

Learning to Lead: Women School Administrators in Twentieth Century Ontario

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Women have taken an active leadership role in Ontario's education system wherever they have been placed in school systems. Indeed, when one or two room schools dotted the largely rural countryside of Ontario, women teachers often fulfilled the management responsibilities of ensuring registers were correctly completed and the requirements of the Education Act were followed in school practices. In addition, they provided instructional leadership in small community schools and acted as advocates for their students and staff with local school boards. Although all of this leadership activity took place under the supervision of a male inspector, his visits were usually infrequent. Therefore, although they did not receive formal recognition for their administrative work, day to day school leadership was carried out by women teachers who exercised a significant degree of autonomy – albeit under the watchful eye of the community and the local school board.

The post-war period and the second half of the twentieth century was characterized by significant governance shifts. Ontario's education systems were increasingly bureaucratic and hierarchical. The degree of autonomy that women teachers once enjoyed was diminished as rural boards amalgamated, schools consolidated, educational systems became more bureaucratized and status became attached to hierarchical positions that reflected gender norms(1). As Linda (2) noted about her own career:

I was a principal at the end of my career, and at the beginning of my career I was a principal, in a 2-room country school. That's when women were principals, in those days,... they weren't in the latter days...(ACPID041)

Feminist historians (e.g., Prentice, 1977; Oram, 1989; Reiger, 1993) have shown that as bureaucracies in education increased, high status opportunities for women decreased. The historical record shows clearly that as educational organizations became more and more bureaucratized in Ontario, (3) women became increasingly over-represented in teaching positions and men became over-represented in positions of authority in educational bureaucracies – particularly in elementary schools.

Learning to lead, for women in Ontario's schools in the last half of the twentieth century, meant more than gaining the required credentials for assuming the role of principal; it also meant reclaiming a position that had once been theirs. Doing the latter, however, was a process of rethinking socialization as well as strategizing against discriminatory practices that made it more difficult to assume the role of school administrator. The literature on school leadership, however, is not particularly helpful in understanding their experience because it is largely based on a stereotypical male life experience and does not account for historical evidence of the gendering of educational work. As Reynolds (2000) notes much of the "existing work on school leadership has not only been gender blind, it has been rooted in the present and uninformed by historical theory and methods"(9). There has been some very valuable historical work on women administrators in Ontario based on quantitative analysis of archival evidence of the gender distribution of males and females along several variables such as pay scales, years of teaching before becoming a principal and so on (Reynolds, 1983; Small, 1996; Stokes, 1974). This historical research offers intriguing insights for those who have focused primarily on contemporary issues around women in or seeking administrative positions in educational organizations (e.g., Reynolds & Young, 1995; Wallace, 2000, 2002).

The women whose stories are explored in this paper reflect historical accounts of the experience of many women who became school teachers and administrators in the last half of the twentieth century (Reynolds, 1983; Prentice & Theobald, 1991 ; Small, 1996). I

will draw on interviews with twelve women who became administrators in elementary schools in various geographic locations in Ontario. Their teaching and administrative careers spanned the last five decades of the 1900s. They coped with a series of evolving policies and practices, each requiring new administrative skills. The expansion of public schooling in Ontario during the late 1940s and early 1950s was followed by progressivist reforms in education during the early 1960s, and more prescriptive education policies in the 1970s and 1980s. There followed a heightened pace of neo-conservative restructuring in the 1990s. The career aspirations of many of these women were assisted by gender equity employment policy that was implemented in various iterations from the mid-1980s to 1994 and then abandoned totally in formal policy in 1995. The words of the women administrators in this paper reveal how they struggled to make sense of learning to lead using “the concepts and language available to them” (Weiler, 1997, 636) during a period of intense policy change in almost every area of school governance and practice.

Nurse, Teacher, or Secretary?

When the women in this study were asked why they became a teacher, their reasons varied but a significant number recognized that they made their choice based on limited financial resources as well as a limited set of prospects that were deemed appropriate for young women – nurse, teacher, or secretary. As Linda said:

Well I didn't have a great passion or anything to be a teacher. I think it was probably more of a process of elimination, you know, when you're looking for a career, and the cost of university at that particular point in time. So you could have been a nurse, you could have been a stenographer, you could have been a teacher. Teachers college was good because there was no tuition, just getting yourself through the year, and I had to board downtown, okay, and then off to teach, so I think that's probably why. It's not a very good reason, but it worked out all right in the end (ACPID041).

