are not motivated to become administrators is that they are content with their current status and that a disruptions in their work

life are not worth the fiscal gain. Eventually, Jones recommends that women become more educated on their opportunity for upward mobility. She also notes that women need to understand that they could fill more positions if they simply applied to more positions and embraced these responsibilities in the workplace. Jones' work aimed at obtaining a sense of the sentiments of the community as a whole, rather than delving deeply into the lives of a select number of administrators. While I would argue that a more in-depth questionnaire or interview could have been more productive, her overall work is extremely vital in setting a framework to understand the reasoning behind women's lack of motivation for upper administrative positions. Her primary conclusion is that some women are complacent in their current positions and are fearful of how extra responsibilities could affect their work and personal lives. By working to overcome this underlying reservation of women to apply for promotions in education, a patriarchal system can be broken even more deeply as the experiences and styles of women's leadership add richer and more diverse perspectives to tackling administrative problems.

Another study that contributes to this topic was that of Melissa Byington, entitled "Principal balance: Life role balance among women in secondary school administration." In her work, Byington conducts both a questionnaire and an extensive personal interview with nine different women. She strongly contextualizes their experiences; she introduces readers to the background of each woman and describes where they fit against each other in answers to the questions. She draws patterns from the women, most notably describing the maternal struggles they face when working towards attaining the role of principal. One interviewee noted that "You will regret missing your children's activities and special events, but you won't miss spending more time on work" (Byington 114). This conclusion allows for readers to grasp the inherent maternal guilt that comes along with pursuing a leadership role that could potentially take time away from the family. As many female principals are also mothers, there might be a misconceived notion that these women are caring more for the children of the community than for their own. Nonetheless, the leadership skills gained from parenting easily transfer into conflict mediation strategies, event/workshop planning, and beyond. Being a mother, in addition to a principal, adds to the experiences of managing youth and can be showcased as strength for such women. People should not shame women for excelling in their workplace, regardless of whether they are mothers.

A study by Dorothea Webb in Mississippi looks at the satisfiers and dissatisfiers associated with women in education administration among women working in elementary, secondary, and higher education. She issued a questionnaire to 144 women, 40% of them aged 45 – 54, in various

levels of administration. Her interests lied in understanding the personal satisfaction of women in the different layers of their job. She notes that the factor most strongly influence women's satisfaction in the workplace is when they are head of their household. She also notes that while age significantly contributed to a lack of satisfaction, other seemingly relevant factors did not: "...race and level of educational attainment were not significant factors in total job satisfaction" (Webb, Abstract). Webb adds nice insight into the academy by contributing data from a large number of administrators' responses to probing questions. Her links between demographics and satisfaction in the workplace allow for a more nuanced understanding of women's positionality of their controlled life (i.e. what job they work, where they work) versus parts of their life they cannot control (i.e. age, race).

In a notable work, David Coursen critically analyzes education administration as a whole, specifically focusing on the role of language (regarding women) in attaining respect. In addition he seeks solutions to closing disparity gaps with women and minorities in primary and secondary schools. He states:

"They may act exactly the same way, but they are called: absent-minded if they are men, scatter-brained if they are women; intellectually curious if they are men, nose-y if they are women; planners if they are men, schemers if they are women; sensitive if they are men, emotional if they are women..." (Coursen 20).

This observation highlights a distinct lived experience of subordination that women face in the workplace. Though taking similar approaches to confronting problems, women are often deemed as inherently more emotional and less logic-centered than men, making it much more difficult to garner a sense of respect as a school and/or community. Coursen explains that the major way to deconstruct these negative stereotypes is for qualified and educated women to attain positions of power and to prove these stereotypes false through their actions (Coursen 26). In addition, by changing the way we speak about women in these positions, language can be altered in a way that equates men and women. Coursen's article showcases barriers-to-entry and the difficulty that women face in gaining respect as a result of language norms, evidence that crucially situates my argument in relation to societal and professional lived subordination.

