

Project 302

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# Female Leaders and their Impact on School Culture in Saskatchewan

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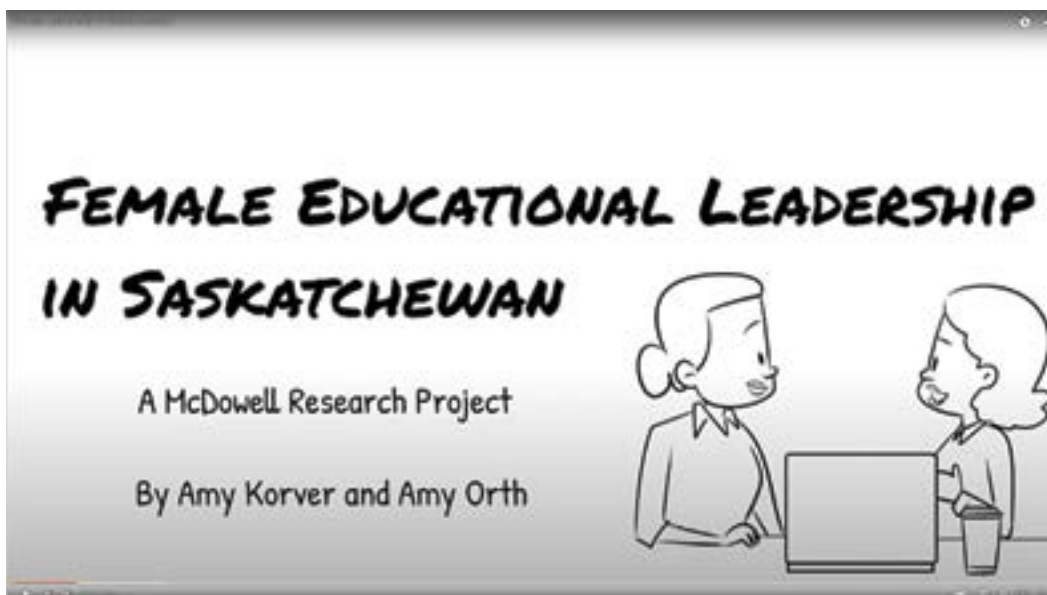
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Over the past several years, as both colleagues and friends, we have spent many evenings discussing, analyzing, and giving each other advice and feedback about our roles as educational leaders. Often our conversations combined educational pedagogy with politics and current events. As the Me-Too movement began, we started to compare the experiences of women in other fields to our experiences in education. Students spend 13 years in the Saskatchewan school system and will be exposed to leadership through their administrative teams – who will they see in positions of power? Ultimately, as we reflected about our impact on children, we started to identify the importance of having strong female role models in their lives. As we researched, interviewed, discussed, and wrote, we were inspired by the words of Rupi Kaur (2017):

Our work should equip  
the next generation of women  
to outdo us in every field  
this is the legacy we'll leave behind  
-progress (p. 241)

View a video from this project at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yb38IXBRIU>





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# Research Question and Methodology

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## Research Question

Our main research question was: how might female leaders impact their school cultures? In order to explore this question, we broke our research into the following sub-questions:

- What are the experiences of female educational leaders in Prairie Spirit School Division and Prairie South School Division?
- What challenges or barriers have they encountered in their leadership journeys?
- How do they perceive their impact on school culture?

## Scope, Methodology and Research Approach

We interviewed nine female in-school and division-based administrators in Prairie Spirit School Division and Prairie South School Division. Both divisions have a similar demographic, being centred around a large urban centre, with mainly rural schools. Interviews were conducted throughout the 2019-20 school year; the first in-person interview established the participants' roles and experiences in education, the second in-person delved more into their perceived impact on school culture. From there, emails were exchanged with participants to clarify and ask any lasting questions. All participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect their identity.

