ARTICLES

Abstract

Frequently, explanations for the small number of women administrators are based on the belief that we know the nature of the problem (i.e., disparity in numbers). An alternative explanation would suggest that disparity in numbers is not *the* problem but is symptomatic of a larger one — the androcentrism embedded in administrative roles, i.e., *role discrimination*. This concept in conjunction with *access discrimination* and *treatment discrimination* may answer the question, ''Why are there so few women in school administration?''

Résumé

On croit fréquemment que le problème du petit nombre de femmes en administration en est un de disparité dans les nombres. Une autre explication suggère que la disparité dans les nombres n'est vraiment pas le problème mais est symptomatique d'un plus grand probleme soit celui d'un ''androcentrisme'' enraciné dans les roles administratifs qui engendre las discrimination dans les rôles. Ce concept, conjointement avec ceux de la *discrimination dans le traitement des postulants*, peut fournir une réponse à la question ''Pourquoi les femmes sont-elles si peu nombreuses dans l'administration scolaire?''

Mary Nixon*

FEW WOMEN IN SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION: SOME EXPLANATIONS

Ten years or more of supposedly encouraging women educators to become school administrators has resulted in *fewer* women in school administration than a decade ago.[1] For many years now there has been a search for the answer to the question, ''Why are there so few women in administration?'' Traditionally, papers written on the topic begin with a careful, even pedantic, citing of the evidence that: (1) there are few women in administration in proportion to their numbers in the teaching force, and (2) women who do hold administrative positions are more likely to be found in ''lower''/less influential positions than their male colleagues. These ''facts'' are now common knowledge but the reasons remain elusive as to why there has been such slow progress toward that egalitarian ideal which seemed to be ''just around the corner'' in the mid-seventies. Many explanations are offered but most are applicable only to a comparatively small group of women educators. Fragmented explanations hold out little hope for a comprehensive study of the problem.

Many career women believe that discrimination in the workplace still exists. In her study of career women in Canada, Bassett (1985) found that 88 per cent believed that sex discrimination was a factor holding them back in their professions. The objective evidence would suggest some form or forms of discrimination in teaching. In teaching, however, unlike the workplace in general, there are no structural barriers to vertical mobility. Supposedly, men and women educators have equal access to administrative positions of influence. Given the attention over the last decade to

* University of Alberta

the objective dimension of discrimination (i.e., the disparity in numbers) why has there been so little change?

Explanations Based on an "Equity Through Understanding" Approach

Since 1970 when the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada drew attention to the inequitable treatment of women in Canadian society, people have sought explanations. Commonly, these explanations are based on the belief that we can more nearly approach the equity ideal through a clearer understanding of the *status quo*. We believe we know the nature of the problem and we seek: (1) causes of the disparity, and (2) strategies for necessary or preconceived changes with respect to increasing the number of women in administrative positions. However, the changes which are usually proposed are neither major organizational changes nor changes in the expectations for administrative roles as they are currently defined.

Numerous, often interrelated, explanations have been proffered for the under-representation of women in positions of influence. Partial explanations of this under-representation in public education (which are not based on a legally-indefensible, overtly discriminatory model) may include the following: (1) the tradition of men in leadership roles, (2) the socialization of women into helpful-dependency relationships, (3) women teachers' perceptions with respect to the "cost" of accepting administrative positions, (4) the narrower background of professional preparation and/or experience of women teachers, and (5) the lack of role models and sponsors/mentors for women teachers.

The tradition of women as teachers and men as principals and superintendents was well-entrenched in Canada by the end of the nineteenth century. Although women occupied only low status positions, there was still prejudice against them. This male prejudice was grounded in the fear of competition (women accepted very low salaries); fear of the degradation of the profession since women were not career-oriented (women did not intend to spend a life-time in the classroom if it could be avoided), and fear that women had neither the mental capacity nor the training for public school teaching. This bias against women could be overcome, at least in part, by placing all females in subordinate positions, paying them less than men and encouraging these women teachers to look for guidance to their male superordinates (Prentice, 1977). It can be argued that today's under-representation of women in the upper echelons of public school systems is, in part at least, a legacy from the male domination of yesterday. Women teachers inherited a system which was seen as equitable in an earlier time.

The last quarter century has brought gradual change. Differential salary scales based on sex, as well as other inequities in fringe benefits, no longer exist. Yet a number of studies show that "women's aspirations for administrative careers decline the more they see of administrative career patterns" (Marshall, 1985). For some women, traditional cultural definitions of femininity which emphasize attributes such as sensitivity, conformity, lack of assertiveness and dependency may contribute to this lack of aspiration.

