Leadership and gender: Conclusions drawn from Wildrose School

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ABSTRACT: In this article, I present the findings of a single-site case study which examined the role of gender in constituent group perceptions of effective female leadership. First, a brief description of the Wildrose School community context is presented followed by an overview of relevant literature on female leadership. The emergent themes regarding the principal leadership in Wildrose School are then given. These include the importance of relationships, the role of self-awareness in leadership, and the life of a leader. Finally, the impact of gender on perceptions of leadership efficacy and success are discussed.

In this article, I present the findings of a study I conducted (Burns, 2001) which examined the perceived connection between leadership and gender as described by various constituent groups associated with Wildrose School and its principal, Violet. Located in a large western Canadian city, this school served an ethnically diverse, socio-economically disadvantaged community and, consequently, faced all of the numerous challenges presented by poverty and diversity. Following a brief description of the Wildrose School community and the urban leadership context, I will present an overview of the literature on gender and educational leadership which both prompted and under-girded this study. The perceptions of Violet’s leadership held by those in direct contact with the school, particularly teachers, students, parents, colleagues, and central office administrators will then be presented. The intersection of leadership and gender is then examined as it applies to Violet and her leadership of Wildrose School. Finally, implications for further study are examined.

The Wildrose School Community Context

Violet, the principal of Wildrose School, acted within an urban leadership context. This context is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, one that faces all of the challenges of leadership along with those presented by poverty and diversity. As well as experiencing poverty and all of the effects of poverty, those working within Wildrose School also dealt with cultural and linguistic diversity, minimal parental involvement, and exceptionally high rates of student transience (Burns, 2001). Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, and Lee (1982) comment on the impact of such community factors, noting socioeconomic status of the parents and students, geographic features, parental expectations, and available community support as salient features in the discussion surrounding the context of leadership. The overwhelming significance of community context on leadership is also recognized by many others (e.g., Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Hallinger & Leithwood, 1998; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). It was within this important context that I sought to understand the intersection of perceived leadership efficacy and principal gender.

Relationship to the Literature on Female Leadership

The majority of research on gender and leadership has concentrated on comparing female leaders to the male experience. Three themes became apparent when examining the literature on this topic, beginning with the comparison of women to existing, primarily male-dominated theories and socially constructed gender stereotypes. Also evident in the literature were those studies which simply compared female leaders to male leaders. Finally, female leaders were examined with regard to their experiences around power.

Comparison to Theory and Gender Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes, and their application to the female sex, were generally acquired at a very young age. Coleman (1996) notes that, due to childhood socialization and the labeling of certain psychological characteristics “as either ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ means that sex-role identities and expectations tend to be formulated on the basis of these attributes” (p. 165). Indeed, Gray (1993) developed lists of gender paradigms. Included within the nurturing, feminine
paradigm were the attributes of caring, creative, intuitive, aware of individual differences, non-competitive, tolerant, subjective, and informal. The defensive, aggressive, masculine paradigm, on the other hand, included those who were highly regulated, conformist, normative, competitive, evaluative, disciplined, objective, and formal.

Coleman (1996), using the gender paradigms created by Gray (1993), attempted to dispel the myth that management was essentially a masculine concept “despite the tentative links made between effective management of schools and what might be termed ‘feminine’ styles of management” (p. 163). She found that female head teachers exercised a management style that involved maintaining relations with others, being caring, informal and less concerned with the acquisition of power and authority.

Also a common feature of the literature surrounding women and leadership were comparative studies featuring women’s leadership behaviours and traditional leadership theories. Collaborative leadership, akin to participatory leadership, was one often associated with female leadership (e.g., Hargreaves, 1992; Shantz, 1993). Hargreaves (1992) described collaborative cultures as having “deeply ‘feminine’ characteristics to them, particularly their spontaneous, evolutionary, and unpredictable natures. They intermixed the private and public, openly placing teachers’ work in the context of their wider lives, biographies and purposes” (p. 235), as opposed to “contrived collegiality” which was considered a more masculine phenomenon. This perception of collegiality was also discussed by Funk (2004) who noted that:

by utilizing their unique strengths, including collaborative and transformation leadership, a focus on curriculum and instruction, inclusion of all clienteles in decision-making, empowerment of teachers, students, and parents, and articulation of new visions of what schools should be, female leaders of public schools and school districts could make the difference needed to ensure successful changes in education. (p.2)

Funk continued on to discuss the repeated underutilization of female public school and school board leaders in Texas, leading to missed opportunities for school reform offered by female leadership in particular.

