

“Boy, I wish I were a man!”: Navigating Principalship as a Woman

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Abstract

This case study follows Maggie, a principal of a large urban elementary school, as she navigates principalship as a woman, revealing various gendered discourses along the way. Maggie recognizes gender as a factor and makes distinctions between male and female ways of leading. She reveals some of the barriers she faces as a female principal and refers to discourses of strength, for example, which act upon her leadership. This case study, and the teaching notes that follow, encourage both practising and prospective leaders to consider gender as a factor which impacts the daily work of elementary school principals.

Keywords: gender, leadership, principalship, elementary schools

Case Narrative

Maggie has been the principal at Maple Creek P.S. for the past three years. This is her first principalship. Prior to this, Maggie worked as a vice principal for 12 years during which she worked with both male and female principals. Maple Creek P.S. is located in an urban environment in the Greater Toronto Area and serves approximately 500 students from kindergarten to Grade 8. The population of the school is diverse both culturally and socio-economically with 72% of its students speaking another language, other than English, at home. Maggie is the second female principal to lead the school; the last two principals, over the past 10 years, were male. Since she has been at the school, she has worked alongside a female vice principal. Maggie has worked as a school administrator since the early 2000s. Over this period of time, she has navigated school leadership and reflects on her experiences of leading as a woman.

Maggie was first promoted to the role of vice principal in the early 2000s, a time when women were just beginning to take on leadership roles in schools. At the time, Maggie felt that it was expected that she take on a very hard line as a leader, as her male colleagues had been doing. She felt pressure to lead like a man, with strength and determination. She described her female principal as very strict and explained that her principal “had to overcompensate for being female by being incredibly strong.” Maggie felt that her principal had to find a way to “fit” into the principal role rather than embrace it. She presented the principalship as a role designed for men, and, therefore, not a natural fit for women. Maggie made a clear distinction between the manner in which men and women lead their schools. Male principals were defined by using discourses of strength, and women were expected to engage in that same strength, forced to compensate for being female. If we view principalship in this way, we see how it might be perceived as easier to manage for men than women, thus impacting work intensification for women in the role.

Over time, Maggie’s feelings about the expectations placed on female principals changed. Now that she is a principal, she believes that being a woman actually works to her benefit. Maggie now says that, as a woman, she is expected to lead with compassion and empathy by parents and staff. At one point she says,

“So, if something goes wrong, I always feel like people feel they could empathize or use my compassion because I am a woman, to understand this situation they find themselves in.” Maggie clearly defines a perceived “feminine” way of leading, which she uses to her advantage. She defines this manner of leading using the words “compassionate” and “being empathetic,” revealing yet another discourse of leadership. We see a transition here for Maggie from a time when she felt she needed to lead with “strength” like a man, to the present where she now leads with compassion and empathy as a woman. Maggie’s differing approaches to leadership over time indicates the presence of a struggle to find a way to successfully lead her school as a woman. Maggie’s navigation of the role is therefore made more complex, as it appears men are not necessarily faced with the same challenges.

Maggie’s First Hurdle

When Maggie was first promoted to principal at Maple Creek P.S., she had just replaced a male principal who had led the school for the past five years. She described him as being very much “to the point” and was quite direct around his expectations of the staff. Soon after her promotion, she began to look at the timelines he had set for staff in terms of projected deadlines. She decided that, since the staff were used to these timelines and that the wording around his instructions was already in practice, she would keep it the same and not make any changes. When the new school year started, Maggie posted the very same timelines and used the very same wording and model the previous principal had used in his instruction. After doing this, she immediately received complaints and questions from staff regarding the timelines. She found herself having to explain her decision-making processes, even though they had not been changed from the previous five years. Maggie began to question her decision-making processes and wondered if she had done the right thing. She realized that there were different expectations of her as a female principal and had this to say about it:

I think women principals second-guess their decisions far more often than male principals. I think that they look for approval more so than a male principal would. I think that women principals tend to struggle with the types of decisions that they make. By that, I mean that I think that women, in general, question more than men do. I feel men typically are able to make a decision given the information that they have, make a decision and stick with the decision, where I feel women principals are always questioned about their decision and feel apologetic if the decision that they made doesn’t go in their favour, whereas a male principal I think would just say that’s the way it was, that’s the decision I made and I am sticking with it but I think female principals would look back with regret.

Maggie feels that while women are second-guessing themselves in the principal role, men are able to make decisions quickly. Maggie struggles to find a way to lead effectively without the push-back from staff and feels that it is unfair that, because she is a woman, she is made to second-guess her decision-making processes. Maggie presents a situation in which men have an easier time in carrying out this role, and it becomes increasingly important for Maggie to find some way in which she can express her effectiveness as a female principal. In response to this predicament, Maggie turns to motherhood.