### **3. Contextual Background**

My primary research is based on three secondary administrators and one primary administrator in Wynberg. To set a context for these women, it is important to understand the educational system in which they work. Wynberg Community Schools (WCS) account for three small towns and two large cities. Of the 28,430 persons under age 18, approximately 85% (or 24168) identify as White. The Board of Education is given \$9,925 per student, banking over \$190,000,000 per year (District Detail for WCS 1). Of the 1903 WCS employees in 2011, 957 of them were teachers. This leaves the nearly 1000 remaining employees to fill positions including administrator, administrative support, guidance counselors, library/media specialists, and so forth. The school district is composed of fifteen elementary schools, five middle schools, and a unique structure of three high schools (About 1). Within the high school setting, there are three separate institutions on one campus. There is separate administration for each building, though students are encouraged to take classes in any of the three buildings. According to one of the interviewees, this structure supports a campus of over 6,000 students (Personal Interview with Johnson). All in all, it is clear that the students in this district have a distinct support system and that the complex structure allows students to meet more people and experience different classroom settings. In the following sections, I will showcase the testimony of four powerful women in the WCS district who explain their professional challenges and methods of overcoming them.

#### **4. Alisha Davis**

My interview with Alisha Davis highlights many situations of subordination in the workplace, but is extremely consistent with her leadership style; an approach that demands respect from teachers, parents, and students alike. Born in 1951, Davis is an African-American woman who grew up in a strict household in Texas. She attended a Black-only segregated school, but notes that it was a “positive environment with a rigorous curriculum” (Personal Interview with Davis). Her parents instilled a work ethic in her that emphasized being “better than” in order to get ahead. This included studying longer, arriving earlier and getting better grades. From this experience, she moved to an integrated middle school and fit in with the “academically inclined” students, of both white and black families. This foundation allowed her to gain a “thick skin” and understand that she could persevere through anything, as long as she recalled those three requirements to success.

During the summers, Davis would yearn for “the smell” of school again. She completed her teaching degree at Capricorn University and substituted in Athlone/Fish Hoek schools. From there, she was offered a position as an assistant principal in Athlone/Fish Hoek and soon began to understand her position as an African-American female in a school system that was dominated by white males. In those times, when negative editorial pieces about Dr. Martin Luther King were being published rapidly, Davis noted that she needed to become more “active in the [black] community.” Many members of the WCS district recognized her potential and asked her to apply as principal of the district. During her interview, she was extremely specific about her intent. She noted: “If you think what you’ve seen in me is effective and positive for the district [then hire me]... [But] I don’t want to be a token, and I don’t need to be a token.” Although Davis knew that she could be a powerful symbol as an African American female in a position of authority, she also needed to make sure she was being hired because of her qualifications, not as a “token.” This balance between identity and qualifications is a concept discussed Izhar Oplatka, a scholar who focuses on third-world education administration. She notes that women are often forced to check their gender before applying for higher administrative roles because of their different cultures and upbringings:

“While the debate about gender differences in leadership styles has been hotly contested, it is less difficult to show gender dissimilarities in the experiences of principals, simply because men and women are influenced differently by their gender during childhood.” (Oplatka 609).

Davis was immediately hired into the district and worked rigorously as a principal for 10 years until she attained her current position of “Director of Elementary Education,” in which she oversees the 15 principals in primary education schools. However, her journey has not been without its pitfalls. She noted the way in which being an African American and a woman in the WCS district affected her experience: “As a minority, you have to be careful; you can’t burn your bridges.” Throughout the interview, she noted this in many different ways, such as stating that “[There are] certain things that I couldn’t do.” While this may seem overbearing for many, Davis took every situation “with a grain of salt.” She was interested in educating the majority on minority issues and was not offended that she had to take extra steps to do the same job as many of the privileged individuals in the district. “I use a lens of equity in reverse...I put myself in the perspective of the parents.” She alluded to the idea that many of the parents had a “picture of an angry black woman,” and that she had to fight and still continues to fight, against that image. Davis’s experience highlights the way in which her actions as a person in a position of authority

was constantly checked by her gender and ethnicity. One way in which she pushes against these stereotypes is by having an “open door” policy. When she was a young administrator, one mother called and said that she did not want her son alone in a room with Davis. Davis calmly called the mother and said that she was welcome to be present at the meeting and that she always had her doors open, so there was no need to worry. This “open door” policy allowed everyone nearby the principal’s office to hear the conversation. The secretary was always clued into what conversations were being had and the barriers to trust could be relinquished. Davis’s reaction to the mother’s comments displays her ability to handle situations of racial prejudices with rationale that is extremely exemplary of a leader.