Bolman and Deal (1992) compared gender to the four leadership frames: the human resource frame, the structural frame, the political frame and the symbolic frame. They found women to be more aptly suited to all four frames, leading them to conclude that “under representation of women in school administration is not a function of their inability to do the job” (p. 328). Leithwood, Begley and Cousins (1990) found women to be more involved in instructional leadership than in the management tasks traditionally held for men, while in a comparison of symbolic versus technical leadership, Reed, Smith and Beekley (1997) found women to be more symbolic and attentive to relationships than their male counterparts. Finally, Eagly, Karau and Johnson (1992), in a meta-analysis of fifty studies relevant to gender and leadership style, compared female leaders to three aspects of leadership style consisting of interpersonal orientation, task orientation, and democratic versus autocratic leadership style. The compilation of results suggested that female leaders were both more democratic and more task-oriented than their male counterparts. However, this finding was tempered with a warning to treat these statements with caution as it was also found that individuals often differed from the expected stereotype. Findings were also unable to suggest superiority of one gender over another due to the small variance in numerical results in all categories.

Comparison of Female Leader Behaviours to Male Leader Behaviours

Much of the literature studied in this area promoted the concept of superiority of one gender over the other (e.g., Helgesen, 1995; Shakeshaft, 1989). For example, women have been termed more cooperative, collaborative, and more dedicated to teambuilding than their male associates (e.g., Hargreaves, 1992; Rosener, 1990; Rossler, 1992). Similarly, Shakeshaft (1989) found that women “intervene more than men, they evaluate student progress more often, and they manage more orderly schools. Women demonstrate, more often than men, the kinds of behaviour that promote achievement and learning, as well as high morale and commitment by staffs” (p. 20).

Another collection of literature, however, did not state superiority but merely delineated differences (e.g., Coleman, 1996; Gougeon, 1995; Helgesen, 1990). Helgesen (1990) drew on the work of Mintzberg (1968) to compare the leadership styles of the men in Mintzberg’s study to the executive women in her study. Comparisons were made, noting many differences, but no value judgment accompanied those discrepancies. Eagly, Karau and Johnson (1992), while stating that women were more democratic and task-oriented than men, urged the reader to treat the findings with caution, going so far as to say that within the fifty studies analyzed, “it would be premature to argue that the sex differences demonstrated by the study review manifest themselves in superior administrative performance by one or the other” (p. 94). Differences, again, were simply named and the temptation to pass judgment was resisted.

Female Leaders and their Experiences with Power
Literature of this type generally looked at two aspects of women’s relations with power: power as a tool to be used and power as a structure that inhibits. The first of these examined how women used power to navigate the field of leadership (e.g., Pashiardis, 1997; Rees, 1999). Marshall (1984) examined the numerous ways in which women used power by presenting a model utilizing three dimensions including power over, power through and power with. Power over others reflected the traditional, hierarchical power structure, placing importance on reward and sanction, while structural power placed authority in a high-profile position such as the principalship. Power through others saw women using facilitation to enact organizational goals. There were criticisms of this power dimension, notably that it appeared to be a malevolent form of power over others, using manipulation to ensure certain goals were met (Young, 1994). Finally, power with others and personal power encouraged empowerment, collaboration, and self-reflectivity. Power with others was described by Perreault (2005) in her model of leadership as friendship. Central to her conception of the leader-follower relationship was the authentic exchange of ideas and vision for the organization. “The relationship of leaders and followers is not one of general-troop, parent-child, or manager-subordinate, but of friend-to-friend engaged in genuine dialogue. Leaders and followers together comprise the leadership relationship” (p. 3). In describing the leadership relationship as friendship, Perreault situated female leadership as one of respect, participation, and optimism. These dimensions of leadership served to illustrate well how women might function within the typically male-dominated landscape of leadership theory and practice.

