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Influences associated with the underrepresentation of women in administrative positions in education

Abstract

Women are greatly underrepresented in administrative positions at all levels of education. In spite of all the efforts that have been made to recruit women into, and to encourage women to seek, traditionally male-dominated careers, the statistics continue to be discouraging. Nationally, five percent of school superintendents are women, a 1989 National School Boards Association survey found. Only 10 percent of high school principals are women, 17 percent of junior high and middle school principals are women, and 32 percent of elementary school principals are women (Lanter, 1989). A September 30, 1990 fiscal year report of Iowa public universities showed that 21.6 percent of all faculty members are women at the University of Iowa, 25.1 percent are women at Iowa State University, and 34.3 percent are women at the University of Northern Iowa (Muller, 1991). These statistics raise many questions about women and their access to positions in educational administration. The purpose of this study is to examine the influences which are associated with the underrepresentation of women in administrative positions in education.

INFLUENCES ASSOCIATED WITH THE UNDERREPRESENTATION
OF WOMEN IN ADMINISTRATIVE POSITIONS IN EDUCATION

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Judy S. Bohrofen

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Women are greatly underrepresented in administrative positions at all levels of education. In spite of all the efforts that have been made to recruit women into, and to encourage women to seek, traditionally male-dominated careers, the statistics continue to be discouraging.

Nationally, five percent of school superintendents are women, a 1989 National School Boards Association survey found. Only 10 percent of high school principals are women, 17 percent of junior high and middle school principals are women, and 32 percent of elementary school principals are women (Lantor, 1989). A September 30, 1990 fiscal year report of Iowa public universities showed that 21.6 percent of all faculty members are women at the University of Iowa, 25.1 percent are women at Iowa State University, and 34.3 percent are women at the University of Northern Iowa (Muller, 1991).

These statistics raise many questions about women and their access to positions in educational administration. The purpose of this study is to examine the influences which are associated with the underrepresentation of women in administrative positions in education.

Barriers To Women

A review of the literature suggested that the lack of women in administrative positions may be the result of impediments which fall into three categories: personal, professional, and psychological. Personal conflicts experienced by women, professional barriers, and psychological factors all are obstacles to women's climb up the

career ladder. These factors appear to work together to cause underrepresentation.

Personal Barriers

The absence of women in leadership positions may be due, in part, to the differential socialization of women and men. As women grow up, they learn to be nurturing rather than aggressive, to defer to the opinions of men, and to prefer the leadership of men to women. Women have been accorded the role of caretaker, and many women believe that paid work is to be done only after the fulfillment of one's primary role as nurturer and caregiver. A career with hierarchical promotions requires commitment and would be extremely difficult if one's primary interest and commitment were to the home (Baugher & Martin, 1985).

Women are taught to desire and seek social approval. This becomes a directing force in their lives. They are more likely than men to alter their estimations of their own competence on the basis of other's opinions, and are more likely to denigrate their abilities and accomplishments (Marshall, 1984).

Jones and Montenegro (1985) found that, among professors, the qualities traditionally associated with the role of wife/mother and those associated with the role of career woman are incompatible. This incompatibility leads to personal anxiety, personal sanctions, and avoidance (by many) of the career role and acceptance of the wife/mother role. Because of role conflicts, women may lack geographical mobility; they may lack support from their families for

their careers. They may also experience feelings of guilt or inadequacy in one or both roles. Role conflict is primary in the perception of both women and employers, as demonstrated by the fact that single and divorced women hold higher ranking positions than do married women.

Women experience conflict between the self-perceptions of their roles and the roles demanded of them by relevant others. Women experience great emotional conflict and physical exhaustion when they take on additional roles, as, for example, when career is added to the role of mother, which was added to the role of wife. Such women become victims of role overload because of the many demands made on their time and emotional energy. These women suffer from more than overload; they also suffer from lack of direction (Moore, 1981).

Due to such negative perceptions, and the feeling that men have a better chance of obtaining administrative positions, many women do not seek administrative posts. Some women find that teaching is a satisfactory career, because it allows them to meet professional goals without sacrificing a domestic lifestyle (Swiderski, 1988).

