

Sociocultural perspectives on education and identity



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Abstract

The contention of female leadership in education has become a pivotal focus for research since the end of the twentieth century. The goal of my research paper is to examine common misconceptions of why women are underrepresented in elementary and secondary school administration around the world and mainly here in North America. In addition, it is my goal to explore alternative reasons why women are underrepresented in school leadership positions. These common misconceptions are primarily that women have obligations to home and her children, and therefore will not serve as a great educational leader. A second misconception by many is that women are not merely as educated as men or lack sufficient experience. In addition to those misconceptions there is the “this is not what were used to” misconception; the societal norm for a man to be the leader.

Keywords: gender, female school administrator, female principal, gender discrimination

Sociocultural Perspectives on Education and Identity

In every school there is a qualified female educator that will retire from the education field without ever having the chance of becoming a school administrator. Many will question why. Is it due to her minimal education of only a bachelors degree like many have said? Perhaps its her lack of experience? Many will say its because of her numerous responsibilities at home and her inability to balance home with work. On the other hand, a few will say its because societal norm expect school leaders to be men. The question that lead me to dive into this research is, “ Why are women

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underepresented in school administration? Are women truly being discriminated against because of their gender? Is it because of their responsibilities other than school leader, or the lack of qualifications and training that their male counterpart possess? Or are there possibly other issues?

Shakeshaft (1987) provides the first major investigation into the positioning of women in educational administration.

Based on the ideas of Diehl (2014) women leaders face gender-based barriers at individual, organizational, and societal levels.

The above view is supported by Coleman (2005) and Shakeshaft et al. (2007), who argue that female leaders prioritise communication, teamwork and collaboration, involve subordinates in decision-making and maintain personal relationships with them.

The statistical findings of male and female representation in schools as teachers versus school administrators around the world are astounding. Globally, women represent more than eighty percent of the elementary school teacher population, yet they account for roughly twenty percent of the administrator population.

In secondary schools, women accounted for about fifty six percent of the teacher population but only twenty eight percent of the administrator population. This pattern can be identified in prior studies that show that teaching became a 'feminine' occupation when men left it for more attractive occupational alternatives (Oppenheimer, 1970; Bernstein, 1993).

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With such alarming variations in statistical findings, I decided to research statistical findings for Canada specifically.

According to the Canadian Teacher's Federation (2003) during the 2002-2003 academic year seventy two percent of the teaching population were women while men accounted for twenty eight percent of the teacher population.

During my research it was also found that in Canada, nationally; excluding the province of Ontario, forty four percent of school administrators were women. In addition, on a national basis, forty five percent of vice principals, excluding the provinces of Ontario and Quebec, were women.

In the province of Quebec, women account for forty eight percent of the school administration population an increase of three percent in comparison to other provinces within Canada excluding Ontario. In the province of Ontario, women account for fifty five percent of the administration population, an increase of ten percent when compared to the remaining provinces.

In British Columbia the female teacher population in public schools continue to rise. According to the BCTF (2018) there was a steady increase from approximately sixty two percent in 1991-1992 to seventy two percent in 2016. The BCTF (2018) continued to inform that the percentage of female administrators has drastically increased since the 1991-1992 academic year from a low twenty four percent to a whopping fifty five percent here in British Columbia. Nonetheless there is still a disproportion in the secondary schools as men make up approximately twenty seven percent of the teaching

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population yet they dominate the secondary schools by forty five percent and administration of elementary and secondary schools by more than fifty percent. In 1991-1992, men accounted for more than seventy percent of the administrative positions here in British Columbia.

As a female principal from The Bahamas, these statistics did not startle me at all. In comparison to The Bahamas the numbers are quite similar with men dominating the secondary school administrative postings and almost all executive postings.

A former colleague of Mrs. Shadale Mackey gave her perspective on male dominance in leadership positions in The Bahamas. According to Mackey (2019), the Ministry of Education Science and Technology should not promote male teachers because of their gender, but should promote men because of their leadership and other qualities which meet the prerequisite for successful candidacy for higher positions.