Perhaps the socialization of children into traditional sex roles ensures that for some women many subtle attitudinal barriers will remain. First in the home and later in the school, children learn their place in the social structure from the expectations and reactions of others. Throughout life they see mirrored in the reactions of others — whether real or imagined is immaterial — their self-images, their strengths, their weaknesses, appropriate behaviors and appropriate values.

Most parents seem not to have the same expectations for sons and daughters. In her study of parental child-rearing practices of four-year-olds, Tudiver (1980) concluded that "the issues for parents with respect to daughters appear to be interpersonal relatedness and permissiveness, while the issues for parents with respect to sons appear to be achievement or task orientation and control" (p. 40). This differentiation in parental behavior based on the sex of the child begins a socialization process which will turn toddlers into "men" and "women" who are aware of, and who may strive for, the idealized attributes associated with their sex roles. It is not likely that schooling will help these children find a more androgynous role model, for public schools tend to be conservative institutions where conformity is valued and the cultural norms are perpetuated.

Historically women's socialization into public school teaching in Canada has been socialization into subordinate, hand-maiden roles and to the extent "that school children absorbed messages from the organization of the institutions in which they were educated, Canadian children were [and still are] exposed to a powerful image of women's position in society" (Prentice, 1977, p. 65). Sadker and Sadker (1986) have found that even in the mid-eighties, sexism in the classroom, at all levels, continues to flourish. The traditional stereotypes for male/female behavior persist and high school girls are discouraged from specializing in math and science (Campbell, 1986, pp. 516-520).

For more than a decade, superintendents of schools and school trustees have been saying that women would be welcome in positions of administrative influence (Nixon, 1975), but the number of women educators in those positions remains comparatively small. One partial explanation of this phenomenon may lie in the perception of the administrative task itself. A woman teacher's decision to apply for an administrative position will depend, to some degree, on how close a match she perceives between the rewards she seeks and those she believes are associated with that position. Some teachers are influenced by their own negative stereotyping of such positions or by the belief that they would need to be superwomen to meet all the additional demands on their time. Talking with women who have administrative positions may not allay these fears. Like successful men, many successful women are very quick to attribute their success to their own initiative, intelligence and hard work. On balance, some women teachers who have all the proper credentials may feel that the "price" of an administrative position is too high.

Attention has been drawn to the comparatively small number of women enrolled in graduate programs in Canadian universities (Symons, 1980). Until the mid-seventies very few women had access to professional preparation programs in educational administration for they lacked the professional experience in school administration which at that time was believed crucial to academic success. By the mid-seventies, when this background admission requirement was relaxed, it was too late; educational institutions were no longer expanding and most influential positions had been filled by the male graduates of the sixties (Nixon 1985).

As a result of this unlucky accident of history, there are few role models for women aspiring to positions of influence in the educational system. While women administrators have attested to the influence of sponsors/mentors on their careers (Nixon and Gue, 1975), relatively few women can anticipate such sponsorship (Stillion, 1984). There are few women in positions to act as sponsors/mentors and, as Marshall has pointed out, "men and women are not accustomed to working as caring, supportive colleagues as in the sponsor-protege relationship" (1985, p. 135). She goes on to add that these "informal interactions between men and women may give the appearance of love or sexual relationships, thereby harming marriages and careers" (p. 135).

Assertiveness training, which might help to compensate for the lack of role models and sponsors, is not included in the typical professional preparation program for initial certification. Silently, women prospective teachers are encouraged to focus their ambitions on classroom teaching. Once within the profession, these young women soon learn that leadership ambitions for administrative positions will be subtly discouraged. It may just seem easier to limit one's sphere of influence to the classroom during a life period when it is not uncommon to take on new responsibilities outside the profession such as marriage, starting a family, and a mortgage.

It is doubtless true that the factors which have been discussed — the tradition of men in leadership roles, the traditional socialization of women into helpful-dependency relationships, the perceptions of some women teachers with respect to the "cost" of administrative positions, the narrower background of professional preparation and experience of women teachers, and the lack of role models and sponsors/mentors for women teachers — have severally, or in combination, influenced the careers of some women in public education. However, these factors do not render a very satisfactory explanation as to why well-qualified women educators in the late twentieth century do not choose administration, or when they do, why so many women administrators remain in administrative positions of limited influence. The success of the "equity through understanding" approach would appear to be limited by the question which it does not address directly, "Are women educators discriminated against?"

Explanations Based on an "Understanding Discrimination" Approach

In 1987, discrimination based on sex will be generally covert in nature. While the individual and collective lives of women are still the focal point of explanations based on a discriminatory model, there is a sharpened awareness of the continuing impact of man-made ideologies on the lives of women. Feminist scholars have heightened our awareness of the effects of socialization practices on both sexes and the nature of the interactions which takes place in the workplace. Out of this work has come a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of the concept of discrimination and the degree to which covert discrimination may influence the "life chances" of women.