Professional Barriers

Do women lack the necessary experience and training for administrative positions, thereby creating an inadequate pool of potential candidates from which to draw administrative talent? The small number of women administrators cannot be explained by the "lack of training and experience" argument. The number of masters

and doctoral degrees in educational administration awarded to women increased in the 1980s. Women not only have, on the average, more education hours required for certification than men, but women also academically outperform their male counterparts. Women have more years of experience in the classroom, more experience in instructional staff positions, and proportionately more advanced degrees than do men in administration (Moore, 1981).

The myth that women are not well qualified and are not effective researchers is unwarranted. It was found that women do as much scholarly research as men; in the fields of sociology and psychology, they do more. In addition, it was reported that women and men with doctorates were similar in teaching assignments and publication rates (Fobbs, 1988).

Education has a pyramidal structure; women are clustered at the bottom of the pyramid. Recruitment and hiring practices remain a major barrier to women seeking positions at higher levels. Although the recruitment process has been opened to a broad range of applicants to comply with affirmative action regulations, employers tend to seek recommendations for positions from their colleagues. If a female does not have a male mentor who will recommend her, the recruitment process will probably not serve as an avenue to an administrative position. Employment discrimination against women has been found through age data, comparative years of teaching experience, and promotion schedules (Baugher & Martin, 1985).

Harder and Waldo (1983) suggested that women scholars are not

taken seriously and cannot look forward to a normal professional career, not because they have low prestige, but because they are outside the prestige system entirely. Women are limited by low visibility and have little opportunity to interact with superiors to acquire skills needed for career advancement. The administrative positions most commonly held by women, e.g., curriculum coordinator or assistant to the dean, do not provide the high community or professional visibility, or the informal interaction with those who have the power, to propel them up the career ladder.

The organizational structure constitutes a barrier to the entry and advancement of women, because it lacks female role models and mentors, male or female, for aspiring female administrators. The exclusion of women from the informal network systems in educational organizations heightens the negative feelings which result from the internalization of inferiority and fears of rejection. Women denied access to the informal network--the informal interactions and role-learning which are an integral part of organizations--are denied the arena in which major decisions are made (Harder & Waldo, 1983).

Psychological Barriers

Attitudes of women and men are also plausible causes why women are not advancing in educational administration in ways similar to men. The "Old Boy Network", the "Queen Bee" and the "Cinderella" syndromes, are terms which have been used to describe and label the attitudinal causes of behaviors which have adversely affected women's careers (Moore, 1981).

Baugher and Martin (1985) reported that the characteristics identified as necessary for leadership are traditionally viewed as male. Barbara Uehling (1973), in a paper presented to a conference on Women and Management of Post Secondary Institutions, related that many studies have portrayed women as less independent, less objective, and less logical than men. Those studies revealed that female characteristics rendered women unable to perform effectively as leaders in management or administrative positions. The socialization processes perpetuate the myth and thereby create a reality that approximates it.

In contrast, Moore (1981) found that personal attributes of female administrators were actually quite similar to those of male administrators. Their self-esteem, motivation to manage (measured by competitiveness, assertiveness, and uniqueness) and mental abilities were, on the average, similar. Differences in administrative performance which do exist have been found to be easily changed with training and experience. However, the weakest point for women is the "fear of success" motive. It is this motivation that contributes to the problems for women in administration due to their need to prove their success. Women grow up and work in ambiguity (Moore, 1981).

Boys grow up learning to tolerate each other and to work with each other despite their differences. For women, who grow up rather critical of each other, relationships, especially in the work setting, become ends in themselves--prerequisites to success. For

these reasons, women can become stereotyped as being intolerant and reactive in many situations. The pressures to demonstrate success are many for women, and it is a burden of proof to which men are never asked to submit.

Dohrmann (1986) found that sex role stereotypes form barriers to women's entry into, and promotion within, organizations. Because of sex role stereotypic attitudes, women are not hired or are "passed over" for promotion. Once hired, they are frequently given differential treatment. Sex role stereotypes have been internalized by women, and these act as psychological barriers to their own advancement.