I wholeheartedly agree that more male figures are needed in positions of leaderships at the elementary and secondary school level, but they must be qualified. From experience, a former colleague was hired as principal of the only secondary school on the island where I was principal simply because he was a man. As part of my research, I contacted the district superintendent to ask her viewpoint on the selection of this candidate three years past. Yes, you read correctly. Her. She is the first female district superintendent on that island in over two decades. The district superintendent's response was that the high school needed a man administrator to bring order to the school. She explained that the former male administrator was " slack" and didn't

reprimand the students. She continued that a firm and no-nonsense leader was necessary to bring the school to order. To better understand her perspective on male and female leadership I asked her if she didn't think that a female would have been able to successfully bring about positive change. She responded by expressing that she strongly doubt it and it is her hope that he remain in his position for a very long time.

In The Bahamas men are " preferred" by society as administrators because most Bahamians feel that men are better at keeping students in control. Corporal punishment is a social norm in The Bahamas therefore parents are accepting to male administrators reprimanding their children. As women, we are thought to be too kind-hearted and as most Bahamians would say, " too soft".

Based on the findings of Harvard Global Online Research study with a participation of more than 200, 000 individuals, it can be argued that 76% of people, both men and women, are gender-biased and tend to think of men as better suited for careers and women as better suited as homemakers.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF A WOMAN

Traditionally, women are known as nurturers: compassionate, patient, forgiving and generally more loving and caring than men. For centuries, women have been excluded from leadership roles and have been forced into motherhood. In many cultures around the globe, the responsibilities of family remain solely on the shoulders of the woman. These responsibilities mainly include rearing of the children, household chores such as cleaning, cooking, grocery shopping, taking care of family finances and so on. Many of these

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family responsibilities refrained the woman from attaining work therefore the man sought paid work. A few women worked part-time if their spouse and time allowed it. Growing up as a child, I have witnessed this over from generation to generation. My great grandmothers on both sides were housewives, my grandmothers were both housewives and my mom worked until she got pregnant with her first child. For the past forty years she has willfully settled as a housewife.

It is on the basis of this original notion, that men are placed in more leader positions than women. Although femininity is often correlated with a merciful ethics of care (Noddings, 1999, 2003), women are judged not only on how they personate this obligation on a professional level, but also how they manage to maneuver on a personal level as well. In short, women are expected to maintain a superfluous obligation for her home and children and unbelievably are judged more harshly than the male counterpart, should they consider prioritizing their career over family (Sandberg, 2013; Spar, 2013).

Some of the disparity in leadership can be explained by the fact that women take time out to raise their children however rearing children can also be done by the father. Times have changed and we are no longer in the eighteenth century where women primarily were housewives their entire life.

In today's society, it is very common for a man to receive paternity leave and assist with raising the children and most jobs allow up to twelve months paternity leave; eighteen months here in British Columbia if the parent decides to take an additional six months. In addition, there are men that are

comfortable with staying at home and being a house-husband. According to Rhodan (2013) more dads are staying at home with kids. Rhodan (2013) continued to add that data from the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey in the United States revealed that over the last decade, the percentage of stay at home dads increased to three point five percent or five hundred and fifty thousand dads compared to only two hundred and eighty thousand dads in the 1970's. Birch (2016) stated that a group called Friends of House Husbands in Japan is hoping to increase the rate of house husbands to thirty percent by 2020.

From a personal perspective, my husband volunteered to be a house-boyfriend for a year while we were dating due to the long-distance relationship and my enrolment in a master's program in 2013. We had no balance at home and many times chores would go undone, dinner would be takeout due to me working fulltime and then studying full time for a master's degree was pretty exhausting. That aside, my now husband admits that it was quite boring most of the time and he missed work but the sacrifice he made was for the betterment of our family and our future.

Therefore, it is safe to say that in today's world, having children should not hinder a woman's progression to leadership roles as men are playing the traditional role of stay-at-home parent. This is especially truly if the woman is highly educated and contribute to a larger proportion of income to the family.

