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## Through the Looking Glass: A Comparative Analysis of the Career Patterns of Rural Female Administrators in Saskatchewan and Texas

*This article stems from research that examined the effect of the rural context on the career patterns of female administrators in rural public school divisions in the province of Saskatchewan, Canada, and in the state of Texas, United States. These two studies examined (a) the nature of rural communities and its relationship to women's career paths in educational administration, and (b) barriers and supports faced by female administrators. The purpose of this article is to outline the findings of the study in relation to emergent issues for administration by women in rural areas.*

*Cet article découle d'une recherche portant sur l'effet du contexte rural sur le profil de carrières d'administratrices dans des divisions scolaires rurales en Saskatchewan, au Canada, et dans l'état du Texas, EUA. La recherche visait: (a) la nature des communautés rurales et le rapport entre celle-ci et le profil de carrières des administratrices dans le domaine de l'éducation, et (b) les éléments qui se sont posés en obstacles aux administratrices et ceux qui leur ont apporté un appui. L'objectif de cet article est de tracer les grandes lignes de cette étude par rapport aux questions émergentes qui touchent les femmes en administration dans les régions rurales.*

### *Background of the Study*

Conceptually, this article combines the importance of context with career development of female administrators. The first strand of the conceptualization, therefore, struggled with the ambiguity of the nature of the rural context because its meaning tends to vary with the perspective of the person defining it. Rural areas differ greatly from each other (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; Jolly & Deloney, 1993; Stabler & Olfert, 1996), especially in terms of economic resources, community priorities and purpose, demographics, and political efficacy. In fact rural communities exhibit characteristics ranging on a continuum of economic, social, and demographic growth or decline. However, despite variability among communities, research does address characteristics that are common in rural areas such as higher unemployment, higher poverty, isolation, lack of job opportunities, lower education levels, and depopulation (Herzog, 1996; Hobbs, 1994; Maynard & Howley, 1997). Rural communities, therefore, have differing capacities to address the diversity of issues they face, which makes generalizations about what is typically rural difficult.

Canadian research on rural education focuses most often on how particular educational topics such as teacher preparation (Ralph, 2002), leadership (Wal-

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lin, 2001), professional development (Jeske, 2001), alternative delivery systems (Amundrud, 2002), diversity (McKee, 2002), and amalgamation (Varpalotai, 2002) need to be addressed differently in rural areas than they are in urban areas. Much of the United States literature on rural education in the past two years has focused on the federal *No Child Left Behind Act* and its inequitable consequences for rural school divisions (Hodges, 2002; Reeves, 2003; Rural School and Community Trust, 2003).

Rural schools vary not only to the extent that they are small, but also according to the type of community in which they are located. It has often been observed that rural schools are more tightly connected to their local communities than urban schools. (Gjelton, 1982, p. 2)

In most cases, a sense of community ownership of the rural school is reinforced by the fact that often the rural school is the largest employer, claims the largest share of the local tax dollars, and is the location of most community events (Hobbs, 1994). In essence, the rural school becomes a symbol of community unity, community survival, and community values.

Because of this strong attachment between the school and community, the administrator of a rural school must be “constantly aware of the community, its leaders, and its pressure points.... The quality of leadership ... must reflect a sensitivity to the community, tempered with sound educational decision-making” (Tagg, 1983, p. 4). The administrator must work to understand community attitudes and expectations and to create a school program that meets the needs of the community (Tift, 1990). Prospective administrators must

understand their roles and the expectations placed on them which may be unique to the rural community. Rural communities, the challenges and issues facing them, and the educational programs that exist there are no more or less significant than their urban counterparts, but they are different. (Pickle & Parmley, 1986, p. 1)

It is because rural schools have such a profound attachment to the community that a study focusing on the effect of the rural community on administrators is vitally important to further an understanding of educational contexts.

Perhaps one of the greatest barriers to women in leadership roles in the rural context has been the view that *things have always been done this way and so they shall always be done this way*, especially when practices are patriarchal and promote stereotypical attitudes and androcentric ways of thinking (Reinhartz & King, 1993; Shakeshaft, 1989). However, because economic and demographic forces have caused extensive changes to rural communities, this belief may no longer have as much force as it may once have had. The change may be evidenced by the fact that more rural women have entered the workforce in order to supplement or indeed supply the family income (Ghelfi, Comartie, Lahr, & Parker, 1993), and so traditional rural ways of working have begun to change. As well, centralization of institutions and services such as education and health care now force rural residents to travel to larger centers where they experience alternate ways of working. In addition, the incorporation of technology and the Internet means that rural areas are no longer isolated from experiencing a diversity of social attitudes.

The second strand of the conceptualization for the study examined the plethora of research that centers on the career development of women in educational administration, although results of the research have changed in the past decade or so, again in certain contexts. Much of this research on women in educational leadership focuses on six themes: (a) aspirations (McLeod & Young, 2001); (b) barriers/stressors (Funk, 1987; Schmuck, 1986; Weber, Feldman, & Poling, 1981); (c) selection, recruitment, retention (Howley & Pendarvis, 2002; Marietti & Stout, 1994; Wallin, 1999; Wallin & Sackney, 2003); (d) socialization (Hudson & Williamson, 2001; Marshall, 1992; Mertz, 2000); (e) mentorship (Enomoto, Gardiner, & Grogan, 1999, 2000; Funk, Pankake, & Schroth, 2000), and (f) succession (Ortiz, 2000; Wallin, 2001). In fact women are receiving administrative positions in rural school divisions (McFadden & Smith, 2004; Wallin & Sackney, 2003) although as national and international trends suggest, their representation in school administration remains disproportionately low (Gill, 1994; Mertz, 2002; Skrla, Reyes, & Sheurich, 2000). Of those women who do enter administrative positions, "many times the positions being filled by women are those that have a minimal power base because they are in smaller more rural school districts" (Gupton & Slick, 1996, p. xxvii).

