

Becoming a Leader

Strategies for Women in Education Administration

by Barbara A. Gill

Les éducatrices sont encore sous-représentées dans les postes administratifs en éducation en dépit du nombre grandissant de candidates inscrites aux programmes préparatoires aux postes

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de commande. Cet article définit quelques stratégies visant à surmonter le problème.

If a woman educator wishes to become an educational administrator in the 1990s, what strategies should she employ? How can she best prepare herself for the realities of school leadership in a world of budget cuts, downsizing, and amalgamations? Although women educators are entering Masters of Education and PhD programs in Educational Administration in record numbers, the percentage of women who actually obtain positions in educational administration is under 30 per cent in most provinces in Canada. Although women educators are training for leadership positions, women are not acquiring administrative positions, nor are they staying in these administrative positions for long (Baudoux; Young).

Considerable research literature exists which documents strategies that women have used successfully in order to become educational administrators (Attfield; Gill; Shakeshaft; Young). These strategies include advanced study; involvement in professional groups; participating in school district leadership development programs; holding office in a community or professional organization; acting as a substitute for the principal or vice-principal; encouragement from another administrator; building a women in administration network; a background in special education and counselling; raising a family; taking every opportunity to let people know of one's interest in administration; knowing as much as possible about the area one wants to enter both in terms of subject matter and the job itself; finding a mentor; and looking ahead at what will be happening in years to come. In addition, these results have been compiled into handbooks to provide practical guidelines for women wishing to become educational leaders (Restine).

There is also considerable evidence to indicate that although women educators are following this advice, they are not entering educational administration in sufficient numbers to bring the total to 50 per cent in the foreseeable future. Two studies will be mentioned here which address this issue: Beth Young's summary of the findings of a number of Canadian studies on women in educational administration and Claudine Baudoux's study of the exclusion of women from educational leadership positions over the past 30 years in Quebec.

Young lists a number of factors which discourage women from entering the field of educational administration. This list includes the assumption that men will be administrators and so this career choice is not taken seriously; the tendency for women to submit applications for positions only when it is suggested by someone else; the fact that there is very little sympathy for family responsibilities within educational organizations; the tendency of women to lack confidence in their own abilities; and the constant pull felt by women between school responsibilities and domestic responsibilities which discourages consideration of a career which might take even more time away from the family. Young's research also shows that when individual women are asked whether they have faced discrimination or barriers to acquiring a position in educational administration, many will deny it, although most can also describe experiences which might be termed as barriers.

Baudoux reviewed research which documented the exclusion of women from educational leadership positions over the last 30 years in Quebec. She discovered that women facing a climate of exclusion employed one of two strategies. Those who accepted the status quo tended to deny any access problem, either by refusing to recognize a problem or by denying that problems applied to them as individuals. They would refuse to adopt "feminist behaviour" on the job, and acted to protect the egos of their male colleagues. Those who wanted to alter the status quo tried confrontation, even in the face of isolation, worked to create an anti-sexist culture in some informal gaps in the organization, provided solidarity and sponsorship and encouragement for other women seeking positions, and supported equal opportunity programs.

A dichotomy thus exists. On the one hand there appears to be considerable support for women to enter education administration, yet on the other hand barriers continue to make it very difficult for them to actually do so. Why should such a situation exist in the late 1990s when there is publicly espoused support for women to enter all fields, especially educational administration? What unaddressed issues work against women who are, to all intents and purposes, doing everything necessary to achieve their goals?

It is important to address the phenomenon of denial (Crosby *et al.*). This phenomenon occurs when disadvantaged people will admit to discrimination against a group but not against themselves individually. It is possible that this phenomenon accounts for findings in some studies where the women administrators deny they face barriers but describe incidents where they clearly have faced barriers (Gill; Schmuck and Schubert). Unless women educators are prepared to face, acknowledge, and publicize the barriers that exist for them, it is all too easy for employers to conclude that all is well and there is no need for further action. The low numbers of women can be written off with

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platitudes such as "women are not interested in these positions," or "no qualified women have applied." It is important, too, that employers and women themselves see the "whole picture" of barriers. Crosby *et al.* note that it is only when information is presented in its entirety that the pattern of inequity emerges. Information presented "case by case" does make inequity apparent and therefore unless employers see the whole pattern, there is no perceived need for action against inequity.