Dorsey (1996) confirmed that girls are groomed for their role as wives and taking care of males from an early age.

Studies have observed that women in educational leadership have multiple roles and are highly capable of balancing family and work responsibilities (Burke & Mattis, 2005; Coleman, 2002; 2009; Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Consequently, many women who apply for leadership positions are regarded as unsuitable by employers for fear that they might not balance home and office tasks. Sanda and Sackey (2010) found that married women are faced with the challenge of having many responsibilities that limit their professional development.

As a result, they discovered that many women who decide to take on the responsibility of leadership sometimes have to sacrifice having children or waiting until the latter part of their childbearing years to have children.

Coleman (2009) found that nearly one third of young female principals in her study had no children, while ninety percent of male principals had children.

Coleman (2002) further claimed that women leaders face the challenge of balancing work with family responsibilities and are less likely to settle in a marriage arrangement. Coleman (2002) added that even if they did get married, the marriage more than likely ended in a divorce sooner or later. In addition, it has been observed that unmarried women administrators that are childless have more time to attend to school matters without the pressure of setting aside sufficient time for the family (Ruijs, 1993). As a result their performance is up to par and they will most likely continue in that administrative posting.

EDUCATION AND EXPERIENCE

It is well known that girls outperform boys academically as early as Kindergarten. Females also graduate at higher rates than their male counterpart. However, according to Kasman (2017) a study by researchers at the University of Miami and Nova Southeastern University in the state of Florida revealed that boys that achieve scores as low as sixty percent will make more money than girls that receives marks in the ninety percent range. How is this even possible?

Jordan (2018) highlights that in 2015, the statistics show that globally, women were paid on average, only seventy seven percent of what men were paid and that women occupy only twelve percent of leadership roles.

For that reason, as of 2019, many women have acquired higher education not to desensitize the feminization of teaching but to boost the slow infiltration of women into managerial positions in education. In our education leadership cohort here at Simon Fraser University Surrey Campus, we have a total of sixteen participants with twenty five percent of the participants being male and seventy five percent being female. Of the seventy five percent females, all participants are of an education background ranging from elementary school to post-secondary education. Based on numerous findings there is an increasing number of female teachers applying for masters and doctoral studies in higher education institutes (Haidar, 2005). Consequently, even though a woman's qualifications may exceed those of the man in all the required areas, men are still preferred as leaders for school management (Shapira, 2006).

Women, who have succeeded in being appointed as school principals, are perceived as exceptions and the accepted norm remains that this role is appropriate and intended for men (Shapira, 2006)

It seems that higher education is insufficient to ensure women's evolution into the leadership arena. Even though higher education is a decisive factor in women's participation in the workforce, this opportunity may not be realized, as men dominate most leadership positions, management, are leaders of the senate government or are politically affiliated to ensure that a woman is not successful in a leadership position if there is a suitable man available for such said position.

Men acquire their managerial experience in other administrative roles, such as vice principals (Shakeshaft, 1987), while women acquire it in mediocre roles, such as classroom teacher and school counselor, in which they are spending more time than men do in intermediate positions (Pounder, 1988). Female teachers also tend to progress along the scale of successful leadership much more slowly than men. After five to nine years of experience, twenty percent of male primary teachers are on the leadership scale, compared to roughly nine percent of women.

Considering it could be worse, women are more often appointed as vice principals or principals of smaller schools which unfortunately starting salaries on the leadership scale are based on the size of the school. Hence, women in leadership will still earn less than their male counterpart. Then again, men that decide to go into primary teaching almost always progress faster.

This is mainly because men are a rare commodity in primary education and partly because, if you're a male primary educator, people in supervisory positions tend to assume you're aiming for a leadership position and tend to groom and manipulate the situation to allow them to progress to leadership.

WHAT DOES SOCIETY SAY?

Social psychologist Alice Eagly says culturally “masculine” traits are typically associated with leadership, creating a “gender-leadership cultural mismatch for women.”

At an individual level, women struggle with a conflict between work and family and communication style (Violanti & Jurczak, 2011).