Because the rural context in education is unique, and because research does point to the fact that women are receiving administrative positions in rural school districts, it was the intent of this comparative study to examine the effect of the rural context on the career patterns of female administrators in rural public school divisions in Saskatchewan, Canada, and Texas, USA. The ultimate goal of this research was to describe the career paths of women in rural areas and to elaborate on the barriers and supports for women in rural school districts/divisions by virtue of national context, rural community type, and career position.

### *Methodology*

In each context all female administrators who served rural public schools and school divisions/districts in Saskatchewan and Texas were sent questionnaires. Surveys were developed based on earlier studies of rural environments that described characteristics found to influence the rural context (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; Falk & Lyson, 1988; Gjelton, 1982; Henry, Drabenstott, & Gibson, 1986; Herzog, 1996; Higgins, 1993; Hobbs, 1994; Jolly & Deloney, 1993; Maynard & Howley, 1997; Stabler & Olfert, 1996). These surveys were then reviewed by individuals from both Saskatchewan and Texas rural contexts for feedback, clarification, and comprehensiveness before being delivered. Response rates were 42% and 34% respectively for the Saskatchewan and Texas populations. A rural typology was created and adapted based on the premises of Gjelton's (1982) rural typology (demographic, economic, and social profiles). Gjelton's typology was not used in its entirety because it did not adequately address the diversity of the rural context. In fact communities in Saskatchewan and Texas could be found that could not be sorted into any of Gjelton's original five community types (Stable, Depressed, High Growth, Reborn, or Isolated) because of the restrictions placed on community characteristics. Instead, communities were first sorted into three overarching community nature types (Booming, Stable, and Depressed) in order to simplify the typology somewhat,

yet allow for similarities and differences between communities. Interestingly, no Booming rural communities surfaced in the Texas results, and only five surfaced in the Saskatchewan results, so these data were not used in the statistical analysis of the study. From these nature types, community profiles were generated through a description of demographic, economic, and social variables.

Survey responses related to career were analyzed with chi-square procedures and independent *t*-tests. Nonparametric chi-square measures tests were used for the nominal categories of personal and district characteristics to test the hypothesis that row and column variables in crosstabulations were independent. A low significance value ( $p < 0.05$ ) indicated that there might be some relationship between the two variables. As well, the nominal symmetrical measures of Cramer's *V* and Contingency Coefficient were used to indicate both the strength and significance of the relationship between the row and column variables of cross tabulations. Independent *t*-tests were conducted to determine whether significance differences occurred for variables related to career development/career patterns, barriers, and supports based on national context (Saskatchewan or Texas), community nature (Stable or Depressed) and position (in-school or central office). The Levene's test was used to test for equality of variances. Participants rated their levels of agreement with the variables on a continuum of *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *agree*, and *strongly agree*.

After the surveys were returned, 24 Saskatchewan administrators and 20 Texas administrators who had expressed an interest were interviewed to obtain qualitative data. The data from the open-ended portion of the questionnaire and that of the interviews were analyzed through the use of the computer software program *Atlas-ti*, according to qualitative research guidelines (Moustakas, 1988; Strauss & Cortin, 1990; Tateson, 1982). Reductive analysis (the identifying, coding, and categorizing of data into meaningful units) was used to identify themes and patterns from the data. These themes and quotations were then used to elaborate and contextualize the survey findings.

It must be noted that some methodological issues arose that could affect the findings of the study. For example, the definition of what constituted a rural school division/district in Texas and in Saskatchewan differed between the provincial/state educational regulatory bodies. In Saskatchewan, a rural school division is designated quite simply as one that is not within the limits of an urban center, which is a city with a population of 5,000 or more. The Texas definition of rural school district is much more stringent and includes a growth rate less than 20% where the number of students in membership is between 300 and the state median, or the number of students in membership is less than 300. Therefore, probably some rural communities involved in the Saskatchewan study were larger than those in the Texas study, which of course means that a slightly different sample of rural women were represented.

Two methodological issues related to the survey itself, which was updated according to feedback from Saskatchewan respondents and reflected differences in the scales used for various sections. Based on participant feedback from the Saskatchewan study, the category of *Neutral* in the career development section was discarded in favor of a category of *Don't Know* in the Texas study. Because these categories were changed, all the responses for the *Neutral* and

*Don't Know* categories had to be discarded, which of course reduced numbers in the sample. Some respondents in the Saskatchewan sample whose responses were neutral may have answered with one of the more active responses of *Disagree* or *Agree* if the *Neutral* category had not been available for them to use, so perceptions may not be reflected equally.

A final methodological issue in relation to the surveys of the Saskatchewan and Texas administrators was about the nature of the scales provided in the sections about barriers and supports in educational administration. In the Saskatchewan version, administrators were asked to rate the prevalence of barriers on a scale from 1-5 (low prevalence to high prevalence). In the Texas version of the instrument, in order to maintain consistency across rating scales, administrators were asked to rate the barriers on a scale based on *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *agree*, and *strongly agree*. Because the two scales were different, it was impossible to combine the results of the two surveys for comparative analysis. Therefore, each set of scores had to be analyzed separately.

