What inspired you to study educational change?

When I arrived at the University of Wisconsin-Madison as a first-year doctoral student, I knew I wanted to study women and school leadership. Right before enrolling, I had taught high school English at two different independent schools on the East Coast. While at the first school, I completed a master’s degree in educational leadership at the University of Pennsylvania, where my thesis examined how the school culture impacted women’s ability to become senior level administrators. This work and my subsequent experiences deeply impacted both my decision to study and my research goals.

I conducted 13 interviews for my thesis with women who were mostly teachers and a few who had served as department chairs. The women believed they had powerful strengths, including the ability to listen to others, to make sense of input from community members, and to put students at the heart of their decisions. Yet, over and over, the women also told me that they did not feel these strengths were valued by colleagues or the administration. Instead, they felt they were asked to embrace a model of leadership to which they did not necessarily ascribe.

While powerful at the time of my analysis, their answers became even more resonant for me when I read Carol Gilligan’s In a Different Voice (Gilligan, 1982) during my first semester of graduate school. Gilligan writes, “…the great emotional costs at which success achieved through competition is often gained—an understanding which, though confused, indicates some underlying sense that something is rotten in the state in which success is defined as having better grades than everyone else…when one person’s success was at the expense of another’s failure” (p. 15). It was this dissonance that gnawed at me. Why did so many women fail to see a path forward for themselves in administration? Was it because they could not conceive of themselves operating within an organizational structure that felt unnatural and immoral? I had to find out.
What and/or who inspires you in the field? Why?

Carol Gilligan and Naomi Snider’s work out of New York University in psychology has been incredibly impactful for me (Gilligan & Snider, 2018). Gilligan and Snider put forth the idea that patriarchy, and the traditional understandings of what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman are grounded in a psychological response to loss. Patriarchy provides men and woman with safety, where the individual is protected by severing connection to others. In men, this happens at a very early age when they are told not to have intimate relationships, particularly with other men. Being a man means not being effeminate, which means not expressing emotion or being connected to feeling. For women, they are told through adolescence not to say what they know, for fear of offending others. This seems counter to the idea of not having intimate relationships, because the “conspiracy of silence,” as Gilligan calls it, keeps female relationships intact. But those relationships are superficial because women do not express their truest selves (Gilligan & Snider, 2018). Through my research, I hope to be able to identify school leaders who possess the ‘human voice’ that Gilligan and Snider describe. I want to find out how they were able to move into leadership positions, as well as their non-negotiables as they negotiate these positions.

What do you believe to be the biggest challenge for educational change and what would be a first step to address this challenge?

There are many challenges in doing research on gender, but the biggest challenge for me is making sure my research in gender studies is intersectional. In addition to being binary, the educational leadership literature is largely white, heteronormative and ableist. As school leaders work their way through a school day, their identities will determine how they navigate situations with students, staff and families. To try and isolate only one element of identity without trying to understand the totality of multiple identities, would be like reading one chapter of a great novel and trying to make sense of the entire story looking at only one chapter.

What are some new areas of inquiry and/or directions you think the field should be headed?

I hope gender takes on more importance within the training of, and research focused on, educational leadership. There is much discussion of racial inequality in schools, but I rarely hear scholars connect racism and white supremacy with patriarchy. It is clear to me that the two are inextricably linked. Dr. Gilligan’s 2018 book, with colleague David Richards (Gilligan & Richards, 2018) outlines how patriarchy and violence pose a critical threat to democracy. Public schools are one of the biggest hopes of our democratic society, and how patriarchy interacts with white supremacy must be examined by education researchers. The “ethic of care” that Gilligan says is associated with the feminine must be freed from the gender binary so that all who participate in democracy see the children of our schools as our children.

“Public schools are one of the biggest hopes of our democratic society, and how patriarchy interacts with white supremacy must be examined by education researchers.”
References
SARAH ODELL

Sarah Odell began her career as an editorial assistant at HarperCollins Publishers in New York City. After three years at HarperCollins, she realized that she had missed her true calling in education. Sarah got a job teaching English, coaching squash and running a dorm at the Hill School in Pottstown, Pennsylvania. After two years at Hill, she moved to Miss Porter’s School in Farmington, Connecticut where she taught eleventh and twelfth grade English. Sarah is an accomplished squash player and coach, representing the United States on three US national teams, and coaching the US Junior National teams at the Maccabi Games in Israel in 2017 where they won seven medals, including two golds. Sarah holds a BA in English and Religion from Wellesley College, and an MSe d from the University of Pennsylvania in Educational Leadership. She is a second-year doctoral student in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.