Maggie Uses the “Mom Card”

A few months into her first principalship, Maggie found herself working through a difficult situation with a parent about how their child would be supported in the school environment. In this particular case, the parent was having difficulty trusting that the school would be able to provide the support(s) promised. Maggie felt that the parent was not trusting her intentions, and in response, Maggie decided to use what she called “the mom card.” She began to tell the parent a story about her own child and her experiences as a mother. Maggie used this tactic in order to build trust with the parent and as a result, the parents began to see Maggie as a parent, rather than a school administrator. Maggie states, “I tend to use my own experiences as a woman, as a wife, as a mother to make myself more relatable, and to break the barrier that we might be having so that they see me as a person as well as a principal. I do find that has worked to my advantage in many ways.”

While Maggie expresses that there are challenges she faces as a principal, which stem from the fact that she is a woman, she also feels that being a woman provides her with some advantages. Maggie believes that because she is a mother, she can tap into this identity to help her relate to both parents and staff.

She feels that her experiences as a woman, wife, and mother help to break down barriers and to manage obstacles that come into play. Being a mother helps Maggie to respond to situations with compassion and relatability. In turn, her role as a mother helps her to build positive relationships and break down barriers with parents and staff, and, in so doing, she is able to lead her school effectively. In order to be perceived as an efficient principal, Maggie brings in alternative identities as a wife and mother, revealing yet another discourse of school leadership. Maggie engages this alternate identity as a means of proving her effectiveness as a leader, adding additional complexity to her work. In order to take up the principalship, and be perceived as an accomplished leader, Maggie is forced to engage other identities, such as motherhood, to prove herself worthy of the role.

Maggie Wishes She were a Man

Maggie described a number of times when staff members at the school asked her if they could leave work early. In one instance, Maggie declined the request because she felt that the request was not valid. As a result, she was labelled “bitchy” by some of the staff. Maggie described being fearful of this label, for obvious reasons, but also because it placed Maggie in a bind: each time she wanted to lead assertively, she was forced to also consider the consequences of this assertiveness. These are the moments when Maggie wishes she were a man:

Umm, there are, you know, I have caught myself thinking, many times actually, I wonder if a man would handle this the same way ... certainly, there have been moments where I have thought “Boy, I wish I were a man.” I do remember thinking that at times right. Men will be able to do this so much easier, right? Men would just say it, it would be well-received, and we would move on. Whereas, I feel like I still have to explain and dance around things more than a man would have to. And I do think, you know, I still think even among female colleagues there is... there are still some women who believe that they have to be very strong and unattached to their school emotionally because that is how a leader is seen to be and I do see colleagues that are like that.

Maggie believes that men make decisions easily and are generally perceived as credible leaders, while women are forced to do a “dance” in order to be perceived in a similar way. Maggie brings back the notion of strength and juxtaposes this strength with emotion. She believes that it is important to lead schools with emotion and to ensure that leaders have created connections with students, parents, and staff, and, at the same time, she states that women feel the pressure to lead with strength and detachment. Maggie chooses to focus on her ability to build relationships with people through emotional attachments and yet still feels, in the end, that it would be easier to lead if she were male. This perspective is clearly problematic and raises many questions about the challenges faced by female principals.

Teaching Notes

It is in moments like these where we see the intensification of work among female principals. Not only are female principals navigating the many challenges posed within principalship, but they are also having to engage with, and manage the internal struggle that comes with being a female principal. The following questions highlight this intensification of work:

1. Are men and women naturally different leaders? If so, can we say that it is more work for a woman to be a principal than it is for a man? If not, then how do we account for the internal struggles Maggie experiences as a female principal?
2. How do we define strength in leadership, and what are some implications of our definitions? What is the relationship between “strong leadership” and work intensification? Do strong leaders work harder?
3. Why does Maggie feel the need to prove herself as a leader and what does this say about how female principals are perceived by others, and the degree to which women have to work harder than their male colleagues?
4. What does Maggie gain and/or lose by taking up the discourse of motherhood? How does this discourse further complicate principalship for women?