### Findings

#### *Career Development/Career Patterns*

*National context.* The female administrators in this study were categorized by their national context as being from Saskatchewan, Canada or Texas, USA. The chi-square tests revealed that three variables were significantly related to national context: (a) number of years in an administrative position ( $p=0.009$ ); (b) number of students in district/division ( $p=0.000$ ), and (c) number of schools in district/division ( $p=0.000$ ). However, because the Saskatchewan sample included communities that were larger than those in rural Texas, it was not surprising to find significant relationships for the last two variables because the size of a community is highly correlated with the number of students and number of schools in a district.

The Cramer's  $V$  (.299) and Contingency Coefficients (.287) indicated that the relationship between number of years in an administrative position and national context was rather weak. Even so, 57.9% of the Saskatchewan administrators had five or fewer years of experience in an administrative position, compared with 31.3% of the Texas sample. The Texas respondents were more evenly spread throughout the categories for years of experience: 28.9% 1-5 years, 39.8% 6-10 years, and 20.5% 11-15 years. In the Saskatchewan sample a large portion (49.5%) of the sample had 1-5 years of experience, compared with 25.2% with 6-10 years and only 10.3% with 11-15 years. A small proportion of Texas (4.8%) and Saskatchewan (1.9%) administrators indicated that they had over 20 years of experience in an administrative position.

Table 1 summarizes the findings of the independent t-tests conducted on career development variables for Texas and Saskatchewan administrators. Saskatchewan administrators had significantly higher levels of agreement for only two of the 18 variables: (a) expectations about combining work with marriage or family affect a woman's chances to pursue/perform in higher level positions; and (b) the community has an important role to play in retaining administrators in rural schools. In all other cases the levels of agreement for Texas administrators were significantly higher.

*Community nature.* The number of schools in a district/division was related to community nature ( $p=0.021$ ). Although the Cramer's  $V$  value of 0.168 and

the Contingency Value of 0.166 indicate that the relationship was weak, it was interesting to note that the majority of school districts/divisions in depressed communities (54.2%) had fewer than five schools in the district, whereas the majority of school districts in stable communities (62.6%) had five or more schools in the district/division.

The only significant difference found between stable communities and depressed communities in the *t*-test results occurred for the statement that women in the community tend to consider a wide variety of career options ( $p=0.031$ ). The mean level of agreement for women in stable communities (2.34) was found to be significantly higher than that of women in depressed communities (2.09).

*Position.* The chi-square tests revealed a number of variables that were related to position: (a) age ( $p=0.020$ ); (b) number of years in an administrative position ( $p=0.004$ ); (c) number of students in a district/division ( $p=0.016$ ), and (d) number of schools in a district/division ( $p=0.049$ ). The Cramer's *V* (0.265) and Contingency Coefficient (0.257) for age indicated a weak relationship between that variable and career position. Over three quarters of the central office administrators in these studies (76.9%) were over the age of 46, and over half (51.3%) were over 50. Somewhat fewer than half of the in-school administrators (45.7%) were over 46 years of age, and 26.5% of the in-school administrators were over 50.

The Cramer's *V* (0.319) and Contingency Coefficient (0.304) for the number of years in an administrative position indicated a relatively weak relationship between that variable and career position. Not surprisingly, central office administrators were more likely to have more years of administrative experience than in-school administrators. The majority of central office administrators (64.1%) in this study had between 6 and 15 years of administrative experience. In comparison, 76.8% of the in-school administrative had between 1 and 10 years of administrative experience.

Although the relationship between position and the number of students in the district/division was weak (Cramer's *V*=0.176 and Contingency Coefficient=0.174), a larger percentage (84.6%) of central office administrators worked in schools where the number of students in the district was greater than 500 as compared with only 64.4% of the in-school administrators. A similar phenomenon occurred for the relationship between number of schools in the district/division and position (Cramer's *V*=0.143 and Contingency Coefficient=0.141). In this case 69.2% of central office administrators and 51.7% of in-school administrators worked in school divisions/districts where the number of schools in the district/division was equal to or greater than five.

*T*-test results indicated that significant differences between central office and in-school administrators occurred for four career development variables: (a) advancement in administration is worth the effects on personal/private time ( $p=0.000$ ); (b) the school district is committed to employing/hiring women in administrative positions ( $p=0.001$ ); (c) women are underrepresented in top-level educational administrative positions ( $p=0.025$ ); and (d) demonstrated competence is the major reason for achieving upper level administration ( $p=0.000$ ). In each case, agreement levels for central office

Table 1  
Independent T-tests of Career Pattern Variables by National Context.