Another example of the graceful way in which Davis deflected acts of discrimination was an event involving a fire at Roeland Elementary School, where she was principal. A group of teenagers went into the woods behind Roeland and lit a garbage can on fire. When Davis phoned 911 to have the situation investigated, the officer said “Next time, make sure when you call the fire department, you call the principal first.” This assumption that Davis was not the principal, due to her race, her femininity, or a combination of the two, illustrates the prejudices that still circulate today. She merely viewed this incident as a teaching moment and happily explained to the officer that she was the principal and thanked him for his time.

Later on in her career, Davis embraced a struggle during the “Halloween epidemic of 2011.” Elementary school teachers in Parliament Elementary School wanted to move the holiday festivities (including the parade that parents attend) to the evening, when it was already scheduled for the morning. Their argument was that they did not have enough time to teach and that they thought more parents would be able to attend the parade if they celebrated in the early evening. Davis approved this motion, as the Director of Elementary Education, but was confronted on numerous fronts about ruining the holiday. One parent had the audacity to post on a social networking website that “We [parents] are sick of minorities taking over our district.” From this controversy, Davis stated “You would have thought I was a communist [by the amount of backlash].” This is another example of how people have reacted to her as an African-American female in education administration rather than a principal; their complaints attacked her identity as a “minority” rather than with her leadership decisions.

Another strife that Davis attempts to conquer is the inherent prejudice amongst co-workers. She noted that while many administrators feel free to express themselves at meetings, she would have to “back it up with scientific evidence.” Because of assumptions made based on



her race and gender, Davis felt that she had to verify herself on multiple occasions. She said, however, that she does not mind because it makes her arguments more persuasive in meetings and she in turn becomes more educated and respected than those who are unprepared. She also noted the irony in that she continually has been forced to fight feelings of marginalization for her black racial identity and her female identity, but now she creates and implements policy decisions for white males. In the face of racial and gender-based stereotypes that attempt to undermine her authority, Davis transforms these situations into lessons and emerges as an even stronger leader.

In Davis' current position, she has employed multiple programs and philosophies to combat racial and gender marginalization. She has promoted a program that was developed by Glenn Singleton and Curtis Linton entitled "Courageous Conversations," in which administrators assemble at least once a month to discuss forms of oppression and develop ideas to contest them (Singleton & Linton). She notes that at times it gets uncomfortable for people, but if one uses the "reverse equity lens" they can understand that marginalized people often feel the same discomfort. Another philosophy that she has instilled is the idea of continual respect and openness. Davis has noted that she is "very open to constructive criticism," as she employs this mode of communication in her work every day.

Davis also discussed her motives for dedicating herself to her job. She notes that it is not easy - the number of hours that are put into a day do not reflect her salary. She works tirelessly in a community that continues to undermine her but manages to remain strong. She notes "I do this for my daughters, because they never had a black teacher." To see faces that are similar to your own, she argues, is helpful for students as they can better identify with their teachers. She wants to be a role model for minority children and female students as well as create a legacy of consciousness and an environment of tolerance.

Davis is an integral player in the Wynberg community by offering an inclusive approach to leadership. She is frequently doubted by ignorant parents, but stays loyal to her policies that breed competency and success in education administration. From her 'reverse equity lens' to her open door policy and her courageous conversations, she utilizes her identity as an African-American woman and displays a noble management style that has been successful in garnering respect from students, parents, and co-workers alike.

## **5. Betty Smith**

Another woman who plays a pivotal role in the safety and security of the student body in WCS is Betty Smith. Smith is a White female and had every intention of being a stay-at-home mom in her suburban home. She was married before she began teaching, but eventually received her diploma in education from Champion University. She taught English, theater, and speech and absolutely loved what she did – but she wanted more. Smith first taught at Claremont High School, a school in which the demographics are similar to WCS, and eventually became an assistant principal. It did not take long, however, for her to grasp the disparity in gender equality in both positions.

Smith expressed that at Claremont High School there was an unspoken agenda known as the “The Good Old Boys network... [In this network] there was no chance for mobility.” (Personal Interview with Smith). Smith recalls a specific introduction to this ideological structure during a leadership conference. She noted that people were very cold to her and that it was difficult to find faces of women in the crowds: “[I was] made to feel like men knew what they were doing.” This sense of subordination, she remembered, was a topic of conversation amongst the women in attendance. Nonetheless, Smith attempted to assert authority as a principal and break her way into the system by creating spaces conducive to all genders; in this way, rather than rebelling with a women’s only club, she did not perpetuate any exclusive group. While she may be forever excluded from the “Good Old Boys” network, her tenacity and ability to change policies for her students has contributed to her legacy and has made her an example of women’s leadership.