There was a time when the majority of elementary school principals were male. In fact, a study commissioned by the Ontario Principals’ Council on pay equity indicates that women were largely un-

derrepresented as principals for much of the 20th century, and it was not until 2005-2006 when Ontario's principals were 62% female. (Shilton, 2015, p.2) In consideration of this data, it follows that principalship was largely defined within masculine terms. This gendered designation becomes problematic for women, as they begin to take on a role that was designed for men. Eagly, Karau, and Johnson (1992) looked at possible sex differences in leadership styles in order to discover why women were not taking on more roles in principalship. These authors made an interesting prediction that encourages more critical thinking on how proposed gender differences affect leadership style:

One perspective that suggests predictions about differences in the leadership styles of female and male principals emphasizes the gender role expectations represented in gender stereotypes. To the extent that male and female school principals carry out their roles in a manner consistent with gender stereotypes, they would differ in their leadership styles. This gender role perspective readily provides predictions about sex differences in leadership style because the distinctions that leadership researchers have made between task oriented and interpersonally oriented styles and between autocratic and democratic styles are gender stereotypic. (p. 79)

Clearly, by making distinctions between leadership styles that are “task oriented” (male) versus “interpersonally oriented” (female), researchers are emphasizing gender differences based upon socially constructed notions of what it means to be a man or a woman. Within this discourse, men and women are described as having very different and opposing leadership qualities. Women are portrayed as having “soft” leadership skills, and are encouraging and collaborative, whereas men are “pushers” and focused on task completion. Hence, the discourses around masculinities and femininities set up yet another discourse around what it means to lead as a man and as a woman. As these notions dominate the discourse around the issue, they become widely accepted as truth. As a result, principals become subjected to this discourse and find themselves having to “live up” to these ways of leading. We see this playing out as Maggie describes her experiences and thoughts about leading as a woman in her school. As well, we have seen within the case study that Maggie believes she faces more challenges in the role of principal than her male counterparts.

Murakami and Tornsen (2017) found links between gender and professional identities. They reported that “gendered discourses were evident in the development of professional identities. When female principals resort to demonstrating ‘male-like’ qualities, or when they must challenge authoritative styles to develop their own professional identity, they reveal a continuous struggle towards equity” (Murakami & Tornsen, 2017, pp. 820–21). Here, the authors (2017) highlight the struggles female principals face when taking on what is often perceived as a position meant for men. Murakami and Tornsen (2017) also point to the need for more research in this area, in particular, the lack of support offered to women as they navigate leadership positions in education (p. 821). The issue of gender and leadership needs to be explored further if we are to challenge hegemony within principalship. Murakami and Tornsen’s (2017) study is an example of this need, and an expression of the inequalities that exist, particularly with respect to female principals. Fuller (2017) comments on the need for a feminist approach to principal leadership through a lens of social justice: “In the twenty-first century, women’s underrepresentation in headship is a matter of social injustice, with women’s lack of parity of participation resulting in lack of recognition for their capacity for leadership and from lack of resource with which to achieve it” (p. 55). What I think is most important to note here is that when both the current and historical underrepresentation of women within principalship are considered, it becomes clear how this underrepresentation affects the manner in which women are viewed within the role. If principalship was indeed designed for men and suited to so-called masculine ways of leading, then women would be challenged when entering the role and questioned in terms of their suitability and fitness for the role. This perception has a negative impact on the work intensification for women in the role.

Activity 1: Exploring Gender Stereotypes and Work Intensification in Principal Leadership

Relevance. There are some who feel that gender does not matter when it comes to principal leadership. Now that women have taken on the role in greater numbers, it follows that, if women have greater access to this role, we have somehow attained gender equity in principalship. However, Maggie expresses

her struggles on leading as a woman. Maggie's conflict suggests that women experience difficulties leading their schools and meeting the expectations placed upon them as principals. These difficulties are to be expected if women have no choice but to lead in a manner which is largely defined within masculine terms. If it is the case that the principalship is inherently male, then it is assumed that men and women are naturally different leaders. This activity asks the following questions: (1) To what extent might women's leadership styles be different from the way men lead? (2) Now that more women are educational leaders, do we still need to think about issues of gender equity? These questions are important to consider for both practicing and prospective school leaders because gender does matter when it comes to principalship, as evidenced in this case study.

Purpose. The purpose of this activity is to encourage both potential and practicing principals to consider gender as a factor which affects the manner in which they lead. It will encourage participants to engage in conversation and build awareness of the issue. While solutions to this problem will not necessarily be found within these discussions, this dialogue will stress the issues at hand, and provide a framework for talking about gender and its impact on principal leadership.