Research in this area also served to examine how women have been hindered by the existing power structures inherent in many organizations, including the area of school leadership (e.g., Gupton & Slick, 1996; Reynolds, 1998; Wilson, 1997). Gill (1995) discussed female administrators in New Brunswick, noting that while many of the women felt there were no barriers to them personally, situations did exist which might “work against their obtaining a position or functioning effectively in an administrative position” (p. 56). Included in these situations were the need to take university courses, the perceived need for networking, and the perception of administration as a male profession. In response to situations such as those cited above, Rusch (2004) proposed the implementation and adoption of critical reflection as a means of treating areas of injustice as “valued puzzles and unposed questions” (p. 44) by critically examining the pockets of contention. “To expand a complex discourse that has serious ramifications for our youngest and most vulnerable citizens, faculty must intentionally agree to experience a fault line, to engage in a discourse where she or he may feel like strangers” (p. 44). From critical reflection would come the knowledge that would drive forward an agenda of resistance and change.

**Methods**

This study utilized an instrumental, single-site, case study design (Stake, 2000), that site being the leadership of one female principal working within the bounded system of one urban, high needs elementary school. Interview data were collected over a three month period using focus group interviews with students and one-on-one, narrative interviews with teachers, parents, head office personnel, and Violet herself. They were then analyzed thematically, providing a detailed and personal view of Violet’s leadership and the role gender plays in the perceptions of her leadership efficacy.

**Data Analysis**

Thematic interpretation was carried in two ways. First, all interview transcripts were examined for repetition of common themes. NUD*IST, which stands for non-numerical, unstructured data indexing, searching, and theorizing (Creswell, 1998, p. 157), a computer program designed to assist with qualitative data analysis, was then employed to deepen the recognition and understanding of categorical aggregations and thematic patterns not already recognized. The aim of this qualitative data analysis program was to calculate the frequency of repeating words and phrases. While helpful, I found that it was my own examination of the data that produced for me the clearest picture of Violet's leadership.

Thematic interpretation was employed to develop naturalistic generalizations (Stake, 1995) as much as was possible given the inherent limitations to generalizability of the case study design. Thematic interpretation provided me with the opportunity to seek out patterns of instances from which I was then able to develop a framework characterizing Violet's leadership in Wildrose School. All interpretations were made while keeping in mind the importance of gender, social context and the social construction of leadership as tenets of the study.
Participants

Participants in the study belonged to six groups: the principal, teachers, students, parents, the current area superintendent, and, finally, the retired area superintendent. The first participant, the principal, Violet, was chosen based on her gender, her administrative assignment, her reputation of efficacy in the school division, and her willingness and excitement to participate. Teachers, and this included the assistant principal, were also approached for interviews and were chosen based on gender, teaching assignment, and years of experience. I sought a balance between men and women, between experienced and inexperienced, and between those teaching kindergarten to grade three and those teaching grades four to six. Only three of the sixteen full- and part-time teachers were men, however. Notably, they held the positions of assistant principal, physical education teacher, and grade five/six teacher, an interesting statement on the roles of gender in this school.

Students, parents, and the past and present area superintendents were also invited to share their perceptions and their stories regarding Violet. While the students were interviewed in small focus groups of five to six, thereby making them more comfortable and willing to share their impressions, I met with the parents and division personnel individually. I found it particularly difficult to elicit interest in this study from the parents, and did, eventually, interview two women and one man, all of whom were members of the parent council. Only speculations as to the possible explanation for the lack of parent interest were possible, though it should be noted that low levels of parental involvement were a historical fact in this school.

Process

Two primary questions were developed to anchor this case study. These were, first, what are the constituent group perceptions of effective female leadership within an economically disadvantaged, ethnoculturally diverse, urban elementary school? Second, does the gender of the principal play a role in shaping these perceptions? To answer these questions, the various constituent groups already mentioned were interviewed by me in the school setting. Each participant was encouraged to share, in a relatively free-flowing, non-structured way, their stories and impressions regarding Violet and her leadership. These interview transcripts were then analyzed thematically, allowing me to paint a picture of Violet's leadership in Wildrose School and, consequently, to look for patterns regarding both leadership in this challenging context as well as influences of gender upon perceived leadership practices and abilities.