During our interview, Smith recalled a specific incident in which she was undermined as a woman at a sporting event. During each of the high school’s football games, she was a regular attendee in the crowds and always cheered for the school’s team. She sat with parents and students alike, boosting team morale and showing her dedication through the late and chilly nights. A first year assistant principal, Paul, also enjoyed going to the games, but did not have the same loyalty and dedication to the team that Smith had. When it came time for the head principal to pass out the “sideline” passes (a much better and interactive space), Smith did not make the cut. Contrarily, Paul was offered the tickets because, as the principal noted, “He’s a guy, he gets the sport...You wouldn’t enjoy it as much.” Smith was awed and fell silent. After a woman, who had dedicated multiple years to the school district and had yet to miss a single game finally got a chance to watch from the sideline, she was marginalized on the sole grounds of being a woman. This had nothing to do with her race, her education, nor her ability to perform administratively well; it was merely a sexist and misogynistic act that still haunts her.

Smith has taken these experiences and applied them to her new position in WCS. Throughout her time transitioning to the school district, she described herself as a “natural leader.” She fell into administration with ease when she was “encouraged by two females [in the district], but never encouraged by a male administrator.” In an article entitled “The Influence of Mentors of Career Development of Women in Educational Administration in Leon, County Florida,” J.B. Clemons discusses the importance of female mentorship to promote women’s leadership. She notes that, “having a mentor impacts a woman’s career advancement in education positions, and those women who could identify a mentor had a direct career from teaching to school administration...” (Clemons 353). During the reconstruction of Smith’s school district, an “associate” principal was cast in each of the individual high schools to maintain the day-to-day administrative duties, underneath a larger “overarching” principal. This principal oversaw all of the operations across the three schools, but the associates were at the forefront combating issues in the daily lives of high school students. Smith and the other hired associate principals, were forced to step up in a way that they had never had to, professionally: “[It was] way more work...sometimes 12 hours per day in the summer,” (Personal Interview with Smith). They were not only doing the work of an assistant principal, but they were forced to contribute to everything else; the school also revised their job structure to move from five administrators per building to two. This process taught Smith how to best manage her time and be an effective leader. From there, she was soon promoted to principal at Woodstock High School (one of the three high schools in WCS) upon another reconstruction that removed the overarching lead principal. “Women are strong communicators,” she said, and she was up to this new task.

Although Smith is a successful leader, she is also extremely aware of how her gender influences the way she is perceived in positions of authority. Recently, a teacher passed away in the district. In delivering the news, Smith had to navigate her natural emotions and her gender identity. Striving to fight back tears, Smith remembered her socially constructed place. She noted “I shouldn’t be doing this...I can’t be going down this emotional trail... [Would] a male administrator do that?” However, she indulged in those real feelings, an act that proved even more powerful. She stated “I like who I am;” in remaining true to herself as a person, she displayed compassion and empathy as a leader. While ‘women being emotional’ is a stereotype, those who embrace their emotions should not be shamed. This expressive episode showcased her compassion for her colleagues and added a more comprehensive style of leadership.

Like Davis, Smith also works in the administration for her daughters. She has a firm hand in discipline but finds that “[In discipline], most students say “Thank You.” She wants her students to respect her as a principal, but also not to view her as solely a disciplinarian. She attempts to keep her door open as much as possible, but is constantly struggling to find a balance in the rigor of the job. One thing that can be known for certain is that Smith continues to do the best she can to break down societal norms in education administration.

Smith does an incredible job of staying true to her personal ambitions and expresses it through her style as an administrator. Even after facing blatant sexism, she vehemently takes all people into account when making policies. She understands the multiple self-identities of her students and battles patriarchal norms through her leadership style in the administrative role. She carries her life lessons with her each day, creating environments welcoming to students, parents, and employees of all genders, races, and creeds. She employs similar policies as Davis with an open door policy and aims to get to know each student at a personal level, rather than just during disciplinary meetings. The subordination she has undergone only motivates her to transform WCS into a district that respects women as equal to men.