Statement	Nature	N	Mean	Leven's F	Leven's Sig.	t	Sig.
<i>Males dominate relationships in this community.</i>							
	TX	83	3.18	7.049	**0.009	Welch t	***0.00
	SK	73	2.48			4.759	0
<i>There is general consensus on community expectations of the school.</i>							
	TX	83	3.29	1.794	0.182	2.721	**0.007
	SK	99	2.98				
<i>Women in this community are expected to marry and to stay married.</i>							
	TX	78	2.64	7.390	**0.007	Welch t	**0.004
	SK	82	2.26			2.943	
<i>Women are expected to assume primary responsibility of home and family.</i>							
	TX	82	2.91	7.084	**0.009	Welch t	***0.00
	SK	90	2.42			3.831	0
<i>Administrators are expected to be highly involved in community activities and programs.</i>							
	TX	83	3.35	0.993	0.320	2.436	*0.016
	SK	96	3.10				
<i>Women enter teaching because it is an occupation with which they can combine marriage and a family.</i>							
	TX	80	3.11	3.240	0.074	6.435	***0.00
	SK	96	2.33				0
<i>The majority of community members believe that leadership positions in education should be held by males.</i>							
	TX	79	2.57	48.414	***0.000	Welch t	***0.00
	SK	102	1.23			12.039	0
<i>The attitude that it has always been done this way plays a large role in the way things are accomplished in the school/district.</i>							
	TX	82	2.91	7.133	**0.008	Welch t	***0.00
	SK	101	2.34			4.376	0
<i>Hiring committees in this district tend to choose administrators who are "tough" and who will be the "boss" of the school/district.</i>							
	TX	79	2.72	4.449	*0.036	Welch t	**0.006
	SK	93	2.41			2.756	
<i>Expectations about combining work with marriage/family affect a woman's chances to pursue/perform in higher level positions.</i>							
	TX	80	2.64	0.451	0.503	-3.505	**0.001
	SK	100	3.04				
<i>The community has an important role to play in retaining administrators in rural schools.</i>							
	TX	81	3.20	5.427	*0.021	Welch t	*0.020
	SK	100	3.42			-2.354	
<i>The school district is sensitive to the needs of female administrators with children.</i>							
	TX	75	3.00	16.843	***0.000	Welch t	***0.00
	SK	67	2.27			5.455	0
<i>Most administrators accept the administrative position in this community to gain experience for a job in a larger community.</i>							
	TX	78	2.60	0.690	0.408	2.616	*0.010
	SK	83	2.29				
<i>Female administrators within this community generally have more teaching experience than male administrators.</i>							
	TX	73	2.96	23.215	***0.000	Welch t	**0.001
	SK	71	2.45			3.571	

Table 1 (continued)

Statement	Nature	N	Mean	Leven's F	Leven's Sig.	t	Sig.
<i>Men are more likely to occupy secondary principalships.</i>							
	TX	77	2.97	38.553	***0.000	Welch t	*0.027
	SK	72	2.61			2.244	
<i>In this district, females and males generally have similar career paths in administration.</i>							
	TX	76	2.57	0.258	0.612	4.983	***0.00
	SK	87	1.99				0
<i>Females tend not to develop a career plan; their careers are more likely to evolve when a career move "feels right."</i>							
	TX	82	2.77	19.608	***0.000	Welch t	*0.031
	SK	76	2.47			2.177	
<i>Demonstrated competence is the major reason for achieving upper level administration.</i>							
	TX	81	3.07	24.363	***0.000	Welch t	***0.00
	SK	75	2.49			3.725	0

Note. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.000$ .

administrators were significantly higher than those of in-school administrators.

*Career path.* One of the most intriguing comments made by nine of the 20 Texas administrators interviewed was that they were either the first ever (or the first of about 3) women hired in the district or they were currently the only woman working in administration in their districts. This was not reflected in any of the Saskatchewan interviews. Many of the interviewees in both Texas and Saskatchewan suggested that although the numbers of women in educational administration was still not representative, they had seen an increase in the number of female administrators, although this increase was more prevalent in elementary principalships. At the central office level, interviewees in both Saskatchewan and Texas indicated that there were still few women in superintendencies/directorships and even fewer minority women in superintendencies/directorships.

Most Texas and Saskatchewan female administrators had traditional career paths. Most had begun their careers as teachers and moved into administration after working in a variety of positions in which they were able to showcase leadership talent: (a) head/coordinator of special education; (b) programs and assessment coordinator; (c) instructional strategist; (d) technology coordinator; and (e) consultant. Texas respondents seemed to have a greater variety of positions open to them before becoming a principal. Many of the Saskatchewan respondents attained their positions after exhibiting leadership in special education or curriculum. In the Texas data only a handful of interviewees moved from these kinds of positions into assistant principalships because most schools did not have an assistant principal's position. In Saskatchewan schools many divisions had reinstated the position of vice-principal because of the need to provide support for administrators working in geographical contexts removed from each other, even if this meant that administrative time was split between two individuals instead of having one full-time equivalent.

The path to the superintendency in Texas was similar in most respects to that of the principalship, with the addition of a number of central office positions or positions of responsibility outside the school district such as (a) director of curriculum/instruction, (b) counselor/diagnostician, (c) special education director, (d) educational service center trainer, (e) university instructor, (f) English-as-a-second-language director, and (g) executive director of elementary operations and special programs. Only one Texas interviewee indicated that she had never been a campus principal. On the other hand, none of the interviewees had been secondary principals. Interestingly, one of the Texas respondents assumed the responsibilities of both the campus principal and district superintendent. The path to the directorship in Saskatchewan was more or less similar to that of Texas. Most women in central offices had been vice-principals and principals, although more of these women had moved from an elementary principalship to a secondary principalship before being placed in a central office position. However, a number of respondents had moved into central office by virtue of being a curriculum or special education specialist at a time when the province was introducing new programs in these areas.

Respondents in Texas and many of the respondents in Saskatchewan indicated that obtaining a high school principalship was difficult because the expectations of the position remained biased against women due to stereotypical beliefs associated with discipline, athletics, and physical size. Participants mentioned that the inequitable practice of not hiring women for secondary principalships in Texas hindered women's ability to garner higher salaries and achieve positions in larger districts, which further detracted from equitable gender representation in the superintendency. Although Saskatchewan respondents indicated that the high school principalship remained difficult to obtain for many women, they did not mention that not having this experience hindered their mobility once they were in a central office position.