In many societies, leadership is seen as a masculine position. Eagly and Johnson (1990) reported that people judge leadership based on what behaviour society perceives to be appropriate for men and women. That is to say, women are expected to portray a feminine style and men a masculine one due to socialisation, culture and context. This therefore may result in few women being considered for leadership, especially where the masculine leadership style dominates.

Women as educational leaders is still unnatural in many societies around the world.

The trend of female under-representation in senior leadership positions is manifested in schools in both developed and developing countries (Coleman, 2002; McLay & Brown, 2000)

Furthermore, female under-representation in leadership is observed even in schools where women outnumber men. Socio-cultural factors appear to determine who leads and who does not and what leadership should look like.

As women are a group that constitute almost half of the world's population and a third of the labour force, the United Nations calls for women to be involved in decision making and other opportunities. Involving women in decision making accelerates development and improves the economy, as women are able to contribute their abilities and creativity (United Nations, 1995).

Under-utilisation of the skills of capable and qualified women means a potential loss of economic growth. That is to say, women in the world constitute an under-utilised resource. The majority of capable and skilled women in the education system are not utilised (Mbilinyi, 1992). Involving more capable and qualified women in leadership may create leadership opportunities for other women, as female leaders serve as role models and mentors for other women and young girls in society. This would help to break society's stereotyping and negative perceptions of female leaders.

Many societies perceive women as being incapable of leading. This is because, from a cultural point of view, men are perceived as strong, mighty decision maker while women are perceived as having the role of being mothers and caring for children.

Regionally, even in areas where women are in the majority and have exceptional qualifications and decades of experience, they still are under-represented in leadership.

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Socio-cultural norms, socialisation and expectations may have a major influence on women's participation in decision making, as they may mould the behaviour of female leaders to believe and act according to these norms and values of society. Bahamian society still believes that leadership is for men, and this belief is dominant in most of the countries in the Caribbean.

In my experience as a woman who has passed through different levels of education and experienced the work environment in a third world country that is male dominated it is important for me as a female school administrator to relate my position to this paper. The idea of examining female leadership derives from my rural background, my education and my work experience, which are crucial for delving into issues influencing women's under-representation in leadership positions.

I was born 32 years ago and studied in rural areas in The Bahamas. My country is comprised of seven hundred islands and cays all smaller than the city of Vancouver so, its pretty rural, with a population of less than three hundred thousand scattered out among these islands and cays. My professional background as a teacher include a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education and a Master's degree in Literacy Instruction. Being a female student, part-time prep lecturer for a year and having been born in a rural environment, I have been associated with women whom are unwilling to take leadership posts because they lack the confidence and simply accept men's superiority. This is caused by the socialisation of women, who are less encouraged by their parents and society to be involved in decision making.

Throughout my six years of primary education, all the principals on my island were women with the exception of one school, the largest primary school

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had male principal by the name of Mr. Wells. I have also experienced women putting more effort into family issues than their studies and careers. I have friends that decided not to pursue an education and preferred to become a housewife. This was never an option for me if I didn't have tertiary education or employment.

This notion continued into my secondary school and at college level. At secondary school level, I noticed that the only two secondary schools on the island were led by men; Mr. Lawrence Cartwright and Mr. Machon Cartwright. In addition, I observed that there was also a male district superintendent, Mr. Endal Adderley. When I became employed by the Ministry of Education my principal was a male, Mr. Deral Wells and the district superintendent was..... can you guess.....a man! As you can see all supervisors were men including the Director of Education Mr. Lionel Sands and his supervisor, the Minister of Education, The Honourable Jerome Fitzgerald was once again a man. Over the years I have observed a similar situation throughout many third world countries such Jamaica, Turks and Caicos Islands, and a few more.

Likewise, I have also realised that female teachers face obstacles at the family and school level when seeking administrative postings. Male teachers do not experience this. During my teaching career, there were some women discouraging other women from aspiring to leadership positions instead of motivating them, by suggesting that leadership is a man's job and that they will be unable to manage. Remember the district superintendent I told you about a few pages ago? Exactly!