Emergent Themes

Violet was perceived to be a very effective leader by the constituent group members of Wildrose School. Three particular themes arose which were seen to be especially important to those interviewed, including her superior ability to build and maintain relationships, her self-awareness, and her life as a leader.

Relationships

“The sticky parts and the messy parts [of relationships], to me are the parts where people learn how to be in the world so I want to dwell more in those messy and sticky bits” (Burns, 2001, p. 63). Within the theme of relationships, Violet was seen to be one who preserved the dignity of those with whom she interacted. She was also perceived to be an excellent capacity builder, a wonderful listener, and a dedicated contributor to the creation of community in Wildrose School. Violet saw her role as principal as one that could facilitate the connections necessary between staff, students, and parents to bring about the best educational experiences possible for the children.

Self-awareness

“I think it’s a whole lot of soul searching that has to be done and self-awareness is required or I think it gets people in trouble” (Burns, 2001, p. 87). Violet, as was evident in her words, saw self-awareness as fundamental to a successful principalship, going so far as to indicate that to be without it would end in trouble. Regarding self-awareness, Violet was commended for her authentic nature, her ability to handle confrontation and crisis, her capacity to nurture a vision, and her dedication to her duty as a role model.
**Life as a Leader**

We see people at our principal’s meeting that are really brilliant and efficient and they have all their paperwork in on time and they probably have far tidier offices and things like that but I don’t care about those things much. (Burns, 2001, p. 105).

Finally, it was obvious that every part of Violet’s principalship was about being with those around her and engaging people in meaningful conversations and productive activities geared toward the children. The “life of a leader”, was a term used in reference to Violet and the many actions she was noted for, since she was characterized as one willing to spend her time with people. She was also seen to value diversity which, in the case of Wildrose School, was seen to include primarily economic, racial, and cultural qualities. In the case of racial and cultural diversity, Violet felt that such differences should be celebrated; however, her ultimate goal was to create a place where diversity brought children together in a spirit of tolerance and acceptance. Finally, she also acted as an advocate for Wildrose School, fighting for the programs, resources, and services needed in this disadvantaged community.

**Conclusions: Leadership and Gender**

Does the gender of the principal play a role in shaping perceptions of leadership efficacy and success? This question provided the opportunity to compare the perceptions of parents, teachers, students, and division staff regarding the importance and role of gender in the principalship. The female parents interviewed felt that Violet's nurturing, calm disposition, attributed to her gender, was an asset. A male parent shared a particularly interesting view, though. He felt that angry fathers, those who came into the school yelling and threatening, might be more likely to physically abuse a male principal. Therefore, the fact that Violet was a woman was seen as a benefit because if the principal were a man it was felt that that angry parent likely would have become physically violent. The age-old rule that boys should not hit girls was coming into play.

Students and teachers generally disagreed with this view, however. It was found that all of the students and a majority of the teachers felt that gender was irrelevant. It was at this point though, while the researcher was speaking to the adults working in the school community, that an interesting pattern emerged with regard to gender. The male teachers on staff, with one exception, and the female teachers with little experience, all felt that gender was irrelevant. It was the character of the principal that was seen to be important, and this leadership personality was not, in their estimation, dependent on gender. As I began to speak to female teachers with more experience and the past and present area superintendents, however, this opinion began to change, and at the crux of this change was the ability to build and nurture relationships. It was felt that women were generally more committed to the teaching and learning aspect of the principalship, and that females were socialized to focus on relationships much more so than men. Indeed, Violet herself admitted that she did not believe she perceived her role in the same way as did the male principals with whom she had worked in the past. Violet maintained that her dedication to relationships differed from the managerial focus she saw in her previous male colleagues. Of course, all of these statements were qualified as stereotypes, and I was asked to treat them as such.