As these young women entered teachers college, however, it became evident to many of them that their career prospects were limited by gender as well. As Alice noted:

I can recall sitting down with a group of women that I was studying with, and there were probably four men in our class at teachers college, and it had just suddenly hit us that all four of those men were going to become principals within about four years, and none of us would. And they weren't top quality students in the class, but we just knew that was going to happen. And some of them, we thought, shouldn't even be in education. So we're sitting there going: "Wow, this isn't what I thought it was going to be...." [We knew they would become principals] by the way they were treated, and having been out to teach in a few schools, we had already seen that all the young men had those positions and none of the women did. It was written on the wall (ACPID115).

Of course, for other women, these limited options in both career choices and career possibilities were congruent with the expectations to which they had been socialized. First, because women's career choices were limited, many of the women had mothers, aunts, and grandmothers who had also been teachers – a preferred career choice. For example, when asked why she became a teacher, Cathy responded:

Well, I really don't think I had any choice. My mother was a teacher, my grandparents were teachers, I'm a fifth generation teacher, so it was in my blood, and I never really seriously thought of doing anything else. It just seemed to be the natural, normal thing to do. The first lesson I ever taught at teachers college, my first lesson, I just felt at home. I mean that was where I belonged (ACPID078).

Combining Public and Private Responsibilities

In addition to the generational norms and societal expectations that provided powerful motivation for many young women to become teachers, many were attracted to teaching because of its accommodation to their home responsibilities. First, the work of teaching was organized

around an agrarian work cycle, which was particularly helpful to women who wished to help on their family's farm during the summer months. It was also a career that enabled fulfilment of another societal expectation – that women would marry and become mothers who would provide primary childcare at home. Of course, the marriage bar and an expectation that women would leave teaching before their pregnancy began to show banished many women from their classrooms but, once their children were in school, many women teachers taught during the school year(4) and stayed at home and cared for their children during the summer vacation. As a result, these women saw teaching as a practical choice. It enabled them to have a career that would not interfere inordinately with their private responsibilities. It was Linda's impression, for example, that,

Women went [to teachers college] as a temporary measure until they got pregnant. They didn't go in as a career teacher. And probably I didn't either. I mean, I probably expected to get married and have children and quit at some time. I did get married but I never had the children (ACPID041).

Perceptions of the interlocking demands of women's public and private lives not only shaped their own expectations for their teaching career but also the expectations of others who were in a position to act as gatekeepers for women's careers. As noted above, women's lives did not always follow the expected trajectory of marriage and children; women did not always marry, nor did they all have children. Even if they did, women were often willing to combine their family and career responsibilities, including administration. Yet, opportunities for advancement were constructed by a male career pattern with little, if any, accommodation for the ways in which many women's lives were constructed. For example, Linda had decided that she was ready to move into administration but found that the qualifying principals' courses were a major obstacle.

Okay [I thought to myself] so now what do I do? I'm a teacher and I now have some time and the resources to devote to my career, which I think with women with families was much more difficult – particularly, for example, taking the principal's

qualifications in those days. The courses were two summers and you had to live in residence. Well, how many women could go away for two years and live in residence when they had a family?(ACPID041)

Clearing the Credentialling Hurdles

Even if they were able to accommodate the demands of the courses, the process for getting into the courses was clearly discriminatory against women. For example, Linda revealed that she and three other women wanted to be considered for admission to the courses, but their board was allocated only one spot for Part I and one spot for Part II. The spots were filled following an interview process that was conducted by an all male panel; not surprisingly, only male candidates were chosen. Judith, who was a committed feminist and activist on behalf of women in educational organizations, found it very difficult to move beyond these barriers. She tells this story of persistence in realizing her goal to become an educational administrator.