Sociological stereotypes, i.e., women employees have higher rates of absenteeism and they lack commitment, create discriminatory barriers. These stereotypes are not supported by the data. For example, statistics from the Department of Labor indicate that the number of sick days taken per woman averages 5.6 per year; the average number of sick days per man is 5.2. Women do not end their careers at the time of marriage; married women make up more than half of the female work force. Women do have a high commitment level to work; women in management have an average tenure of 24 years. Men change jobs more often than women; 95% of male college graduates will leave their first employer within ten years (Baughner & Martin, 1985). These data lend support to the argument that the lack of women in administration stems from social stereotyping perceptions rather than a lack of dependable, committed women.

Summary and Conclusions

Women who seek roles in educational administration find that equality of the sexes is an illusion. Factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of women in educational administration have been identified in the literature as personal, professional, and psychological barriers. Equal access, participation, rewards and power gained through knowledge will help diminish the personal barriers for women. A focus on the behavior patterns and attitudes of decision makers, and an evaluation of the contributions of female administrators in educational administration positions, will diminish the professional and psychological barriers. As the barriers are diminished, perhaps the illusion of women in administrative roles will no longer exist because the illusion will become a reality.

Underrepresentation of women in educational administration is the responsibility of decision makers now in authority. Research on women in administration suggest that men remain the primary decision makers in educational administration, and the number of women in administration is actually on the decline. To create opportunities for women who aspire to administrative positions, targets for change must be identified. Some targets for change include a reorientation in the attitudes of decision makers and an examination of the benefits accruing to education as women are appointed to decision-making positions. The decision makers should also be aware of myths concerning women in leadership roles (Baugher & Martin, 1985).

To make the best use of the available human resources, educational institutions must recruit, train, and employ people for leadership roles based on the concept of equal opportunity. Because women professionals in education have education and experience similar to their male counterparts, the existing shortage of women administrators demonstrates a lack of commitment to affirmative action. The untapped talents of aspiring women administrators are needed to improve the quality of education at all levels. Many women have reacted to the reduction of opportunities for advancement in educational administration by looking for and finding administrative positions in other fields. They have not only found numerous opportunities for advancement, but also greater monetary rewards. The best job for any person is at the highest level at which the person is capable of performing. As women who are desirous of contributing to the improvement of our educational system are thwarted, they become subject to the lure of the business world with its financial rewards. Although research shows that many sectors of our society, including business, are underutilizing the talents of women, education lags in providing equal access and in recruiting women for administrative positions. The educational system will continue to decline in effectiveness if it does not fully utilize all of its human resources. If the system of education waits too long to develop its female personnel, it may not be able to compete with other employers (Jones & Montenegro, 1985).

The women who stay in education will face three vital

challenges from which the intrinsic rewards mentioned will come. Women administrators must help shape the role of education in society by meeting these challenges. They must see the responsibility for the preparation of prospective administrators as a way to ensure nonsexist education, they must become more assertive in their participation in the profession, and they must help clarify the personal commitments to education of each woman educator. Women administrators must help remove the negative mythology of sexism and help all students recognize the contribution of both women and men to society. Women will have such a positive impact on the American educational system if they see their role as unique and important, not a modeling of male behaviors and attitudes.

The implications of this paper apply to three groups: recruiters of educational administrators, men in administration, and women. Recruiters must heed significant findings related to effective administration which show women as capable of holding administrative positions. They must apply affirmative action guidelines to employ female administrators; to do otherwise is legally, if not morally and ethically, unacceptable. Men in administration obviously need more development and the cooperative input of women. Women must discard the restrictive aspects of traditional "femininity" and must no longer tolerate discrimination. They must apply for jobs, and invoke legal action when necessary. Women must be overprepared and overcompetent.

The decision of what degree of commitment to make, and what

price to pay for advancement, will be personal. But, it should become more reasonable as women become accepted in educational administrative careers.

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