When selecting participants, we aimed for a diverse range of experiences. Considerations included:

- a variety of experiences including formal and informal leadership opportunities
- when participants entered administrative positions (early, mid, or late in career)
- experience in rural and urban settings and a variety of school settings (elementary, high school, K-12)
- how participants came to the leadership roles in their career – traditional path of applying for positions or being asked to take on an interim position to respond to a school emergency.

## Limitations

A major limitation of our study was that we explored the experiences and journeys of nine women. We purposefully selected a diverse range of experiences, which means that the findings are not representative of all women in Saskatchewan. Further, this was not a comparative study and conclusions about male leaders cannot be drawn. We also note that we interviewed cis-gender women who are assumed to be engaged in heteronormative relationships. While some participants self-identified as Indigenous or had spouses who were Indigenous or a visible minority, our participants did not fully reflect the diversity of Saskatchewan teachers.

# Background

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Teaching is rooted in a system of paternalism. This system supports assumptions about who can and who *cannot* lead in the educational organizations. Historically, the majority of one-room schoolhouses were led by single women with the belief that they held the skills to implement curriculum and follow regulations, but still needed to be supervised by men, were unable to teach at larger high schools, or hold board positions (Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, 1988). Today these ingrained beliefs carry through. A Google image search for "leader" brings up predominately pictures of males; a similar Google search for "school principal" again brings up pictures of (white) men, while a search for "teacher" returns images of females. Women continue to outnumber men as classroom teachers yet they continue to be under-represented in leadership positions at the school and school division level (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2020; Diez-Gutierrez, 2016; Denys, 2019; Denys, 2020; Kruse and Krumm, 2016; Manitoba Teachers' Society, 2018; Shakeshaft, 1987).