I put an application in every year for thirteen years [to be chosen for the principal's course] but I worked much more strongly behind the scenes to change the system. I was aware that I would likely not be in the first group to get through. I mean I had read enough studies to realize that ... The Federation produced a filmstrip called "The Story of O" – I don't know whether you've ever seen it – and it's about how women...the men are all Xs and the woman is an O and she tries to make herself into an X in order to be accepted into the group. And that was so true then. The only women who were accepted were those who acted like the men or who were trophies. You know, who made the coffee and, you know, said "You're so clever." And so those patterns were so clear to me(ACPID023).

Judith had a clear sense of the systemic discrimination she experienced and worked to change unfair hiring practices by strategizing through board trustees and the women's federation at the local and provincial level. However, some women provided little evidence that

they understood the nature of the systemic bias they had experienced, even as they described it. For example, Brenda's lengthy journey to the principalship, included thirty-three years as a teacher, brief stints as a principal, and several years as a curriculum consultant before becoming a principal again. Her daily routine while a principal included finishing her day by ensuring that the casserole for the next night's family meal was ready, lunches were made, and laundry and other tasks done for her husband and four children. Yet she claimed that nothing had ever stopped her from achieving her career goals. When asked whether she believed women administrators were disadvantaged in any way by their sex, she remonstrated,

I often hear women teachers saying that we have not had a fair shake. But I always said to them, any time that I ever wanted to make the next move up the ladder, I never had anyone try to stop me. When I applied for principal, it was two men and myself. ... And I thought to myself, those two men had both been V.P.s and I had been a curriculum program person. So I thought there was no way. Well, who got the job? I did. I said, why do you feel men have stepped over us? I didn't feel that way. Any time I wanted to make a move, I made it and I never had any man step in my way to prevent me from getting to where I wanted to go (ACPID076).

While Brenda denied any consciousness of her "otherness" as a woman in a role largely occupied by men, she also lacked consciousness of the ways her own socialization undervalued the superior skills she brought to her work as a school administrator. That is, she valued the work of educators in positions of added responsibility based on gender norms. She saw her work as a consultant, most typically done by females, as less valuable than the work of vice-principals that is more typically done by males. She may have been simply acknowledging the usual progression through hierarchical positions in educational bureaucracies but remained blind to the ways in which women are disproportionately placed outside the usual routes that males followed to promotion. In addition, she made several references to the ways in which her husband made room for her career but ignored the obvious inference

that he was in a position to block her career goals if he chose to do so. Despite her protestations, then, the power remained firmly in the hands of Brenda's marriage partner and her male peers to make room for or close ranks against her. Other narrators recognized this. As Judith commented:

Even in our best years, there was never any doubt that the power was in the hands of the key men. Never. So I think that never changed. I also saw very clearly that whenever larger numbers of women became principals – and I was of course witness to the discussion around the table that dealt with this – it was quite common for men to say at the table and on appointments, you know, “We don’t want a woman in that school. She can’t handle that.” There were very few women who were ever seen as strong enough to handle a tough school. So I don’t think there were any advantages – there were never any advantages for women to move up quicker. (ACPID023).

The Old Boys’ Club

Among the disadvantages to “moving up” experienced by the women was what is often referred to as “the old boys’ club”: that is, men acting on behalf of other men to ensure access to both the informal and formal networks of privilege. The organization of formal programs required to become a principal in Ontario, as well as the informal organization of social relationships, privileged male gender norms and acted as deterrents to women who wished to become principals. For example, Cate and Meg both talked about the informal networks of power that were forged on educators’ sports teams that were not open to women. Cate recounts,

It was a big joke that the next in line to be a vice-principal was all decided at the Thursday night basketball games. I used to jokingly ask to be included in the basketball games and then they started moving them from school to school, so I used to joke with them and say, “I know why you’re moving them...it’s because you don’t want me to find out where they are, so that I can go (ACPID067).

Meg describes how the “old-timers” hockey team served the same exclusionary function in her community.

The male teachers had an old timers hockey team....Once you were thirty-five – and that was kind of, you know, the expanding years of your career – and you had to be thirty-five to play on the team. So a lot of the male teachers played on the team and that was almost like a proving ground to becoming principals and vice-principals. Many, many people who became principals and vice-principals in this board played on that team. I'm looking at into the late 1980s, that's how it was (ACPID030).