Women are underrepresented in leadership and the few who get to the top have to face major social and psychological pressures (Coleman, 2011). Despite this, the idea of women in positions is still difficult for many to grasp.

To sum up, all that I have examined, I have concluded that leadership is recognized as the ability to lead, encourage, influence, work well with colleagues, to be honest, respect others and maintain the ethics of equality in giving people positions by virtue of their special or personal skills and knowledge, rather than other differences such as gender.

Pirouznia (2013) concluded in a study on women aspiring to principalship using interviews and concluded that women are under-represented in leadership because of gender role stereotypes and family responsibilities. Powell (1999) identified the stereotypes to women in leadership positions and also addressed women and men in educational management.

Bullough (2008) addressed factors affecting women's involvement in leadership in the United States of America discovering that women remain under-represented in leadership. These studies concluded in general that, although women are under-represented in decision making, their numbers slowly are increasing.

It is with great pleasure to make note that the amount of research on women in leadership has increased compared to the observation by Shakeshaft in 1989 (Oplatka & Hertz- Lazarowitz, 2006).

The Gender Organization System model presents the study of issues concerning women's leadership advancement (Fagenson, 1990b). The model

reveals that the absence of women at senior levels of leadership is a result of the coexisting interaction between the individual, organisations and society (Fagenson, 1990a; Yukongdi & Benson, 2005). Rowley and Yukongdi (2009) and Meyerson and Fletcher (1999) report that obstacles to progressing as a leader are not just within women, but are around them and within the structures of organisations and their culture. This perspective combines a gender-centred perspective and an organisation-structure perspective to explain female under-representation in leadership. The Gender Organization System framework helps to explore what influences female under-representation in senior leadership positions, and it shows that gender inequality at school should be seen from different dimensions in terms of how men and women differ in their experience of an organisation and system, which are the main factors that are leading to discrimination against women in workplaces.

A gender-centered perspective is primarily used by researchers to explain the influences of female under-representation in senior leadership positions (Fagenson, 1990a). The perspective assumes that “women’s traits and behaviour are ‘inappropriate’ for top management positions” (Akpinar-Sposito, 2013, p. 1). It considers that organisational and societal factors are not responsible for female under-representation in leadership. According to this perspective, women are under-represented in leadership because of internal factors resulting from socialisation. Women are socialised to put more effort into their lives and to value family and home more than their careers. Women are groomed to be kind, understanding, caring and

submissive. Unfortunately, such qualities are considered contrary to the demands of senior leadership positions (Fagenson, 1990b).

On the other traits instilled in men, such as aggressiveness, decisiveness and independence, are socially acceptable for a leader. This suggests that women should behave and act like men to convince society that they qualify for leadership positions.

The Organisation-structure perspective argues that men and women in organisations behave differently because of the characteristics of organisations. This perspective proposes that, not only do women's inner factors resulting from socialisation impact and shape their behaviour at the workstation, but so too does the organisational structure (Fagenson, 1990b). Furthermore, the perspective believes that the organisational culture, stereotypes, rules, laws, policies and ideology hinder women from becoming senior leaders (Fagenson, 1990a). Organisational culture shapes the behaviour of women and many opportunities are given to men (Fagenson, 1990a). Oakley (2000) points out that these organisations contribute to the under-representation of women in leadership positions due to unfairness in recruitment, promotion and retaining of positions.

In short it is safe to conclude that women are not underrepresented in leadership positions because of their responsibilities to the home and child rearing, nor is it because she lacks the education or the experience. In today's world, society can help to make or break you and for us, female leaders societal norm negatively affect our advancement to leadership in elementary and secondary schools.

Gender continues to be a marginal research issue in education leadership studies.

We cannot simplify gender inequality without considering wider socio-economic, cultural or organizational contexts. To conclude my research I acknowledge and agree with the claim that gender inequality is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon (Reilh & Byrd, 1997).

Powell (1999) remind us that Gender-related influences on the world of work are interrelated and occur simultaneously at many levels ... at the societal, industry, occupational, organizational ... and individual level.

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