Examining Women in Educational Leadership in the Teaching Profession

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The mandate of the Alberta Teachers’ Association (ATA) Women in Leadership Subcommittee includes research, public awareness and advocacy concerning the high-lights and low-lights of women in educational leadership. This article highlights the results of a needs assessment survey on systemic barriers that impact the entrance and progression of women in educational leadership roles.

To consider the question of underrepresentation of women in educational leadership and the associated status of women within the Alberta teaching profession, the Diversity, Equity, and Human Rights (DEHR) Committee of the ATA created a Women in Leadership (WIL) subcommittee, during the 2018-2019 school year.

The mandate of the subcommittee included the development of a research plan to investigate the experiences and obstacles affecting women in educational leadership in both the Association and public-school jurisdictions. A needs assessment survey was conducted and three major themes were identified: normative gatekeeping, gender stereotyping and work/family balance.

Normative Gatekeeping

Normative gatekeeping refers to the acceptance of a normalized model of leadership and the processes put in place to ensure that the accepted standard for leadership is maintained and replicated (Newton, 2006; Sperandio, 2015; Tallerico, 2000). Bierema (2016) explained that “leadership literature has long been dominated by representation of the ideal leader as an individual who operates within a culture – and value-free space, possesses masculine traits, and is, ideally, male” (p 121). Normative gatekeeping and the reliance on an ideal leader model are evident in the data for this study. Participants identified three ways they experienced normative gatekeeping practices: overrepresentation of men in leadership positions, preferential hiring practices and lack of both formal and informal mentorship opportunities.

For many of the respondents, discrimination based on gender was evident because of the imbalance of the numbers of men and women in positions of leadership in relation to the overall population of teachers. This is evident in the low percentage: approximately 13 percent of women are school superintendents in Alberta. The Association’s senior levels of leadership are similar. The 2019 Provincial Executive council was composed of 19 elected representatives and the Executive Secretary. Of these 19 representatives, 65% were men and 35% were female. Moreover, over the course of its history, the Association has had eight out of 55 or 15% provincial presidents who were female.

Blackmore, Thomson and Barty (2006) conducted a study in which they examined the perception of merit-based hiring processes and procedures for principal selection in Australia; they wrote that “it is evident that something has gone wrong with merit selection to produce such widespread disenchantment with the system” (p 298). The disillusionment referenced was due, in part, to their own finding that there was a clear preference on the part of hiring committees to select candidates who possessed known qualities despite stated goals to increase diversity within the principal leadership group. Blackmore, Thomson and Barty suggest that “the vexed technologies of selection tend to become a ‘reproduction’ model, in which those who do not fit a ‘normalized principal identity’ are excluded. That which is known or familiar can be called homosociability” (p 309). A more recent study from the University of British Columbia (2021) found that women who complete high school with A grades have relatively the same leadership opportunities than men with failing grades.

Even with hard work and proven capabilities women were not able to overcome the systemic barriers in place, such as normative gatekeeping. The qualitative comments of the participants revealed a perception that unfair practices were implemented in hiring for leadership positions in both school jurisdictions and the Association and that the ‘old boys club’ was still impenetrable.

Finally, respondents identified mentoring as a barrier to leadership positions for women. Mentoring is “a highly recognized and accepted strategy for attracting, developing, and sustaining leaders across the education sector and beyond” (Robinson, Horan, and Nanavati, 2009, p. 35). The qualitative data from this survey revealed that respondents identified differential opportunities for mentorship in their own career paths primarily on the basis of gender. Participants responded that women had fewer occasions to access mentorship opportunities. Particularly on an informal basis where they were often excluded, such as sports activities and informal get togethers.

Gender Stereotyping

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights (2014) explained that “a gender stereotype is a generalized
view or preconception about attributes or characteristics that are
or ought to be possessed by women and men or the roles that
are or should be performed by men and women” (para 1). The
Gender Equality Commission of the Council of Europe, in its
Gender Equality Glossary (2016), explained how “stereotypes
about women both result from, and are the cause of, deeply
engrained attitudes, values, norms and prejudices against
women. They are used to justify and maintain the historical
relations of power of men over women as well as sexist attitudes
that hold back the advancement of women.” Participants in
this study identified that gender stereotypes are present and
operating in Alberta school jurisdictions and the Association.
Participants stated that within their contexts, there was a
division of labour based on gender, and pointed out that gender
stereotyping started with the locations where teachers work.
One participant noted, “I think there is an underlying gender
bias when looking at the grade level male and females teach
at. This bias is that female teachers are elementary teachers,
and male teachers are middle school/ high school teachers.”
In other words, female teachers tended to work with younger
students whereas male teachers work with older students.
Drudy (2008) asked students and pre-service teachers why
males did not enter primary school teaching and found “the
perception that primary teaching is a women's job, or that
it relates to a mother's role, was the most frequently offered
explanation by both school students and school teachers for
the low proportion of male entrants to primary teaching” (p
311–12).

Work/Family Balance

“Women with children are expected to work like we don't
have kids and raise children like we don't work. Look at the
statistics. How many teachers are female—how many are in
leadership positions?” (survey respondent quote)

The tension between work life, career progression and family
is one that is well established in the educational literature
and beyond (Bascia and Young 2001; Eagly and Carli 2007;
Grogan and Shakeshaft 2011; Oplatka and Tamir 2009). As
women continue to take on more responsibility outside the
home, the amount of responsibility in the home for women
has not decreased (Loder and Spillane, 2006; Oplatka and
Tamir, 2009). Participants raised several interesting aspects
with respect to childbearing, family obligations and career
progression in relation to discriminatory treatment. While
scholars point to work/family balance as internal barriers to a
woman's career advancement, given that many women still take
on primary responsibility for domestic work at home (Bascia
and Young, 2011; Oplatka and Tamir, 2009), participants also
pointed out that there were aspects to their experiences that
were external in nature. For example, one participant shared
the view that “Women are often not put in roles of leadership
if in child-bearing years. Commitment is questioned,” and
another wrote “I believe that women are consistently passed
over for leadership roles when they are in their 'child-bearing'
years and also when they have young children at home.” Finally,
another participant speculated that “young female teachers
may be passed over for a position (contract) on the basis that
they may become pregnant and request a leave.”

These comments illustrate how a masculine version of the ideal
worker may be inhibiting the career advancement of women in
schools and in the Association. While it may not be explicit in nature
within school jurisdictions or the Association, the perception that
women in their childbearing years are not potential candidates for
leadership positions may have a caustic effect on female teachers
who aspire to educational leadership.

Conclusion

The results from the needs assessment survey have confirmed that
further research is needed into the systemic barriers that impact the
entrance and progression of women in educational leadership roles.
All these elements have been further emphasised by the current
COVID-19 pandemic. In this era, the role of women is rapidly
changing, responsibilities increasing and inequalities becoming more
pronounced. This current lived reality has further reinforced the
inequality already prevalent in today's society. The economic downturn
has been dubbed a she-cession (Lewis, 2020; LeanIn, 2020; Powers,
2020) and the impact on the working lives of women and teachers
is beginning to be documented (Chung, 2020; Promundo, 2019;
United Nations, 2020; Wenham, Smith and Morgan, 2020). The
WIL committee continues to study various factors such as: family
life, caretaking, socio-cultural roles and perceptions, and economics
within the reality of the pandemic.

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