Both women lost out on administrative positions to less qualified male colleagues who were an active part of the informal networks forged on these sports teams. In fact, Meg was overlooked so often by a board that blatantly promoted men over more qualified women, she finally lodged a grievance that was supported by the Federation of Women Teachers' Association of Ontario (FWTAO). The board agreed that Meg was well qualified and had been an outstanding candidate in each interview, but her recent involvement as the local federation president – one of the few leadership positions open to women while there was a women teachers' federation – had soured her relationship with the board resulting in her being placed very low in subsequent competitions for administrative positions. By the time her case was decided in her favour, she was thoroughly disenchanted with her board's actions as well as the education policies introduced by the Mike Harris government of Ontario and decided to take an early retirement.

FWTAO Leadership – Pro and Con

While Meg's story did not end happily, it also points to the ways in which women have acted strategically to improve their career opportunities. For many women, their aspirations to become a school principal were improved by the work of the Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario who provided mentoring programs for women who might be considering administrative work. For example, Ann recalls that after she and three other women became principals, many of the FWTAO locals that were situated relatively close by asked

them to provide mentoring workshops.

We did lots of interviews with the applicants and really worked with them. We would videotape their interview and they had to be dressed the way they would for an interview. They'd come in and we had a very serious interview with them ... and then we would give them the videotape and they'd go home and look at it and they'd think, "Oh my goodness." You know, we would tell them what we saw and then they would see it themselves. ... And they would have Federation meetings and they would have us come to try and encourage people. We would tell them funny stories that happened in administration...that sort of thing (ACPID032).

In addition to mentoring opportunities, FWTAO actively lobbied against discriminatory practices that were preventing women from attaining access to principals' qualifications programs. Alice recalls the work of one president of an FWTAO local who ensured that she had an opportunity to become qualified for a principal's position.

In the late '70s, up to the late '70s, to get into the principal's course you had to go through a screening process in your board, okay? It wasn't just, okay, here's the course ... It was something that the Federation was looking into, because it was, you know, the old boys network or whatever, and women didn't have mentors then and whatever and they weren't really, didn't have access to all the networking that men did. So there's a gal ... who was the president of [board name] Women Teachers' Association, and she, along with her director of education, lobbied the government and got a course opened up, a principal's course, for anybody who wanted to sign up. No screening from the board. It was offered if you had certain qualifications, criteria that they set ...They anticipated 400 people, they got 1400. I guess I was president of WTA here in [board name] and I was encouraging our members to go and somebody said to me, "Well, aren't you going? Aren't you setting the example by going?" And I said, "Well, I'm sort of busy." "You should go." So I went. [Laughter] (ACPID225).

Many of the women interviewed for this paper also applauded FWTAO's mentorship as they sought administrative positions and its strategic action in lobbying for gender equity employment policy. However, as Meg's experience demonstrates, taking on a position as an executive member of the FWTAO could also lead to direct recriminations. This could happen to women who had taken an unpopular stand with the board. Hannah found herself in just such a position and remembered that one superintendent went out of his way to ensure she received that message after she fought for a particularly unpopular position.

I don't know whether the attitude is still there today, but I found the attitude of the administration, especially the local boards, towards women that were very engaged in federation work, was very anti-assisting a teacher, if she wanted a promotion, for example. And the ... teachers gave up on [a particular issue] and I was the one that fought it like crazy. And then one day I bumped into our personnel superintendent down in the hallway of a school I was going to for a meeting. I said good afternoon to him, he looked at me and he stopped dead and pointed his finger at me and said, "You – you were the one that was upset over [issue deleted]." He said, "If you're looking for a position of responsibility, you'll get one over my dead body." That's the exact words I got, so I knew it was no use me even applying for a position of responsibility (ACPID129) .

Acts of exclusion, discrimination and even direct coercion, like the incident described by Hannah, were troubling but these women learned to move on towards their goals in most cases. As Cate's female superintendent advised when a much less qualified man was chosen for a principal's position for which Cate had interviewed: "This is what happens. You just have to grit your teeth and move on." Cate continues, "And so [I did and] the next Christmas, I got my principalship" (ACPID067).