## **5. Christy Williams**

Christy Williams, the coordinator for special education at the Wynberg Village (the name of the combined high schools of Woodstock, Mowbray, and Delft), has an entirely different journey than the women previously discussed. The Williams family migrated from India to seek better working opportunities for Christy and her sisters. She noted that her mom “had to work to provide for us... so we could have the opportunity to be educated and have careers.” (Personal Interview with Williams). However, Williams did not have the same passion as her sisters. The family mostly consisted of physicians and businesspeople, but Williams was devoted to teaching. She is a self-proclaimed “black sheep;” and her family marginalized her in ways that society may not have. They thought that she was not fulfilling her potential and that she was wasting her time by not making the amount of money she could be. They went on further to note that the time she put into education “takes [her] away from [her] family” and that she “needs to do more with [her] life.” These notions of the ‘focus on the family’ are in line with many societal pressures women face in navigating the career-life balance. Regardless of their comments, she continued to persevere and focus on her passion - influencing students in a positive way.

Whilst battling her family's lack of pride and faith in her, she quickly advanced throughout the education system. She began as a speech pathology major in her undergraduate journey, soon attaining her degrees in teaching art, science, and finally attained a specialized education degree in administration. She climbed up the ladder because she felt that she was ready to continue taking steps to affect students in grander ways. After teaching, she became an assistant principal in the WCS district, and then moved on to manage the special education department. In terms of the gender dynamics, she said that she "never felt it was man versus woman, [but more about] proving [herself] in running this position." Although, when asked how the system had been run previously, she voiced that she had to "get a tough skin, let the shit go" and always yearned to "keep up with the guys."

Williams maintained her goal of "keep[ing] up with the guys," by her outgoing personality: "The people are good, I care, I give time (above and beyond), and I am transparent." She further explained that as the "only Indian administrator- I own people." Her light-hearted confidence during the interview truly showcases her personality; one can see how she how she is able to thrive in any social setting. She continues to climb the hierarchical education administrative ladder as a minority female who hopes to one day gain the position of "Special Education Director."

Despite her confident display of leadership, Williams has faced many unique forms of discrimination. She is often mistaken for a first-generation Indian woman - with all of the stereotypes surrounding that - and has felt particular backlash from people of different religious and sociopolitical backgrounds. She has noticed little to no eye contact from certain parents and has received feedback about her supposed "place" as a woman. Through all of these potential barriers to succeeding in educational administration, including the tough parents and the rigor of the job, Williams has maintained her determination and has not allowed this ignorance to thwart her leadership abilities. Williams's leadership style is clearly exuded through her nature. She is welcoming and compassionate to everyone and demands that she is treated with the equal respect that she gives. She defies not only gender norms, but has also combated the backlash from her family in persevering with her own passion; Williams is exemplary of a woman who has navigated multiple spheres of cultural and gender based constructions and has emerged as a powerful representation of female leadership in education.

## 6. Diane Johnson

My final interviewee was Diane Johnson, a White woman who moved through the education system at a rapid rate, stunning many in and outside the WCS community. Johnson was a pre-medicine junior at Champion University before having her self-proclaimed “beginning life crisis.” (Personal Interview with Johnson). She realized over halfway through her undergraduate career that she was not exactly sure that she wanted to be a doctor. She decided, with the coaching of a few of her teachers, to attain a teaching certificate. She soon fell in love with teaching and pursued her true “calling” as a teacher in secondary schools.

She began her career at a Catholic high school and was asked to apply to the WCS district. She noted, contrarily, that she was happy where she was and that she was not interested in suffering a \$16,000 pay cut. Nonetheless, she was encouraged to apply again, and considered the proximity to her home (much closer; more time to spend with kids), interviewed, and was offered the position. She ultimately chose to take the position because she believes that “everything happens for a reason,” and wanted to give back to the community of which she is a product.

In moving to Wynberg, she continued to teach biological sciences and “never had an interest in being an administrator.” While this was true at the time, she did take on a distinctive set of leadership roles, even in her first years, including sophomore moderation director, technology chairperson of the social committee, and coach of the track and swimming teams. From there, she was offered a positions with many responsibilities -- the student activities director for Wynberg Village. During her duration as a teacher and active leader on campus, she noticed some positive changes that could be made in the district. She noted some assistant principals that would shame kids by reprimanding them in front of an entire class, when a more personal and productive reprimand could have taken place. When restructuring opportunities came around, she thought, “I can do this [better]!”

After interviewing and attaining the assistant principal job, the position of associate principal became vacant. Johnson was so driven and expected so much from herself, and her boss, that she knew she had to apply to be satisfied: “I want to work for somebody who works as hard as I do...It matters to me that I’m held accountable...The only way [to ensure this] was to put my name in.”