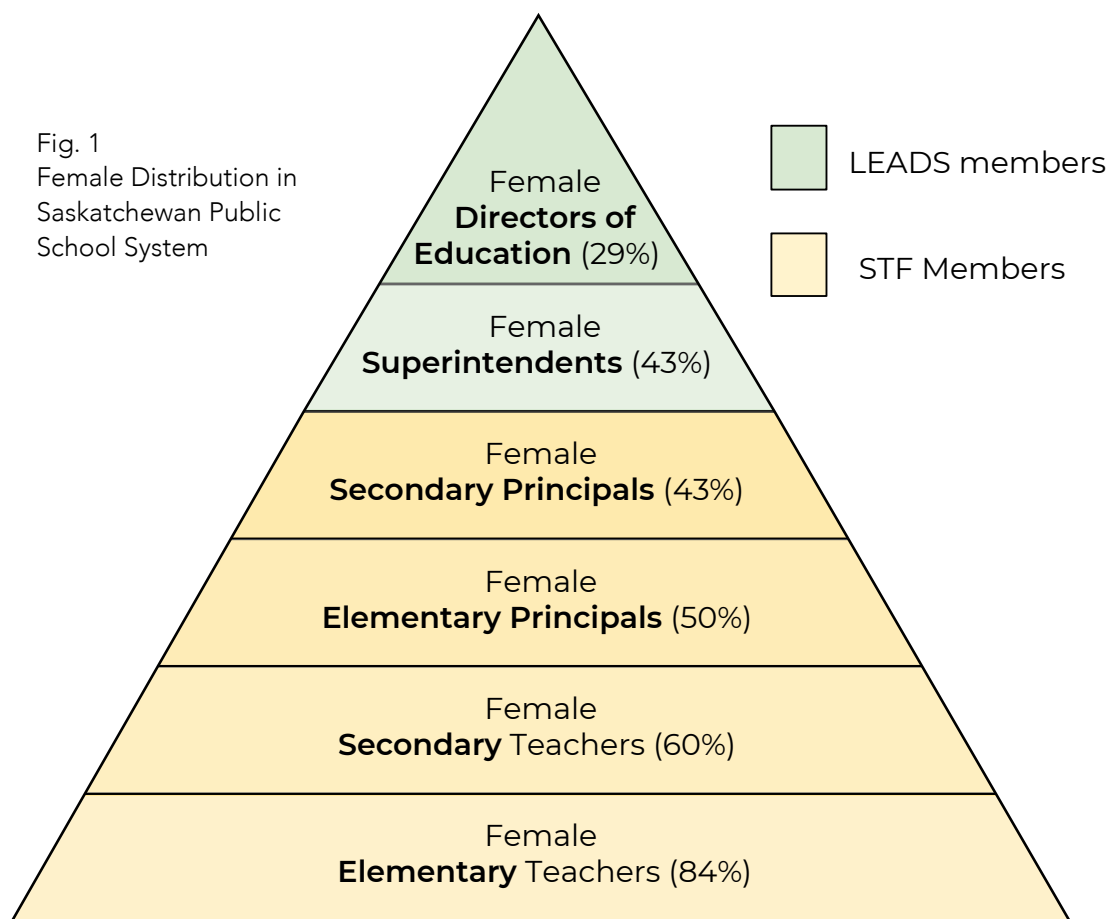
## The Saskatchewan Context

In Saskatchewan, 75 percent of teachers are female (Denys, 2019) and while there has been a significant increase in female administrators since the early 1990s, women are still under-represented in leadership positions. In the 2018-19 school year, 59 percent of vice-principals in Saskatchewan and 53 percent of Saskatchewan principals were female (Denys, 2019). While this is an increase in female principals of 29 percent since 1996, a closer look is needed to truly understand the genderization of school and school division leadership.

Women continue to primarily teach elementary school. In Saskatchewan, 84 percent of elementary teachers are women (Denys, 2019). Female secondary teachers have increased from 42 percent in 1996 to 60 percent in 2016 (Denys, 2019). A similar trend follows in administrative positions. Approximately half of elementary principals are female and there has been an increase in female secondary principals in the last decade (Denys, 2020). However, these statistics may not tell the whole story because they do not indicate if there is a gender difference between rural and urban schools or the size of school. Frequently, high school principalships (assumed to have large student and staff populations) are seen as entry points into higher leadership positions (Kruse & Krumm, 2016). It can be assumed that fewer women in Saskatchewan fill these roles, which speaks to why some men tend to continue to rise to senior leadership positions in school divisions. In the 2019-20 school year, 43 percent of superintendents in Saskatchewan were female and fewer than 30 percent of the directors of education were women (Denys, 2019). The proportion of women decreases as the level of leadership increases.



Fig. 1  
Female Distribution in  
Saskatchewan Public  
School System



## Experiences and Barriers

The majority of literature on women in leadership divides barriers into internal barriers (such as self-perception, lack of agency, or family commitments) and external barriers (such as limited mentorship opportunities and gender stereotyping and discrimination). This is also highlighted in the 2019 Alberta Teachers' Association Women in Educational Leadership Needs Assessment Survey, where the most significant barriers for Alberta teachers were work/family balance, normative gatekeeping, and gender stereotyping. Gender-based discrimination is an issue identified by women across industries in Canada. However, it is rarely recognized by men as an identifiable issue. In the ATA report, 63.4 percent of Alberta teachers interviewed determined that gender discrimination exists in schools, whereas 45 percent of men felt the same. This is consistent with a Canada wide survey where 62 percent of women identified gender discrimination as an issue, but only 41 percent of men identified it (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2019).

## School Culture

Educational stakeholders have been increasingly focused on schools as complex organizations, within which attention to that organization's culture can have real impacts on the quality of teaching and learning. One of the biggest shifts in school cultures over the last several decades is from one where teachers and school leaders are experts who hold information and transfer it to students to one where knowledge and skills are constructed collaboratively between all learners. As educational organizations have made this shift, the desired skills and orientations of their leadership have changed as well.