Gritting Your Teeth and Moving On

While Cate's story demonstrates that there were obvious disadvantages to being a woman in hierarchies organized around male interests and social bonds, once each participant became a principal, she set about working to put into place the education reforms to which she was committed despite male and female resistance in her school, community, and/or board of education. Many women pursued pedagogical issues that were of passionate concern to them during their graduate education. For example, Judith had taken a very unpopular position against corporal punishment early in her career in Canada and pursued the issue of control and punishment in educational settings in her graduate work. She also worked to enhance standards of pedagogical practice at both the elementary and secondary level in her role as a superintendent. Brenda focused her graduate research work on the collaborative model of leadership that she developed based on her work as a principal.

In addition to pedagogical issues, some women used their position to draw attention to issues of social justice for women. For example, Cate, although not abused herself, was very active in working with the FWTAO on developing information programs and brochures to develop awareness around woman abuse. Some spoke out about sexual harassment against students and staff rather than turn a blind eye to inappropriate behaviour from colleagues. For example, Susan recalled a situation in which the inappropriate sexual behaviour of another principal had been tolerated by his male colleagues until she spoke up.

Our principal had even mentioned his concern to me about this chap and some of the young lady teachers on the staff but he didn't speak up. No one spoke up, so I did. There was dead silence (ACPID093).

Susan could not remember her exact words.

I'm sure I would not be as brutal as to say, "We have enough tom cats around" but you know, I mean, I made some suggestio that I didn't think we needed that type of person as a principal and no one said a word and then one of the other principals spoke up and agreed with me. Now, I wouldn't have expected him to so then other people spoke up and agreed with me. Now, I wouldn't have

expected him to so then other people spoke up. The man did not go on the principals' course but a short time later, he was down at the Board actually as a consultant and a short time later, I heard that he had been caught on the back stairs with one of the secretaries in a compromising position.(ACPID093)

Incidents like this one illustrate that, although inappropriate behaviour has continued, the silence around it was broken and eventually sexual harassment policies became the norm in educational organizations.

Viewing Women's Administrative Work

While all of the women who were interviewed for this paper were more or less conscious of various degrees of resistance to their presence as a school or board administrator, they often chose to work both inside and outside the system to accomplish better educational outcomes for children. Meg, who is very recently retired, is looking for ways to continue working on her interest in curriculum development. Brenda, who had been a curriculum consultant for many years, applied her experience to the context of her school when she became principal. Her work as an instructional leader was acknowledged as highly effective by her board and academic researchers. Speaking about her leadership goals, she says,

Well, [my work as a program consultant] helped me so much when I became a principal. I knew what should be happening at the various levels because I had written the curriculum that they were using. So I knew what to expect, and so, once a month, I met with my teachers and we planned where they were going, what they were doing, etc. and that was incorporated into a large study at OISE. They'd come up, a team, to the school and they did an interview with a lot of the teachers about that very communication aspect that was going on. Because I find that's what the teachers need is the principal to sit down with them and talk about the curriculum individually and I found time once a month to do that (ACPID076)

There are two aspects to Brenda's description of her practice that are particularly interesting in light of comments made by the other participants: first, Brenda described some of the emotional labour that

many women invest in their work and second, the work is recognized as significant to women and by women.

Blackmore (1996) has drawn attention to the ways in which women are often positioned as emotional labourers by organizations experiencing restructuring. As more and more women became administrators throughout the 1980s, there was a concomitant increase in educational change (Gidney, 1999) during the 1980s and especially in the 1990s. No doubt the transitions were eased for many teachers by the nurturing role that many of these women fulfilled in their schools, as well as the high level of instructional expertise they brought with them to their role as principal. These women administrators were able to mitigate the resistance to change for the organization.

However, these same qualities were a double-edged sword for women principals at the board level. Judith, who spent several years as a superintendent of a large urban board in Ontario, was able to comment on the ways in which women were both included and excluded from the work of board committees because of her perspective from the upper levels of the hierarchy of her educational organization. She observed that:

Women tended to be excluded from key committees back in the 1970s and 1980s. And that started to open up and as it opened up, I could see that women had been chosen to be there because of those kinds of skills (being able to bring to consensus, etc.) and it would be on what I would call key board committees. It was a combination of their communication, interactive skills but also their task skills. The women on the whole were better writers, more focused on task, they would get things done. Having said that, the principals' associations within the boards -- very seldom did women have a look in on those, very seldom. The men controlled it (ACPID023).