A basic assumption underlying a discriminatory model of explanation is that the legal ban on adverse discrimination has been sufficient to eliminate or nearly eliminate its overt expression. Only the naive, however, or those with vested interests, believe that Canadians have made major strides toward the egalitarian ideal. In the 1984 Royal Commission Report entitled, *Equality in Employment,* Abella drew attention to the changing nature of the concept of equality.

> Equality is, at the very least, freedom from adverse discrimination. But what constitutes discrimination changes with time, with information, with experience, and with insight. What we tolerated as a society 100, 50, or even 10 years ago is no longer tolerable. Equality is thus a process — a process of constant and flexible examination, of vigilant introspection and of aggressive open-mindedness. (p. 1)

It is now socially unacceptable to express openly attitudes which discriminate against women. School board members and those with responsibilities for administrative appointments may speak persuasive words to suggest that the egalitarian ideal has been achieved. Typically, the initial promotion of women to positions of administrative responsibility is given some media coverage.[2] This small group of women may then be called upon to continue to serve as examples of an equitable system where promotions are based on ability. Yet these prominently displayed examples of women in positions of administrative responsibility may serve only to obscure the fact that

representation in the administrative cadre in education is not proportional to representation in the teaching ranks. It is not likely that these "high-profile" examples are sufficient to counter successfully the androcentrism embedded in the formal and informal expectations for administrative positions.

Covert Discrimination: Role, Access and Treatment Discrimination

Many writers have drawn attention to the masculine or androcentric bias of conventional scholarship in general.[3] Since androcentrism assumes a universality of experience, the need to ask research questions which discriminate with respect to sex can then be eliminated. Of course, as Eichler and Lapointe point out, this leads to a distortion of reality.

> The monosexual tradition in Western thought leads to omission, blind spots and biases which distort reality and may invalidate a research project and its findings. Linguistics, psychoanalysis, philosophy, sociology of knowledge and other disciplines have shown that there is no discourse without a subject speaking — a subject who, consciously or unconsciously, transmits his or her own interests and socio-cultural conditioning. (1985, p. 5)

Unfortunately, androcentrism permitted the "blind spots and biases" to get passed on as knowledge. For example, texts on organizational behavior could, with impunity, ignore female achievement orientations or females as leaders. The simplistic solution of including women in a research design is not sufficient if the findings and interpretation are flawed by an androcentric bias which measures all persons by a universal male standard.

> Even in the subsequent replications of the Maslow, Getzels and Guba, Fiedler, and LBDQ research, which included females in the samples and which tried to account for the effects of gender, the findings and interpretations were tainted by the androcentrism of the primary research. Women were measured against male standards and were presented with implications which might have been of more detriment than benefit to them. (Shakeshaft and Nowell, 1984, p. 200)

Over the last decade there has been a growing awareness of the subtleties of covert discrimination. To the two dimensional model of covert discrimination (access and treatment) which has been used by numerous writers[4] has been added a third dimension — role discrimination. Among the many forms which covert discrimination might take in an organizational setting are role discrimination, access discrimination, and treatment discrimination. The addition of the third dimension may assist in understanding why many women teachers appear reluctant to apply for administrative positions as they are currently defined.

Defining androcentrism as "the elevation of the masculine to the level of the universal," Shakeshaft and Nowell have pointed out the andocentric bias in research on organizational behavior. They suggest that one of the results of the androcentric bias has been a concept of leader effectiveness which "has evolved from a consciousness that prizes the drive to compete, to win, to beat out everyone else" (1984, p. 200).

It is from such a male consciousness as this that the stereotypical view is derived of the "good" principal who would emphasize efficiency, control, and accountability. According to Irvine, it is this stereotyping of roles which has contributed to the comparatively small number of women in educational administration.

> Men were considered better for "masculine" tasks such as organizing, leading, commanding, and controlling . . . . The stereotyping of the principalship according to prior sex role socialization has resulted in the over-representation of men and the exclusion of women in educational administration. (Irvine, 1984, p. 219)

The underlying sex bias in this stereotype may not be malicious, or even intentional, but the continuing, unquestioning acceptance of this traditional stereotype "without analysis or comment may unintentionally foster inequity" (Quell and Pfeffer, 1982, p. 268).

Conceptions shaped by the forces of socialization and past history direct people in the construction of their individual worlds. As a result, the expectations held for leadership positions symbolize the elements of the leadership roles. Thus the role expectations held by women teachers for administrative positions become the reality of the roles as viewed by these observers. It is this set of perceptions that influence women as they evaluate such positions for themselves. Thus women who reject an androcentric world are likely to reject positions seen as androcentric in nature while women who have been socialized into an acceptance of masculine values would be more likely to accept such positions.