Almost all the respondents indicated that they assumed extra responsibilities in their roles as rural administrators. Because many schools in Texas did not have assistant principals, principals were required to assume all the professional responsibilities themselves: special education consultant, English-as-a-second-language consultant, behavioral consultant, Title I responsibilities, and so forth. One Texas principal had to take on all the secretarial duties of the school. Other respondents said that they had at times been the caretaker, plumber, and carpenter. In every case, administrators were considered to be community as well as school leaders and, therefore, were expected to become involved in community and school events.

*Mobility.* A number of respondents in Saskatchewan and Texas worked in or near rural communities in which they grew up. These individuals had vested interests both personally and professionally in the communities where they worked. Not surprisingly, the most commonly cited interests were investments in property, homes, children's education, proximity to family, and/or a husband who was tied to the land. Some of the administrators in Texas mentioned that they were willing to drive some distance from their home if a position were to open, but residency requirements that stipulated that administrators had to live in the district deterred them from applying. Saskatchewan adminis-

trators in stable communities seemed to be much more mobile and willing to move for professional reasons than administrators in depressed communities because more women in depressed communities were placebound because of marriage to a farmer.

Many administrators said that their upward career mobility had been fostered more quickly than it would have been if they had been in a large district because they were able to showcase their leadership talent and build professional connections in a more intimate environment. However, the lack of diversity and/or number of administrative positions in rural areas could become a hindrance unless one was willing to move out of the area.

*Career aspirations.* As far as career aspirations were concerned, most principals in the Texas study indicated that even if they did move into upper administration, they were not interested in the superintendency. In fact only two respondents interviewed mentioned the superintendency as their career position of choice. The most commonly cited reason for this finding was that the responsibilities of the superintendency in relation to the lack of control they had over many of the issues, as well as the insecurity of the position based on relationships with school boards, was not worth the toll it might take. Such an aversion to the senior administrative position in Saskatchewan (director) was not mentioned by Saskatchewan administrators. In fact the most common reason cited for not moving into central office positions in Saskatchewan was the loss of direct contact with children.

#### *Barriers*

No significant differences based on community nature or position occurred for any of the barrier variables under study in the Saskatchewan data, nor were differences found based on position in the Texas data. However, a significant difference was found between women in stable and depressed communities in Texas for the barrier *Female administrators with children are perceived to be less capable of performing their administrative duties* ( $p=.029$ ). The mean score of women in stable communities (2.18) was significantly lower than that of women in depressed communities (2.51) although both groups fell in the middle range of agreement for this variable.

*Hiring and selection.* Although these women spoke from a privileged position in that they had achieved administrative positions, the hiring and selection context needs to be mentioned because of its potential effect on female administrative career patterns. Almost all the Texas respondents indicated that men were generally hired before women except in the case where districts wished to ensure a gender balance in school administration. Many Saskatchewan respondents also mentioned that boards tended to want a gender balance in school administration, but they were much more positive that women and men were treated equally in interview situations and that the "best person for the job" was hired. Many of the Texas respondents and some of the Saskatchewan respondents indicated that they had been interviewed in situations where they were the only short-listed woman and that they had felt that their presence was the equivalent of tokenism. A final commonly mentioned hiring/selection factor was that women remained at a disadvantage for certain positions, particularly the high school principalship, because of stereotypical notions about the nature of discipline, physical stature, and/or women and athletics.

*Inequitable treatment.* Many of the Texas respondents relayed instances of inequitable treatment that they believed were due more to their sex than to their abilities. These included being granted more administrative tasks than men, being held accountable for paperwork when male administrators were not reprimanded for their refusal to complete it, and being deliberately excluded from discussions with male colleagues until “the guys really need something, especially knowledge about something.” Other responses included: (a) the provision of secretaries to male administrators only; (b) male colleagues taking credit for their work; (c) being told they could not accept phone calls from their husbands while at work; (d) male teachers or school board members refusing to “answer to a woman”; and (e) unequal salaries of male and female administrators. Saskatchewan respondents were more apt to state that they had good working relationships with people in the school system (other than a few instances where staff had to warm up to the new female administrator and her style of leadership), but that they still ran into instances of community biases against women in leadership roles, especially related to discipline.

Three Texas administrators and four Saskatchewan administrators spoke of resistance they felt from other women. As one woman stated, “Women do not support each other. The issue of ‘jealousy,’ for lack of a better word, is hindering career development. Women are socialized to ‘compete’ with other women—men are socialized as ‘team players.’” As well, a number of Texas and Saskatchewan administrators had replaced unsuccessful female administrators and thus lived with the stress of being a symbol of competence for the entire sex. In the end, most of these women believed they had to work harder and smarter to prove themselves worthy of an administrative position. Some women alluded to a sense of betrayal when all their hard work in the community seemed not to be recognized.

*Good Old Boys’ Club.* Almost all participants indicated that the Good Old Boys’ Club in Texas was alive and well and was still a force in Saskatchewan, although not to the same degree. Although frustrated by its presence, most of the administrators in this study accepted the fact that the network existed, and tried to use the Club to their advantage. One of the Texas principals spoke of “breaking in” to this club during her university classes because of her strong intellectual ability, after which she used her relationships with these men as leverage into administration. A second woman spoke of her involvement in the Rotary Club, of which she was the only female member. She indicated that her involvement with this group allowed her to network with some of the “good old boys,” who then helped her and her school. She was astute enough to notice that the same help was not extended to two other female administrators who worked in the same district but who had not joined the Rotary Club.