Still, as Meg put it, many women "filled in the gaps" where they existed and got on with the work that needed doing to enhance learning opportunities for students in their schools.

“Girls Just Gotta Have Fun...”

The women in this study who became administrators clearly had challenges in both becoming and then being school principals. While some had little time for much more than their home and school responsibilities, many found support and just plain fun in their friendships – particularly with other women. For many, the women teachers with whom they began their careers remained lifelong friends. However, because of the particular professional responsibilities of school principals for whom confidentiality was an essential quality, close friendships between female principals were of great importance. For example, as more women became school principals in Cate and Ann’s board, they formed an informal group that met regularly for support as well as stress release. As Cate says:

We’ve been very supportive of each other, and I think that’s what’s helped us get through. We’d go off for a weekend and we had this pact; we were sworn to secrecy and we just let our hair down and complained about everything and got it off our chest,... and then we’d go back to it (ACPID067).

Ann relates that she found having other female administrators to whom she could go for advice was important to her.

It’s easier to admit to your female friend that you’re having problems with one of your teachers and you don’t know what to do about it, than to admit that to a man. It’s much easier. And you know that they’re going to give you honest advice too. And they’re going to admit that they have the same problem too whereas sometimes the men, oh, they’ve never had that problem. [Laughter]. You know. So it just seemed that they’re more honest with you, I think (ACPID032).

On the other hand, while some men were reluctant to share professional knowledge with women administrators, narrators reported that others were supportive of their female colleagues and often gave valuable advice. They also sought advice from women who had often spent many years as curriculum consultants, specialists in special education, or instructional leaders in their school system before moving into position

of school administration.

Being A Woman in A Man's – and Woman's – World

While many women found support from female colleagues, they also found their private lives open to unwelcome scrutiny from those from whom they expected support. For example, some participants who were married with children experienced not only male, but also female resistance to women moving into administrative positions – particularly in the 1960s and 70s. Resistance was expressed by women who were married with children, but particularly from women who were single or married and did not have children. Bronwyn for example, said,

I can remember at the time they were doing equal rights and programs for women to make us equal, women teachers would fill in these forms and say, "Oh well, it's all right for Bronwyn and [another female administrator] to do thus and so because they have husbands at home doing everything." We were really looked down on because our husbands were supportive. I got more support from men principals and from men than I did from women. Women were always [pause] maybe not jealous but they just didn't like the idea They thought there was something amiss or missing in me because I was working ahead on the administrative side of education (ACPID255).

Bronwyn's words are mirrored by Judith, who remarked:

Women didn't talk to each other about these kinds of things. In fact there was a competitiveness in the 1960s when I entered the profession and that was the whole 1950s women's stuff: "Look at her. She thinks she can have a family and a career." So women of that generation felt that they had made a choice [not to have a family] and so there was resentment and competitiveness ... 'How dare you think you can have it all?'(ACPID255).

The resentment and competitiveness between women that Judith described was not particularly surprising, however, since their roles were shifting significantly as a result of pressures from economic and

demographic shifts, wide availability of the birth control pill, and the emergence of second wave feminism.

Whether single or married, however, women occupied a complex location as they took their place in what had become the man's world of school administration. Judith describes the resulting pressure to maintain high standards in both her public and private life and an equal pressure to subsume her private concerns to her public responsibilities because of the perception that she should succeed on male terms.

I think the fact that you have children, that you have family responsibilities, I think that that's always a bit of a challenge. I think that what most women do, in my observation, is that we go overboard. We try never to compromise, you know, and have anyone say, "Oh well, she slipped off early or she stayed home because her kid was sick" or whatever. And I think I went overboard the other way. You know, when I was pregnant, making sure I worked every duty I was supposed to work and so on. ... But I think that women are vulnerable on standards in those two areas: one is the sexual innuendo, the flirty stuff and the other is family responsibilities (ACPID255).