There are many definitions of organizational culture, and the concept has been studied extensively. Deal and Peterson (2016) have synthesized much of the work in this area and suggest that school culture can be defined as "... unwritten rules and traditions, norms and expectations" and also, "the way people act, how they dress, what they talk about or consider taboo, whether they seek out colleagues or isolate themselves, and how teachers feel about their work and their students" (p. 16). Culture has been compared to "the software for the mind - it is the operating program that the group provides you with to support it ... culture massages the data from the environment you take in and then limits your choice of responses to each situation" (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov in Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015, p. 23). Undoubtedly, a school's culture is one of the biggest influences on the quality of teaching and learning that occurs there.

Although culture is understood to be shaped and influenced by everyone that is a part of it, those who hold formal leadership positions hold the most responsibility for defining, directing, and monitoring a school's culture. A principal or administrative team must be constantly paying attention to the school's culture and taking steps to improve it, whether that be shifting from a toxic culture or maintaining an existing culture that supports high-quality teaching and learning. Edgar Schein (1985), who pioneered the study of organizational culture, suggested "the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture. If you do not manage culture, it manages you, and you may not even be aware of the extent to which this is happening" (p. 11). Deal and Peterson (2016) suggest there are eight essential leadership roles that a principal must attend to if they are interested in affecting school culture:

*Historian*: seeks to understand the social and normative past of the school

*Anthropological sleuth*: analyzes and probes for the current array of cultural traditions, values, and beliefs

*Visionary*: works with others, including leaders in the neighboring community, to characterize a portrait of the idea school

*Icon*: affirms values through dress, behaviour, attention, actions and routines

*Potter*: shapes and is shaped by the school's symbolic webbing of heroes, rituals, traditions ceremonies, symbols ...

*Poet*: uses expressive language to reinforce values and sustains the school's best image of itself

*Actor*: improvises in the school's predictable dramas, comedies, and tragedies,

*Healer*: oversees transitions and changes; heals the wounds of conflict and loss (p. 224)

These roles speak to the complexity of school culture and the need for school leaders to be delicate and intentional with their work.

When examining school culture, relational trust is an important feature that presents in existing literature. Teachers' trust in colleagues as well as in their principal is linked to school effectiveness and positive school culture (Kaplan & Owings, 2013). Relational trust means that people in an organization trust in each other's words and actions to work towards a common goal. Fullan (2014) takes this idea further to suggest that developing relational trust is a critical key for principals who are looking to attract and improve human capital – when principals are trying to improve the quality of teaching in schools, they should focus on building relational trust which contributes to a “culture of healthy pressure (high expectations) and support (both technical and emotional) [where] peers help each other grow” (p. 75). In their research on collaborative school leadership involving female leaders, Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) expand this concept to include relational power. They assert that “women enjoy the collaborative power to do things differently that comes from developing strong relationships with others – particularly with others who bring skills and knowledge different from their own” (p. 47). When school leaders contribute to a positive school culture, they are intentional about building relational trust and ultimately, they benefit from the traction they can gain through those relationships.

# Findings

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## Experiences as Learning Leader

It is evident that the participants had a keen interest and passion for learning leadership and sought out informal leadership and professional development opportunities early in their careers. Brooke was involved in a division level committee on assessment, Crystal actively sought out experience working with the Ministry of Education, Sarah was involved in a school-based McDowell research project, and Robin was involved in the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation at both the local and provincial level. Involvement in areas such as this led to many informal leadership opportunities in their school buildings. Participants noted that staff would naturally come to them for curriculum support, or they would be asked to take on specific areas on projects by the administrative team. Brooke was asked to take on the task of tracking and supporting high school attendance and Crystal was asked to take the lead on professional development at staff meetings. While some saw this as a way to develop their resumé, most did it to improve and strengthen their classroom instruction. The focus on curriculum, instruction, and school improvement has been recognized as a specific trait of female educational leaders; women are socialized to lean towards curriculum and instruction as opposed to administration. (Diez Gutierrez, 2016; Kerr, Kerr, and Miller; 2014; Manitoba Teachers' Society, 2018; Robinson, Shakeshaft, Grogan, and Newcomb, 2017.)