Another issue that needs to be addressed is a failure to understand power. According to Colwill

The lack of women in management is an issue, not of education and training, but of power. Time, patience, and women's self-improvement do not appear to be the solution. The solution, in fact, is similar to the problem: power. (81)

Colwill examines three kinds of power: personal power (the belief that one is in control of one's environment); interpersonal power (the ability to influence another person); and organizational power (the ability to mobilize resources to get things done). Colwill's analysis of the research suggests that women are superior to men in organizational power, are no different from men in personal power, and do less well than men in interpersonal power. Colwill notes that women, while building rich relationships characterized by emotional sharing, tend to find themselves excluded from the informal, male-dominated networks in their organizations. This exclusion process bans them from the power strongholds of the organization and thereby lowers their possibilities for promotion. Applying this analysis to educational organizations, while women do "all the right things" in terms of preparing themselves for positions in educational leader-

ship, their access is limited by exclusion from the informal power networks. Only when women break into the informal power networks will they have equal access to positions in educational administration. And only when the existence of powerful "old boys networks" is openly acknowledged and named can their power be diminished.

The affects of socialization can impact on women seeking positions in educational administration. Research studies frequently mention that women tend not to apply for administrative positions until it is suggested by others (Gill; Schmuck and Schubert; Young), and that women tend to attribute their success in obtaining such positions to luck (Gill; Schmuck and Schubert; Young), that women lack confidence in their abilities (Leithwood *et al.*), and that the behaviours needed to succeed at the top may be contrary to those to which women are socialized (Faust).

If school principals and other educational leaders are conceptualized as tough individuals with set chains of command who must have the ability to give orders under pressure and be prepared to make quick, unilateral decisions, then this type of leadership may be off-putting to potential women administrators. Although current administrative theory textbooks and other writings on leadership present other models of leadership which de-emphasize hierarchy and promote concepts such as leadership as collective effort and shared power (Astin and Leland; Owens; Sergiovanni), there is little evidence that current educational reform movements value these concepts. Initiatives in some provinces to remove principals from the teaching bargaining unit and make them managers rather than instructional leaders suggests the opposite.

As women generally assume the major burden for the household and the family there is a tendency for women to delay applying for a position in educational administration or not to apply at all. The "administrative workplace" has not always been sensitive to those individuals with family responsibilities. Meetings are organized to suit the daily timetable of someone who has a partner at home to keep the household running. When both male and female partners work outside the home, the female tends to do more of the household chores such as purchasing groceries and cooking. Women with young families or heavy household responsibilities hesitate to take on the additional responsibilities of school administration, opting to wait until family responsibilities have lessened. Women administrators, thus, enter the field later than their male counterparts and are therefore considered less experienced. Credit is not given for the skills acquired by running a household and raising a family—skills which are directly related to administration.

Given the above, what are the implications for women who wish to apply for positions of educational leadership? The strategies suggested at the beginning of the article hold good but must be approached with caution. It is important not to fall into the traps flagged by Fine and Gordon, namely to (1) note positive progress in relation to women's futures without sufficient cautionary analysis;

(2) to psychologize structural forces that construct women's lives by offering internal explanations for social conditions; and (3) to promote individualized change strategies wherein women are invited to alter some aspect of the self to transform social arrangements. A review of the New Brunswick School Directories from 1992 through 1996 indicate a slowly growing percentage of women in educational administration overall. However, with the reorganization of the governance of education in New Brunswick the responsibility for hiring has been redirected to Parents' Committees. Members of these committees must be educated to understand and support women in administrative positions. There is a need to change ingrained attitudes that men make the best school administrators.

While it is important to take steps to prepare for administrative positions by adopting suggested strategies it is also important to be aware of the outside forces that impinge on women. When women do not obtain or stay in administrative positions the reasons may well be the outside forces which work, often subtly, to prevent too many women from entering or remaining in the field of educational administration. Departments of education need to do more than throw money at the problem. School districts that hold leadership preparation programs need to encourage women to apply so potential can be identified early. There is a need to be constantly on the alert for biases and undercurrents which must be brought out into the open. It is not enough to teach women the skills and strategies necessary to obtain an administrative position. It is crucial to recognize the inequities in society, the unwritten belief that "men can do it better," and change the systemic biases in the general population as a whole.

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