The convergence of "the flirty stuff" and the need to succeed in a man's world was particularly problematic for single women. As Lauren remarked:

You just simply had to be on your toes constantly. You had to be ready with good ideas, you had to be a good listener, and you also had to go out for a drink with the boys now and again. That's the reality of it. And with men like [name of male colleague] around, you also had to develop a good right punch [Laughter](ACPID050)

Linda also talked about the difficulties of learning how to be a school leader in a man's world.

It's funny you know, because I thought as females, we kind of think we're a people-person. And that we would be softer. I think my staff perceived me as more abrasive than men, and some of the other female administrators. And I think it was because in the early days, we were trying to adopt men's characteristics, and if we had been our true selves, we would

have been perceived as being soft. So, for example, in terms of dress, I can remember buying suits from Harry Rosen's in Toronto, and you wouldn't... when you went to principal's meetings, you always wore a suit. Whereas by the end of my career we were dressing a little softer in dresses. So there was a formality about us probably, that the men didn't have....I think it was because we were trying to be like men (ACPID041).

As Linda suggests, both being like a man and “leading like a woman” were concepts fraught with difficulties. Many women felt that dressing, acting, and leading “like a man” was necessary in order to command respect from other school principals – mostly male – as well as their own school staff and community, but it left them feeling uncomfortable in their own bodies. On the other hand, presenting oneself in a way that was congruent with one’s socialization as a woman meant that many women were trivialized or sexualized among male colleagues. Either option is troubling for another reason as well: conformity of a particular way of being male or female constrains possibilities for non-traditional men and women in roles of school leadership.

Learning to Lead: A Summary

Learning to lead, as the women whose stories are explored in this paper exemplify, has been a complex process for women in twentieth century Ontario. Women’s leadership was displaced by the bureaucratization of school systems for which credentialized leadership was required in increasingly hierarchical school systems. Mostly male gatekeepers put significant barriers in the way of women who wished to become school administrators by imposing quota systems and programs that were organized around male norms. Women often accepted these limitations as congruent with their own understanding of their family responsibilities. However, many women questioned these arrangements of gendered privilege and acted individually and collectively to challenge barriers to their desire to become school principals.

The women in this study worked within and against their socialization in quite complex ways. Women, like Judith and Lauren, who became administrators before gender equity employment policy, recognized the discriminatory barriers that stood in the way of women becoming school administrators and fought to open up opportunities for themselves and other women by working with FWTAO and within their

own boards. Cate and Meg continued that work through FWTAO and personal strategic action and persistence after gender equity employment policy was implemented. Other women, like Bronwyn and Brenda, however, seemed unaware or would not acknowledge that being a woman made a difference in administration. Instead, they worked within traditional gender roles and moved into school administration with some reluctance only as male mentors offered opportunities for them to do so.

Whatever route was taken to administration, women have reshaped the educational environment through both formal and informal positions of leadership. Each of the women in this study worked very hard to improve educational opportunities for students. Their stories are ones of persistence no matter what their location within the hierarchy or their perception of that position as gendered. As Giddens (1979) suggests, organizations not only shape agents within them, but those agents also reshape the organization. The women in this study were part of the process of reclaiming school leadership for women. As they did so, they reshaped their educational organizations for the benefit of students, staffs, and the women who have come after them through persistence, patience, and in some cases, strategic political action.

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Endnotes

1. Historical evidence reveals (Small, 1996) that in 1917, 48.6% of principals in Ontario were female – very close to the “goal” of 50% set in employment equity policy in the 1980s. However, by 1968 only 22.9 % of female educators were principals and women educators were strategizing once again to raise their representation in administrative roles.
2. Ethical guidelines require anonymity for participants in this study. Instead, pseudonyms will be used and identification numbers noted to verify the authenticity of quotes used throughout this paper.
3. I am referring specifically to Ontario, however, this same phenomenon has been documented in many other jurisdictions as well.
4. Many of the women interviewed for this project continued to work after marriage and some continued teaching well into the second and even third trimester of their pregnancy, depending on the demands of the marketplace. In locations where it was difficult to attract teachers or if few men were applying for teaching positions because more lucrative opportunities existed elsewhere, women who wanted or needed to continue teaching were able to do so, despite employment practices that discriminated against married women.

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