Instructor guidelines. Ask students to read through the case and think about some of the gendered stereotypes that they have seen play out in their school or educational settings. Perhaps some students might identify with Maggie. Ask students to consider Oplatka's (2016) comment on the masculine stereotype of leadership, stating that it "poses a problem for women aspiring to management roles because female stereotypes do not match expectations for leaders. Even women who possess outstanding qualifications for leadership may have the burden of overcoming preconceptions that they are not well equipped to lead like their male counterparts" (p. 10). This quote speaks to the notion that leadership roles are designed for, and hence intended, for men to inhabit. Are there male and female ways of leading? How are they the same/different? You may also wish to use the following video of Alice Eagly's *The "Glass Ceiling" is Misleading* (2011) in which she speaks to the continuance of struggles experienced by women in the workplace: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLKQezaz2IA>

Place students into groups and then ask them to brainstorm what they consider to be male and female stereotypes as they relate to school leadership. Ask students to think about their own experiences as leaders and the manner in which their gender identity impacts their work. This activity can be done using a chart or a web diagram. Students then share what they have created with the rest of the class.

Pose the following questions for the class to discuss:

- a. What impact (both negative and positive) do you think these stereotypes have on men and women as they lead their schools?
- b. What impact did these stereotypes have on Maggie's experiences leading her school in terms of work intensification? How did these stereotypes shape the way she feels about her abilities as a leader?
- c. Do men and women actually lead differently? How do we account for the difficulties women experience in their role as leaders? What impact might gender stereotypes have on male leaders? How might both male and female principals navigate these gender stereotypes and the manner in which they impact their role?
- d. How can we consider the impact of gender on leadership without taking a stereotypical approach? Can we consider a gender-neutral style of leadership? What experiences have you had as a leader with respect to your gender identity?

Suggested Reading:

- Appalbaum, S. H., Audet L., Miller, J. C. (2003). Gender and leadership? Leadership and gender? A journey through the landscape of theories. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 24(1), 43 - 51. doi: 10.1108/01437730310457320
- Askehave, I., Korning Zethsen, K. (2014). Gendered constructions of leadership in Danish job advertisements. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 21(6), 531 – 545. doi:10.1111/gwao.12053
- Murakami, E. T., Tornsen, M. (2017). Female secondary school principals: Equity in the development of professional identities. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 45(5), 806-824. doi: 10.1177/1741143217717273
- Sandberg, S. (2013). *Lean in: Women, work and the will to lead*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.

Shakeshaft, C. (2006). Gender and educational management In: Skelton, C., Francis, B., Smulyan, L. (eds) *The Sage handbook of gender and education*. London, UK: Sage Publications Ltd, 497 - 511.

Activity 2: A Non-Stereotypical Approach to Principal Leadership

Relevance. One of the approaches to the topic of gender and leadership is to make a case for an androgynous approach to leadership. This approach is taken up, for example, by Coleman (2003) who conducted a survey of headteachers in the UK to determine how they define themselves as leaders. One of the activities Coleman asked her participants to do was to choose leadership attributes which applied to them using the following chart developed by Gray (1993) on gender paradigms (cited in Coleman, 2003, p. 30).

Table 1
Gender Paradigms

The nurturing/feminine paradigm	The defensive/aggressive masculine paradigm
caring	highly regulated
creative	conformist
intuitive	normative
aware of individual differences	competitive
non-competitive	evaluative
tolerant	disciplined
subjective	objective
informal	formal

Note: Adapted from “Gender & leadership style: the self-perceptions of secondary headteachers,” by M. Coleman, 2003, *MiE*, 17(1), p. 30.

Looking through these leadership traits, it is clear that these paradigms are highly stereotypical. Coleman reported that both male and female headteachers chose a range of adjectives to describe themselves, however, she said, “The prevailing model of management that both sexes appear to identify is ‘androgynous’ in that it cuts across both sets of gender stereotypes, but it does favour the ‘feminine’” (2003, p. 31). The results of this survey, and others like it, are interesting because the responses suggest that leadership style is an androgynous endeavour. Respondents typically chose traits from both sides of the chart, suggesting a leadership style that crosses the boundaries between the gender binary. This activity explores the possibilities of looking at gender and leadership as an androgynous exercise.

Purpose. One possible response to the consideration of gender as a factor (which determines how one might lead as a principal) is the belief that leadership is about skill and ability, not gender. The measurement of good leadership is found within the skills exhibited by the principal. This argument, however, does not explain the difficulties Maggie experiences in the case study. How can one account for the fact that Maggie wishes she were a man so that she could more easily lead her school? Do men have an easier time leading schools than their female colleagues? If so, how can we account for this difference? If men do have an easier time navigating school leadership, what does this say about work intensification for female principals in comparison to their male colleagues?