Perhaps the most explicit example of how the “game” was played in Texas is outlined by the following comment.

I’m a woman. In a small rural school that had a school board that was all male. Good old boys, ranchers, cattlemen ... yes! Especially when I heard that they were not pleased when they heard that there was a woman candidate for the principal’s job. I never said anything to the superintendent that that was illegal, but I could have gone and been real ugly. I found real quick a lesson learned. I

hate politics, but I learned real well to play the game. What you do is, I think it was Boleman and Deal, "Survey the landscape." and get to know them individually. I learned to talk cattle and hay. I learned to draw from my experience growing up with a grandfather who was a rancher. I had to find something that I connected with. There was some intimidation there because a lot of these guys do not have a college education. They're high school graduates and here I am working on my doctorate. I had to make certain that I didn't come across as arrogant or condescending. I put on a little southern girl charm and built that relationship up. It's OK. I'm still a woman but I'm accepted.

Of course, not all women had these kinds of explicit experiences, and a large number indicated that the context was getting better for women in administration. In fact a much greater percentage of women in Saskatchewan indicated that the Good Old Boys' Club either no longer existed, did not affect the work of female administrators, or that they confronted "the boys" directly if issues arose. However, many of these women also stated that they knew of female administrators who had problems because of the Club, even if they personally had not experienced this phenomenon.

### *Supports*

*Saskatchewan.* The mean score for the prevalence of supports for women in stable communities (3.52) was significantly higher than that of women in depressed communities (3.05) for the statement that the division strives to find an appropriate fit between the values and needs of the school division and the female administrator ( $p=0.049$ ). Significant differences by virtue of position were also found for the ideas that: (a) women were able to manage situations where sex biases were obvious ( $p=0.003$ ); (b) the division ensures that all administrative candidates have the appropriate educational/professional qualifications ( $p=0.005$ ); and (c) that the division strives to find an appropriate fit between the values and needs of the school division and the female administrator ( $p=0.027$ ). In each case the prevalence levels indicated by central office administrators were significantly higher than those of in-school administrators.

*Texas.* Significant differences were found by both community nature and position for the support *Access to mentorship programs exists*. The mean level of agreement of women in stable communities (2.76) was significantly higher than that of women in depressed communities (2.41,  $p=0.02$ ). As well, the mean score of in-school administrators (2.52) was significantly lower than that of central office administrators (2.81).

The personal supports listed by both Saskatchewan and Texas administrators were similar. In almost all cases, administrators indicated that their husbands, children, and parents were their primary support. Although Saskatchewan administrators indicated that their families wanted them to get an education to do well for themselves, there was a greater sense of passion in the responses of many Texas administrators about the power of education to change lives or to free families from an oppressive lifestyle. Another interesting difference was that Texas administrators more often than Saskatchewan administrators mentioned that their church or faith was a continuing personal support for them.

Professional supports were also similar for administrators in both contexts. Most administrators mentioned particular mentor administrators or administrative teams (both within and outside the district) that they could count on to provide advice. Other commonly cited supports included other teachers, the district/division school board, and professional organizations. However, both groups indicated that travel distance, reduced staff development budgets, and time away from the school significantly hindered the opportunity and the desire to become involved in these groups. Texas administrators cited graduate student networks and university faculty as professional supports more often than Saskatchewan administrators, perhaps because of the difference in certification requirements and programs between the two contexts. Texas professionals typically spent more time in formal learning situations because of state certification requirements, so rural administrators were more likely to come into contact with each other in these programs. Finally, the most commonly cited support was district superintendents/directors who had encouraged ideas and provided the support necessary for these administrators to achieve many of their leadership goals.

#### *Emerging Issues*

In the final section I discuss the findings of the studies in relation to some of the emerging issues that arise from the data

#### *National Context*

Chi-square tests revealed that national context was significantly related to (a) number of years in an administrative position, (b) the number of students in the district/division, and (c) the number of schools in the district/division. However, because the Saskatchewan sample included communities that were larger than those in rural Texas, it was not surprising to find significant relationships for the last two variables because the size of a community is highly correlated with the number of students and number of schools in a district. As for the number of years in an administrative position, Texas respondents were more evenly spread throughout the categories for years of experience than the Saskatchewan respondents, and Saskatchewan had a larger proportion of women in categories of less experience. Three possible explanations for this phenomenon arise. It may be that Saskatchewan administrators had only recently been allowed entry into administrative positions, and, therefore, these women had fewer years of experience than their Texas counterparts. Alternatively, it may be that younger women were receiving administrative positions in Saskatchewan and, therefore, did not yet have the experiential base of some of the older Texas female administrators. Finally, about the same number of central office women responded from Texas and Saskatchewan, but a significantly larger number of principals from Saskatchewan were represented. Because central office administrators typically have more years of administrative experience, the greater number of principals in the Saskatchewan study may have affected the Saskatchewan finding. A small proportion of Texas (4.8%) and Saskatchewan (1.9%) administrators indicated that they had over 20 years of experience in an administrative position, which suggests either that few women entered administrative positions more than 20 years ago or that

women typically are older when they enter administrative positions and, therefore, retire before they are able to gain 20 years of administrative experience.