For those women who conceptualize the leadership roles in ways which conform to their value systems, and who are confident that they possess the necessary attributes, access discrimination may still present a problem in seeking administrative positions.

> Access discrimination refers to non-job related limitations placed on women at a time a position is filled. Failing to recruit, using criteria that favor males, applying antinepotism rules, encouraging and sponsoring male candidates, and excluding females from communications networks are some examples of access discrimination. (Irvine, 1984, p. 219)

Access discrimination is often so subtle that its dimensions may be impossible to define clearly. Rather, its existence must be inferred when outcomes are analyzed. For example, the application of antinepotism policies which frown upon the deployment of married couples in the same school can work to the disadvantage of women teachers who feel that they must "sacrifice" career opportunities for the sake of their husbands' careers. Another example, the shortage of role models/mentors, has been discussed earlier in this paper and the more influential the position sought, the fewer the mentors. Valverde has drawn attention to the fact that mentors choose their proteges and that these proteges are chosen in the likeness of the mentors. Women are less likely to be chosen because they do not share the "white male norms" of male mentors in influential positions (Valverde, 1980, pp. 36-46).

For the woman who has met with initial success in obtaining a leadership role, discrimination may take the form of differential treatment on the job. Not overtly but nevertheless very successfully, the organization members may deny the female newcomer "the more subtle indicators of belonging and recognition" (Irvine and Robinson, 1982, p. 196). This organizational denial may be sufficient to ensure that an individual's career advancement never progresses beyond the initial step.

Treatment discrimination may be expressed in more overt actions. A perennial condition of "being left out" is one indicator. Normal communication patterns may be disrupted with some positions intentionally excluded or redefined because of the current incumbent. As one woman in a provincial educational organization explained:

> In my present position (administrative) I am treated like a clerical worker, and I have had to *fight* to overcome being expected to file, serve coffee, take minutes at meetings and so forth. (Nixon, 1985, p. 6)

The linking of the three concepts — role discrimination, access discrimination, and treatment discrimination — may provide a plausible, alternative explanation for the small number of women in administrative positions. At the very least, it provides a framework to study further the existence and extent of covert discrimination in the teaching profession. From such a formulation a number of research questions can be derived. What are the formal and informal expectations for administrative roles? Are there any elements in the conceptualization of these roles which favor men? What proportion of women educators see themselves as having the necessary attributes for success in these roles as they are currently defined? Do women teachers feel that they suffer from access discrimination? Do women administrators feel that they suffer from treatment discrimination?

Ideologically, Canadians are committed to a society based on equity. Yet the concept of equity is very much influenced by the larger cultural context. For example, in the prairie provinces the rural tradition of a division of labor based on sex still lingers. While it may be true that many farm women participate in all aspects of running family farms (and always have), the traditional mythology dictates what *ought to be*, i.e., that men do the "hard" work and women look after the home and the family. For persons of both sexes who are imbued with such beliefs, there is little awareness that they have adopted a discriminatory model which stereotypes and restricts behaviors.

As societal awareness is heightened and people's sophistication increases, discrimination as a theoretical construct changes (overt discrimination becomes less socially acceptable), and covert discrimination based on sex becomes the means of expressing bias. As time passes, if attention is given to the task, it is possible to gain a clearer understanding of how covert discrimination also operates to undermine the equity ideal.

Discriminatory practice deprives individuals of opportunities for professionally satisfying lives, it deprives school systems across Canada of an enlarged pool of applicants from which to draw leadership talent, and it fosters a society with unrealized potential. Until the imbalance of influence based on sex in our school systems changes, the messages absorbed by children with respect to the place of women in Canadian society will be difficult to counteract.

NOTES

1. Despite the publicity given to women who do receive administrative appointments, in 1982-1983 women accounted for only 13 percent of all school principals. See *Newsletter*, Canadian Education Association, January, 1985; Porat, Karin L. (1985). The woman in the principal's chair in Canada. *Kappan, 67* (4), 297-301.

2. See for example, the ATA Newspaper, March 17, 1986, p. 4. Three columns were devoted to the appointment of three women to three administrative positions: (1) superintendent of a small school jurisdiction, (2) acting superintendent of another small jurisdiction and (3) associate superintendent. Would *any* coverage have been given to these appointments if the appointees had been men?

3. For example, Saunders, Eileen. (1983). Women in Canadian society. In Forcese, Dennis & Richer, Stephen. (Eds.). *Social issues: sociological views of Canada.* Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc.

4. For an overview of the literature see Jacqueline Jordan Irvine. (1984). A question of fitness: teachers' perceptions of expectation discrepancies for male and female principals. *Journal of Educational Equity and Leadership. 4* (3), 219-227.

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