## Pathway to School Administration

The majority of the women we interviewed did not anticipate or aim for administrative positions early in their careers. In fact, a common trend was to apply to administrative positions because of fear of the unknown. Both Crystal and Hannah applied because they were apprehensive about who might be named principal. Both were deeply committed to school improvement and did not want that work to disappear or be replaced. Hannah's principal pushed her to apply to be the vice-principal, saying, "you don't know who will come, so you have to apply." Having worked extensively with Indigenous students in her school; this same reasoning extended to her applying for the principalship. "I was worried about a white, male administrator coming into that school and kicking [the Indigenous kids] out." Crystal, in a similar situation, "found out who was applying and I didn't want to work for them."

Hannah explained the difficulty of working alongside a leader whose vision is different from your own,

“When you don’t believe in your leadership, it’s hard to be there, um, and I hated not being the leader. And not because I ... don’t need to be the leader, but if you don’t believe in them or what they’re doing or how it’s going on, it’s very [hard] ... It’s soul-sucking ... like, I don’t have to believe in everything, but I just need to believe that- that we’re gonna get there together ... in the best way we can.”

Connected to the idea of the fear of the unknown was also a theme of “I can do better than *that*.” Many participants referred to experiences under their previous administrators as examples of what they did not want to be and do as a leader. The participants cited examples of a lack of classroom visits, not providing specific feedback for instructional improvement, not being supportive during medical leaves, a lack of emphasis on adult learning, or witnessing a lack of accountability in staff members. Heather recalls seeing administrators and thinking, “if (blank) can do it, why can’t I?” This sense of confidence and desire to see change led them to apply for new positions. Hannah also noted how her family’s financial situation placed her in a circumstance where she would be able to fail. “I have a false sense of positive outcome. And you know what? I also have come from ... extreme privilege. If it didn’t work, no one is going to starve in my house, so like, fuck ‘em!” Our participants entered administrative roles either because they were worried about who else might lead them or because they were frustrated with the quality of leadership and knew they could do better.

## Key Relationships

All participants pointed to having developed key relationships with mentors, supervisors, and colleagues who encouraged them throughout their career, particularly when they started to pursue administrative positions. Furthermore, every single participant identified various times in their career being shoulder tapped to take on formal and informal leadership positions.

Most relationships, early in their career, were centred around sports and coaching. Often, volunteering to coach sports was seen as an advantage to secure a job, but also allowed for a close working relationship with the principal. Brooke reflects that this was a rooted, ingrained belief from her own schooling experience. “Even as a student in high school, our principal was male, and if you played sports, like, I was in his good books.” As a teacher, Brooke gained support and mentorship from administration by hosting tournaments at school and agreeing to co-coach alongside the principal. This led her to be appointed to redesign the entire physical education program of her school and take on the role of athletic director. Andrea, Robin, and Crystal also indicated that having sports-related relationships was integral in their careers. Other participants identified how later in their career having the chance to work out of the division office allowed them to develop important relationships; “You have access to all these people!” (Sarah). These relationships with division office-based staff allowed for participants to have regular interaction beyond classroom teachers. Key relationships were perceived to be integral to doing well and moving up the ladder. Sarah identified that being “in the club” with the principal meant that he often looked to her to model effective teaching, which likely contributed to her being “known” as an aspiring leader. Robin identified that having key relationships with supervisors allowed her to “get to the [interview] table” and that she was “[given] a shot” in applying for jobs.

It is worth noting that while our participants saw these connections as positive, Gruenert and Whitaker (2019) warn that one of the illusions of effectiveness in a toxic school culture is the idea of likeability; if people have close social relationships with people in positions of power, they are good at their jobs.