In all but two cases from the *t*-tests on career development (Table 1), the levels of agreement for Texas administrators were significantly higher than those of Saskatchewan administrators. Saskatchewan administrators had significantly higher levels of agreement for the variables: (a) expectations about combining work with marriage/family affect a woman's chances to pursue/perform in higher level positions; and (b) the community has an important role to play in retaining administrators in rural schools.

#### *Community Nature*

For the overall data, chi-square tests revealed that the number of schools in a district/division was related to community nature (stable or depressed), and *t*-tests revealed that women in stable communities had significantly higher levels of agreement for the statement that women tended to consider a wide variety of career options. Most school districts/divisions in depressed communities (54.2%) had fewer than five schools, whereas most school districts in stable communities (62.6%) had five or more schools, which is not surprising because population levels were lower in depressed communities. The *t*-test finding relating to the greater consideration of career options for women in stable communities may be related to the generally smaller size of depressed communities, because this also typically includes a smaller variety of services (and so career options) that may play a role in shaping the career development of women.

In the Texas data, the mean score of women in stable communities was significantly lower than that of women in depressed communities for the barrier *Female administrators with children are perceived to be less capable of performing their administrative duties*. This finding may be explained in two potential ways. It may be that individuals in depressed communities hold more conservative ideas about gender roles and motherhood. Alternatively, because of the lack of anonymity in small communities, community members are more aware of the personal commitments (including motherhood) of female administrators and, therefore, might be more apt to focus on those aspects than people in larger communities where the administrator's private life is somewhat more protected.

In the Saskatchewan data, women in stable communities had significantly higher scores than women in depressed communities for the statement that the division strives to find an appropriate fit between the values and needs of the school division and the female administrator, as well as for the support that access to mentorship programs existed. It may be that stable communities are better able to attract administrators and, therefore, have more discretion in hiring based on fit than depressed communities where hiring out of necessity may occur. It is also likely that divisions/districts in stable communities have more opportunity and resources to support mentorship programs, especially if these communities are less isolated from one another.

#### *Position*

In the overall data, chi-square tests revealed a number of variables related to position: (a) age, (b) number of years in an administrative position, (c) number

of students in a district/division, and (d) number of schools in a district/division. Over three quarters of the central office administrators in these studies were over the age of 46, and over half were over 50. Somewhat fewer than half the in-school administrators were over 46 years of age, and slightly over one quarter of the in-school administrators were over 50. The statistics showed that a larger percentage of female administrators were nearing retirement age, which may affect future career possibilities as well as retirement pensions, especially in consideration of the typically smaller number of years of service in an administrative position. Not surprisingly, central office administrators were more likely to have more years of administrative experience than in-school administrators. The majority of central office administrators (64.1%) in this study had between 6 and 15 years of administrative experience. In comparison, 76.8% of the in-school administrative had between 1 and 10 years of administrative experience.

A larger percentage (84.6%) of central office administrators worked in schools where the number of students in the district was greater than 500 as compared with only 64.4% of the in-school administrators. However, this is probably because there simply are fewer districts/divisions in both Saskatchewan and Texas where enrollments are this low: centralization of school divisions has closed many schools with low enrollments unless they are designated as schools of necessity. A similar phenomenon occurred for the relationship between number of schools in the district/division and position. In this case, 69.2% of central office administrators and 51.7% of in-school administrators worked in school divisions/districts where the number of schools in the district/division was equal to or greater than five.

*T*-test results indicated that significant differences between central office and in-school administrators occurred for four career development variables: (a) advancement in administration is worth the effects on personal/private time; (b) the school district is committed to employing/hiring women in administrative positions; (c) women are underrepresented in top-level educational administrative positions; and (d) demonstrated competence is the major reason for achieving upper-level administration. In each case, agreement levels for central office administrators were significantly higher than those of in-school administrators. Some of the explanations for these findings may lie in the realm of self-justification. Naturally, those women who are in central office positions want to believe that demonstrated competence is the reason that they achieved their positions, for the alternative makes them merely tokens. As well, because they are in a position to hire, central office administrators would not wish to admit that men are hired before women for positions, because that practice would smack of gender discrimination. Even if they agreed that women were underrepresented, these women probably felt some need to justify their own past sacrifices of personal/private time for the sake of their careers. Of course, these same women also had a passion for improving the lives of students, staff, and community and, therefore, believed that their personal sacrifices were worth the benefits their work brought to others.

In the Saskatchewan data, significant differences between central office and in-school administrators were found for the ideas that: (a) they were able to manage situations where sex biases were obvious; (b) the division ensures that

all administrative candidates have the appropriate educational/professional qualifications; and (c) that the division strives to find an appropriate fit between the values and needs of the school division and the female administrator. In each case the prevalence levels indicated by central office administrators were significantly higher than those of in-school administrators. Again, some explanation of these findings may lie in the fact that the director is a symbol of the division and, therefore, is more likely to affirm statements about the division in a positive light because they reflect on her leadership. As well, the fact that central office administrators typically had more years of experience may add to their confidence and competence for handling situations of sex bias.

Finally, central office administrators in Texas had significantly higher scores for the support that access to mentorship programs existed. This is somewhat perplexing because the literature and programming have espoused the benefits of mentoring in school districts for some time. However, perhaps the distance between schools and in-school administrators' desire to remain at the school play a role in access to mentor programs. As well, superintendents may be more apt to indicate that support programs in their districts are available, even if in reality they are not functioning at optimal levels. It may also be that preoccupation with the revolving door superintendencies in the state of Texas has drawn attention to the need for more support programs at the superintendent level than at the school level.

