

Unprincipaled Women: The Saskatchewan Case

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The absence of women in administrative positions within the North American educational system is both statistically striking and professionally disturbing.¹ Although males and females generally enter the teaching profession at the level of classroom teacher, females tend to stay there while males advance rather rapidly to administrative positions within the system. Many reasons are given for this difference in the rate of advancement and for the much larger percentage of male educators who hold administrative positions. Until very recently the popular rationalization for the situation was that males were somehow better suited to become administrators.

With the growing women's movement, this rationale has been challenged and is now generally quite unacceptable. In its place, however, other reasons have emerged: women lack interest and qualifications, and they are reluctant to apply for administrative positions. School boards and administrators suggest that the responsibility for this situation cannot be imputed to them since they cannot appoint women to these posts if women do not make application. In this way, hiring agencies (composed mainly of men) shift the responsibility for the situation to women themselves. They maintain that women and men have equal right to apply for any position in the school system and therefore there is no discrimination against women in education. It is true that few

women apply for administrative posts but to suggest that lack of interest, qualifications and applications are the fundamental causes behind the disproportion of women administrators is somewhat misleading and simplistic.

An examination of the Saskatchewan case reveals some interesting points and may suggest a more logical interpretation of the general North American pattern.² Female teachers in Saskatchewan composed 55.29% of the total teaching force in 1971-72; 56.90% in 1972-73; and 53.58% in 1973-74. The percentage of women from the total male-female teaching force who held administrative positions was 1.98% in 1971-72; 2.2% in 1972-73; and 3.4% in 1973-74. This represents 219, 196 and 204 females in administration respectively for each of the years indicated. On the other hand, though males composed less than 50% of the total education force, the percentage of males (from the total male-female teaching force) holding administrative positions for the same period of time was: 14.8% in 1971-72; 14.52% in 1972-73; and 14.44% in 1973-74. This represents 1432, 1188 and 1454 males in administration respectively for each of the periods indicated. Although these figures show a slight increase in administrative positions held by women, the increase is in no way proportional to the total number of female teachers employed in Saskatchewan.

Furthermore, though males made up less than 50% of the total force over the

three year period 1971-74, 28.96% of all male teachers were in administrative positions in 1971-72; 31.1% in 1972-73; and 28.6% in 1973-74. In contrast to this 3.58% of all female teachers were engaged in administration in 1971-72; 3.85% in 1972-73; and 3.48% in 1973-74. The pattern that emerges is that approximately 30% of all males employed in Saskatchewan education hold administrative positions, while only about 3.5% of all females employed in education hold similar administrative positions.

There is no disputing such disproportionate distribution. What can be examined, however, are some of the reasons given for this discrepancy. Is it true, for example, that women lack interest in administration? If they do, why is this so? There are two usual routes to administrative positions: promotions within the system and holding advanced university degrees in education administration. Since men tend to be channelled into degree programs, it is not surprising to find that proportionally more men than women hold degrees in education administration. However, given the fact that there are more women teachers, presumably women would have the opportunity to advance to senior positions by the within-the-system promotion route. Yet this is not the case. To a large extent the reasons lie in the division of functions between men and women within the school system itself.

It is generally agreed that committee work, the types of positions held on educational executive bodies and the nature of the work required of a teacher when employed in other-than-classroom teaching are all highly significant when determining promotions. If a teacher works on committees that are decision- and policy-making bodies, rather than entertainment- and information-providing bodies, chances are that such a teacher will become more visible to the boards of education, the administration and the interested public. Hence, such a teacher stands a better chance for promotion into administrative ranks. It is commonly accepted and expected that membership on policy-making committees is largely male while membership in social, dead-end, or work-horse types of committees is largely female. The effect is that female teachers are kept very busy but also very invisible to persons who determine promotions. Furthermore, the type of work done in the policy and decision-making committees provides initiation and experience in a certain amount of valuable administrative skills and perceptions. Service on the other committees does not provide the members with the same fringe benefits. Women educators would do well to re-examine the type of committees they work on and the benefits they receive in terms of administrative and policy-making experience.