During the interview, when Johnson was asked questions on gender discrimination, she was quick to ensure that this was not her primary identity. She did not want to be remembered first for being a strong woman in this position, but a strong person. She believes one should work “smarter, rather than harder,” and put in time every day to guarantee success. When confronting gender-

based ignorance, Johnson remained strong. On a particular occasion, she was told “I hope you guys can be tough enough,” in reference to the Wynberg Village having three female principals. This only encouraged Johnson to do everything in her power to prove to doubters that women can be just as powerful, if not more powerful, than men in their positions.

In her personal life, Johnson also faced gendered stereotypes based on her role in the school's administration. Once at the doctor's office, while taking her blood pressure, a nurse asked her about her profession. The dialogue went as follows:

Johnson: I work in the education system.

Nurse: Oh, so you're a teacher?

Johnson: Actually I'm an administrator.

Nurse: Oh, of an elementary school?

Johnson: Actually, of the high school!

Nurse: Oh, I can't believe you're a principal of a high school!

This stigmatization that women are not administrators is problematic. Especially with emerging women in administration in the WCS district, one would think that the WCS district would be grasping progressive educational tendencies. On a greater scale, when the nurse found out Johnson was an administrator, she assumed it was for an elementary school. This was most likely a result of the perceived “nurturing nature” of elementary-aged children; the stereotypical “PTA mom with a passion for change.” The final predicament stems from the blunt and outward disapproval of Johnson's testimony; Johnson says that she attempts to brush things like this off, but that one never truly forgets -- she just uses that fuel as passion to make an even bigger difference.

Johnson utilizes these experiences to shape her methods and behavior as a leader. She has an open door policy in which she attempts to keep in touch with the majority of her students. “I do not aim to be a harsh disciplinarian; I treat my students respectfully with understood discipline.” Johnson's strategies are effective and can be seen in the way students react to her as an administrator. For example, during a sporting event when a student attempted to “crowd surf” a different student stopped the misbehavior immediately and said “we don't play like that.” He then turned to Johnson and said “We got your back.” It is moments like these that make Johnson “feel like [my] job is worthwhile!” Johnson's testimony offers insight into a range of positions in which she positively fosters constructive solutions.

Johnson's approach to leadership is unique; she does not want to be remembered as a strong woman, but as a strong leader. Yet, at the same time, she recognizes the gender-based prejudices that remain and channels her experiences into leadership tactics. Her addition to the WCS

community can inspire women to actively follow their passions and realize that sometimes, one must believe in and take on a leadership role themselves, to truly get the job done.

## **7. Conclusion**

It is apparent that the women in education administration in Wynberg Community Schools have complex strategies in combating systems of oppression. Through my research, several conclusions can be drawn. Each of the four interviewees had a unique style of leadership to set a tone for their individualized institution, each prospering in its own way. This further proves that there is not one specific mode that one can engage in when fighting systematic oppression: some choose to acknowledge and embrace their position as a woman and actively engage it within their daily experiences on the job, while others attempt to keep it a secondary identifier and seek to be seen as a positive leader, first and foremost. It also addresses the issues of quantitative versus qualitative research when addressing social concerns. Through this deep analysis and time dedicated to understanding their experiences in an interview format, it is clear that understanding social inequalities can be more productively addressed face-to-face, rather than by questionnaires. It is important to note that there are limitations to my study. The women I interviewed gave their perspectives from a personal standpoint, which could create bias. While that is clear, the testimony truly excavates deeply rooted patriarchal norms that women are fighting on a daily basis in education administration.

The stories of these women are unique, but are not uncommon. By discussing these issues widely, changing the way language is used, positively encouraging women to apply to positions of power, supporting women in those positions of power, and giving women spaces to thrive, it is certain that the education system will be much more diverse, nuanced, and conducive to equality. The education administrators in WCS have worked rigorously in their positions as women in power. Not only do their testimonies help to better define ways women are oppressed in primary and secondary education administration and the various methods they use to combat subordination, but they provide insight into the ways that women are rapidly changing the system. By moving away from male-dominated leadership styles, new spaces for women to be innovative in leadership are being created. The women in my primary analysis, coupled with the ones involved in the Literature Review, are revolutionary in redefining what it means to be a person in power and to what capacity these women can influence education in primary and secondary schools.





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