#### *The Intersection of Context and Career*

Geographical isolation from resources or facilities for professional development/higher learning were causes for concern in rural areas because professional credentials were desired by Saskatchewan administrators and required (in terms of certification) for Texas administrators. Unfortunately, the time, distance, and financial resources necessary for administrators to access them were demanding. Rural female administrators more often than not elected to remain in their schools/districts "taking care" of the students and staff. This, of course, has major ramifications for the skill level and quality of administrators in schools/districts.

Texas administrators were more apt than Saskatchewan administrators to be faced with high mobility rates, high poverty rates in the community (or at least segments of the community), and cultural and/or language issues. On the other hand, Saskatchewan administrators were more often faced with steadily declining enrollments, few options for outside funding (including grants), and the immediate effects of rural depopulation. The emerging issue then becomes one of finding supports to help administrators deal with communities in distress because their role puts them at the forefront of issues as they trickle into the lives of the children in school.

*Life in a fishbowl* was a consistent metaphor in both the Texas and Saskatchewan data, although it was not always referred to negatively. The stresses of being a public role model were often balanced by the care and concern offered by the community in times of need. The lines between professional and personal identities blurred in rural communities. Many single female administrators believed that they either had to leave the community on weekends or live with the fact that their personal lives would become the community's

coffee conversation. Perhaps the issue here is that female administrators in rural contexts need to have some links—social and professional—to a world outside their work community. Of course, because these same women indicated that they did not wish to leave the community for professional development, it would probably follow that neither would they wish to leave the community to attend mentorship meetings across the state or province. Perhaps online learning technologies that incorporate interactive networking with professional development is a potential way to address the issue, especially if it includes some focus on women's issues in administration. Unfortunately, the discrepancies in technology access, availability, use, and maintenance make this a huge undertaking for rural districts/divisions alone.

The data suggest higher variability in the representation of female administrators in Texas than in Saskatchewan. An examination of regional differences in both geographical contexts may help to illuminate some of the discrepancies found in the representation of women in educational administration. In Saskatchewan, for example, it was found that more women (and younger women) had begun to attain administrative positions in depressed communities than in stable communities. It is proposed that positions in depressed communities are not as attractive to men as they once were, because responsibilities are high, school closure is an imminent possibility, and fewer opportunities for advancement exist. Instead, men, who are more mobile in general, are more apt to attain positions in communities that are able to provide more activities and more resources. Quite simply, the competition for positions in stable communities ensures that gender inequities will exist.

The fact that administrators in Saskatchewan are part of the provincial collective bargaining unit of the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation is significantly different from the situation in Texas where collective bargaining is illegal. This difference no doubt affects the career development of female administrators, especially in terms of equitable benefits and salary, contract issues, and grievances. In fact there is no legalized collective bargaining voice for female administrators in Texas that offers them a platform for addressing their concerns. Inequities can more often occur when contracts are negotiated individually and yearly.

Although the notion of gender inequity and tokenism certainly existed in both contexts, the power of the Good Old Boys' Club seemed to be more overt in Texas. Texas interviewees spoke more openly about the methods they used to subvert or to use the power of the Good Old Boys' Club to their advantage; Saskatchewan administrators were more apt to suggest either that the Club no longer existed or that its power was no longer strong enough to stop a strong woman from achieving her ambitions. It must be cautioned, however, that in the Saskatchewan data overall, and from central office administrators especially, the sense existed that there was more protection of the system whether or not this included the presence of the Club.

In general, women followed traditional career paths with few exceptions. The high school principalship is still hallowed ground on which few women are invited to tread. In fact it seems to be easier for a woman to move into a central office position than it is for her to become a high school principal.

Notions of physical size and perceptions about discipline and athletics still epitomize the stereotype of the high school principal.

A decided aversion to the position of superintendent is growing in the minds of many Texas principals. The same aversion to becoming a director does not exist in Saskatchewan. Some work needs to be done with school divisions, communities, school boards, and professional organizations to alleviate some of this negativity. Based on the comments made by the administrators in this study, it is not surprising that in Texas finding superintendents, or at least keeping them for any length of time, is difficult because the breadth of responsibility and level of personal accountability they face is overwhelming.

#### *Further Research*

A concern that stems from this research relates to the differences in national context between Saskatchewan and Texas as political, cultural, and social realities. This study, as do all studies, has contextual boundary limitations, and so interesting questions and/or possibilities are left unanswered or unexplored. Future research and data analysis might further refine the results of a similar study by including an analysis of how the differences in national context affect the respective rural contexts and how this in turn interacts with career development.

A final concern relates to the methodological limitations of this work. There is a need to acknowledge that single comparisons are often limited at best, especially with small sample sizes. Further analyses that include multi-analysis might correct some of the problems inherent in the statistical methodology used in this research.

#### *Conclusion*

The diversity found in the rural context in many senses makes it difficult to provide a definitive statement about the intersection of context and career development for women in educational administration, even though the findings of this study would suggest that women in rural administration have found the promise of challenge, fulfillment, and opportunities to provide service and support in an environment conducive to building relationships. The ambiguity of this intersection might be likened to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Alice has reached a fork in the road, and she is confused about what to do next. Sighting the Cheshire cat in the tree, she asks, "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," replies the cat. "I don't much care where," says Alice. "Then it doesn't matter which way you go," says the cat. But in relation to the participants in this study, it might very much matter where you have been.

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