Stereotypes or not, the pattern created by the views put forth in the interviews was enlightening. The view that women are more naturally inclined to focus on relationships is one that has been reported on numerous times (e.g., Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Coleman, 1996; Gilligan, 1982; Helgesen, 1990, 1995; Kruger, 1996; Shakeshaft, 1989; Wallace, 1998). What I found interesting in this case, however, was that it appeared as though this view was dependent on both gender and experience. I believe that this was so for two reasons. First, as regards gender, I feel that many male teachers, even if they did consider gender to contribute to leadership style, would be hesitant to express this. Female principals in the school division in which this study occurred have taken their place alongside of men in similar numbers if not similar placements. I predict that many male teachers would be wary of bringing the label of male chauvinist upon themselves or of alienating male colleagues should they prefer a female principal. Second, I believe that the role of gender in the principalship is one that, possibly, cannot be fully appreciated until enough experience has been had to allow for hindsight, when one can look back on work experiences. The young female teachers and the students that I interviewed had never worked with a male principal and so it would seem logical to them that Violet's leadership was, perhaps, not a function of her gender but a result of her role.

Violet, while subscribing to the belief that females were more prone to develop and sustain relationships, did not believe that men were incapable of doing so. In fact, she admired the male assistant principal at Wildrose School for his capacity in this regard. She saw this ability, however, as being a result of socialization. Violet believed that women were taught to pick up intuitively on the undercurrents of relationships, and that this helped them to recognize
problems, to sense the climate of relationships and to empathize with the feelings of others. Violet referred to this as having the right radar:

He [the assistant principal] was saying that he just didn't have the right radar to pick up all of the undercurrents and that a lot of the things that I see and talk to him about would just pass right on by. (Burns, 2001, p. 123)

It was this ability to empathize, to "read people" that Violet attributed in part to her gender.

This radar has also been discussed by many in the literature (e.g., Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Helgesen, 1995; Ruddick, 1996; Wallace, 1998), although not generally called radar. Wallace (1998) termed this the historically operative consciousness, a frame of mind where one endeavored to hear others and to be impacted by those voices. And in all, women were credited with this ability due to the socialization of girls in childhood.

I feel, however, that it is imperative that, as researchers, we do not exclude men from these theories just as women have been silenced in educational leadership theories historically. Wallace (1998) noted that the creation of gender inclusive theory "depends on both women and men seeking a meeting place between the public and the private spheres in which conversation may occur between the sexes" (p. 25). As researchers strive to create inclusive leadership characterizations that do not value one gender over the other, the situation exists to socialize boys and girls differently. The school presents such a situation.

Young people learn powerful lessons about gender in schools. Gender-appropriate models greet children from the start when early grade teachers, usually women, extend motherly affection, warmly guide them through schoolwork, and attend to the countless daily details of classroom life. Men typically hold fatherlike positions in school administration or coaching. Schools draw children into traditional gender appropriate behavior and roles through such modeling and in an infinite variety of other ways. (Blount, 2000, p. 83)

While Wildrose School did fit this stereotype in many ways, primarily in the gender composition of the staff, Violet was challenging the typical definition of a principal. In Wildrose School, young boys and girls were coming to know the school principal as being a kind, gentle, firm, insistent, strong woman. Already, in this way, they were being socialized very differently from their parents. Perhaps it is here with these children that inclusive gender discussion will truly begin.

Implications for Further Study

I believe that, while gender-based studies on women in leadership have provided an extensive bank of literature, the time has come to move beyond female leadership into the examination of feminist leadership. Strachan (1999) provided us with both the good news and the bad news regarding female educational leadership literature. She explained that while the diligence and perseverance of feminist researchers has resulted in an extensive bank of literature surrounding women in leadership, "women's contribution to both the literature and practice of educational leadership remains on the margins of acceptability" (p. 309). This has caused a number of feminist researchers to narrow their field of vision and begin to examine feminist leadership as distinct from female leadership.

Feminist educational leadership is not only "on the margins of acceptability" (Strachan, 1999, p. 309) but it also does not enjoy the relatively large literature base which has been created in the area of female leadership. Consequently, in discussing feminist leadership, one is breaking new ground and developing new definitions. In many gender-based case studies (e.g., Burns, 2001; Fennell, 2002; Moller, 2002), female leader perceptions, behaviours, beliefs, and experiences are documented, and consequently women are made the subjects of research in their own right. This is of great importance as it has been through these stories that women have begun to make sense of the leadership world in which they operate. It is my belief, however, that feminist educational leadership, with a commitment to political and social change, can begin to address existing inequities, and is therefore the next step in gender-sensitive leadership research.
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Endnotes
1 All names are pseudonyms.

References


**Author Note**

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