Instructor guidelines. Share the chart used in Coleman’s (2003) research with the students. Ask each student to use this chart to define what they perceive as their leadership style. Pose the following questions to the class for discussion:

1. How would you describe your leadership style using these gendered paradigms? Do you identify with a mixture of the two? What experiences have you had that speak to these stereotypes?
2. Do you consider these paradigms to be problematic? Why or why not? How do you feel about the female paradigm being described as *nurturing* while the male paradigm is described as *defensive/aggressive*?
3. How are Maggie's experiences and thoughts about gender and leadership reflected in this chart?
4. What might happen if one were to remove the gendered headings (*The nurturing feminine paradigm* and *The defensive/aggressive masculine paradigm*)? How easy is it to remove these titles and present an androgynous approach?
5. What do you think provides the basis for Maggie's wish to be a man? Is it that she wishes she had an easier time leading her school or is there more to this wish? What does it say about the implications of gender on work intensification concerning principal leadership?
6. How might male, female, or non-binary principals challenge gender stereotypes to level the playing field in terms of work intensification?

Suggested Reading:

Coleman, M. (2003). Gender & leadership style: the self-perceptions of secondary headteachers. *MiE*, 17(1), 29 - 33. doi: 10.1177/08920206030170010901

Pittinsky, T. L., Bacon, L. M., Welle, B. (2007). The great woman theory of leadership? Perils of positive stereotypes and precarious pedestals. In: Kellerman, B., Rhode, D. L. (eds) *Women and leadership*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 93-125.

Activity 3: Maggie uses the “Mom Card”

Relevance. In her efforts to define her leadership as effective, Maggie makes use of what she calls the “mom card” to present herself as a compassionate and empathetic leader who builds positive relationships with students, parents, and staff. The use of motherhood positions women principals as separate from their male counterparts, and, rather than relegating women to the household, it positions these women as prepared and ready to take on the role of principal. Is this discourse reductive or progressive? Reynolds (2002) commented on the limitations of the label of mother, when she compared the experiences of female principals in the 1940s and 1950s with those of the 1960s and 1970s:

While women in the previous generation had been limited by being positioned as “other”, it appears that all of the women studied in this generation were limited by being positioned as “mother”, whether or not they had any biological offspring. They ran into trouble when their individual actions, which they saw as unrelated to gender, were viewed as gender related by others. (Reynolds, 2002, p. 45)

It appears that the label of mother gets assigned to women regardless of their status as a parent. However, this label comes with certain expectations regarding gender. Some women find that actions that may not have been intended as “gendered actions” are interpreted as gender related. In their article about mothering and women principals in South Africa, Lumby and Azaola (2014) commented on the way female principals used motherhood to trouble gender. The authors noted that one group of female principals would “attempt to trouble gender by creating capital from gender in the workplace. They aim to distinguish female and male approaches to leadership, portraying the latter as less appropriate and less effective. They depict the ‘other’, their male counterparts, as lacking mothering experience and, as a result, lacking the knowledge and skills necessary to lead a school” (Lumby & Azaola, 2014, pp. 37–38). In this case, female principals positioned their male counterparts as the other, distinguishing a female mothering mode of leadership as both distinct and superior. By actively identifying as a mother, in relation to her role as a principal, does Maggie succeed in presenting her male colleagues as the “other” while distinguishing her leadership style as superior? Alternatively, does Maggie perpetuate a limited notion of what it means to lead as a woman by relying on the label of mother?

Purpose. To engage participants in discussion around the principals' use of alternate identities in order to be perceived as a credible leader. This discussion will encourage participants to think about the implications of female leaders invoking motherhood in order to set themselves apart from their male counterparts. In this case study, Maggie invokes the identity of motherhood. However, there are also other

possible identities that can be considered.

Instructor guidelines. Engage the class in a discussion/debate around this issue. Formulate a question for the class such as: When Maggie identifies as a mother in relation to her role as a principal, does she succeed in presenting herself in a position of superiority over her male counterparts, or is she invoking a stereotypical notion of what it means to lead as a woman? Ask representatives of each side of the argument to prepare a position using Maggie's quotation, as well as the resources listed below, if desired. Each group will present their case and then take questions from the opposing side. (Note: If students are not able to relate to parenting, feel free to choose another identity through discussion with the class.)

Suggested Reading:

- Reynolds, C. (ed) (2002). *Women and school leadership: International perspectives*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Lumby, J., Azaola, M.C. (2014). Women principals in South Africa: Gender, mothering and leadership. *British Educational Research Journal*, 40(1), 30-44. Doi: 10.1002/berj.3028

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- Fuller, K. (2017). Women secondary head teachers in England: Where are they now? *Management in Education*, 31(2), 54-68. doi:10.1177/0892020617696625
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