Another factor that influences the



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within-the-system promotion to high administrative posts is the type of position a teacher holds on educational executive bodies. In the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, women are usually found in the positions of secretary and social convenor, while men hold the positions of president, vice-president and Teachers' Federation councillor. Though women put in an equal amount of work and time in serving as secretary, as men do in serving as president, they are short-changed in terms of promotional advantages. Their positions simply do not have the same promotional value. For example, a large number of Saskatchewan superintendents served as S.T.F. councillors prior to holding important administrative posts. It is not surprising that few women have held this position and it is significant that only twenty-three women have served on the forty executives in the history of the S.T.F.³ Today there is not one woman superintendent in Saskatchewan and the eight new Superintendents named in the fall of 1974 were all male!

Holding positions on lower administrative levels is also important for promotion from within the system. Of the fifty-four Saskatchewan superintendents answering an opinionnaire sent to a total of sixty-six superintendents in the summer of 1974, forty-two stated that they had been principals in small town schools, five were principals in rural areas, three were principals in city schools and four had been employed as vice-principal, department head or

supervisory assistant prior to becoming superintendents. A significant number of superintendents had also served as S.T.F. councillors. All this bears out the value of previous administrative experience for the teacher who chooses the within-the-system route to promotion. Women teachers have little chance for such promotion as seen from the situation presently found in Saskatchewan schools. In 1973-74, there were 388 male and 47 female vice-principals and 182 male and 36 female department heads. Unless more women are promoted to vice-principal and department head in Saskatchewan schools, they are effectively denied access to promotion within-the-system.

The same statistics show a distinct advantage for the male educator. In 1974, for the 85 principal, 30 vice-principal and two department head positions available in 54 superintendencies, approximately 634 males applied as compared with 33 female applicants. Of these 634 male applicants, 58.83% had previous administrative experience whereas, of the 33 female applicants, only 12.12% had such experience. Again this shows that women do not get lower level administrative experience. Thus, incumbent administrators appear to give support to male aspirants rather than to female aspirants when it comes to suggesting committee membership, within-the-system promotion and executive positions. It is pertinent to ask here whether unwritten policy and unexamined sex biases are

significant in determining whether senior positions within the schools are filled by males or females. Although twenty-one of the superintendants who answered the questionnaire stated that their school boards did not require four or more years of professional training for administrative positions, qualified female teachers still did not fare any better than non-qualified female applicants. In short, females, with or without degrees in education administration, did less well than their male counterparts in terms of promotion to the highest rank.

What, then, do qualified and aspiring female teachers do in the schools?

Looking at other-than-classroom teaching positions in Saskatchewan schools, it is found that more women are employed in advisory, non-administrative positions such as art consultants, primary consultants, reading consultants, librarians or co-ordinators of music than as department heads, vice-principals or principals. It is obvious that the opposite is true for male educators. This seems to point to the fact that school boards are more willing to engage women in advisory or consultant capacities than in administrative capacities. Such "feminine" tasks rarely lead to upward mobility within the education system. The foregoing suggests that perhaps the lack of interest in administration on the part of women educators is more a

symptom rather than a cause of a bad situation. Perhaps an apparent lack of interest is the only way women have open to them to express their reaction to the odds against them for promotion to administration. Their attitude may well be an indication of the effectiveness of denying them supportive and promotional channels towards administrative positions within-the-system. It may also point to other factors, outside the scope of this study, such as societal expectations regarding their home responsibilities, marriage roles and career mobility. If male educators experienced the same negative factors, the same frustration of being effectively shut out from certain positions, the same moral sanctions put on them by society regarding home obligations, perhaps they too would be lacking in interest and would not seek positions for which the odds against them are too great.

The Saskatchewan situation is typical of a widespread condition in a profession numerically dominated by women. The time is long over-due for those responsible for appointments to administrative positions in the school system to examine more closely the real reasons for the lack of women applicants. Surely, effective affirmative action to bring the situation into better balance is urgently required.

Footnotes

1. Briefs presented to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women by six Canadian provinces (British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec and Nova Scotia) raised the issue of the high rate of attrition of women in public school administration. See Florence Bird et al., Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada (Ottawa, 1970), pp. 92-93. A similar situation has been documented in the United States. See C.D. Lyon and T.W. Saario, "Women in Public Education: sexual discrimination in promotion," Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. LV, 2 (October, 1973), pp. 120-123.
2. The statistics used in this article were compiled from the Saskatchewan Information Service Bulletins, 1971-73, and the results of a questionnaire and opinionnaire sent out to all Saskatchewan Superintendents in the summer of 1974 by the author.
3. Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation Bulletin, April 15, 1974.