Often, these relationships led to shoulder tapping for opportunities for informal leadership (such as acting admin, committees work, research projects, or planning teams) and formal leadership (such as applying for administrative positions). Shoulder tapping, gentle pressure, and being pushed was important because many of the women we interviewed felt as though they were not ready to take on administrative roles. “There’s always been a certain element of like ... somebody thinks I’m gonna be good at this. Like there’s somebody giving you positive feedback ... [it] cycles you in ... [it] feeds you” (Leane). The importance of shoulder tapping is referenced in the literature as well; most women must be shoulder tapped multiple times and receive repeated affirmation that they are capable of the position (Graham, 2020). Key relationships also developed into mentorships with other, more experienced leaders. All of the women we interviewed had some sort of informal mentorship from a colleague, as opposed to a formal mentorship program through their school division or the Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation.

## Work Life Barriers

Some participants identified that maintaining a work and family balance was a struggle at times and influenced their decision to enter administration; one indicated that it stopped her from applying earlier in her career. The majority of our participants made decisions in their careers that centred around family. This included:

- pursuing graduate studies in special education to support a child
- choosing not to transfer to a new school or school division because of a child being near their high school graduation
- choosing to transfer to a new school to allow their child the freedom of not having their mother as principal
- initiating a change from principal to vice-principal to have more time to support aging parents
- changing school divisions to reduce commute time (allowing more time to support their family)
- changing school divisions to be on the same calendar schedule as their children.

Participants also highlighted how at times, carrying the mental load of being both a mother and school leader was a delicate balance; Heather went so far to assert, “it’s not a position that’s friendly for kids.” Often choices like this are a result of the gendered norms and societal beliefs about women’s primary job of being a household leader and impact women going into leadership. Crosby-Hillier (2012) explains that women frequently interrupt or slow their careers to care for other family members and that women with children have lower rates of promotion.

While the majority of research points to family life being a strong barrier preventing women from ever pursuing administrative positions or stops them from pursuing positions early in their career, it only was noted as a strong barrier for two of our participants. Crystal entered the principalship later in her career because of her family, stating, "I had to put my family first" and indicating that there had been positions where she chose not to apply. "I passed those up based on family decisions, not because I didn't want to or think I could do a good job, 'cause I felt like I could." As a result, she also indicated that while she would be interested in pursuing higher leadership positions now, she feels as though being close to retirement, she is too old; "They probably wouldn't even consider me." Believing that a maternity leave would have pushed her out of a vice-principal position and limited her chances to 'move up', Heather stated, "I choose my career over a third child ... I feel sick about that decision ... I couldn't have done a third child." Family considerations are a significant barrier for women considering educational administration.

Many participants did feel pressured to take shortened maternity leave, yet they indicated that it was due to their own self-pressure and a commitment and passion to their students. Andrea took a two-month maternity leave because, "I had a tough class and I didn't want to lose them." Crystal, Heather, and Leane also took reduced maternity leave or continued to visit and volunteer at the school while on their leave. Leane explained this saying, "Where else am I going to be in September?" However, for both Leane and Heather, their maternity leaves provided a way for a division-initiated transfer to a new school on their return. Additionally, Heather returned reluctantly to a full-time administrative position after her second child, despite wanting only part time on her return. She was told that returning full time was the only way to stay on as an administrator (despite having a part-time position prior). Nevertheless, despite recognizing that having family commitments is difficult while leading a school, Sarah encouraged females to pursue leadership. "You can have a family, you can travel, that you can make mistakes, ... you can screw up ... I think women in particular need to know that you don't [have to have it all together] in order to do it ... like, you gotta do like 20 percent and we'll help you the rest of the way."

## Gender Based Discrimination

Hannah put it best when asked what barriers existed for her entering into leadership positions; she replied, "being female," explaining that "I don't come from a position of power."

Not all of our participants felt that their gender hindered their career trajectory, but all could identify times where they faced discrimination based on their gender. Most identified it as a subtle feeling or implicit bias as opposed to consistent, blatant bias. Much of this can connect to the idea of second generation bias, which "does not require an intent to exclude; nor does it necessarily produce direct, immediate harm to any individual. Rather, it creates a context — akin to "something in the water" (Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb, 2013, p. 64). Similarly, this arose in our interviews when, at times, the participants seemed to struggle to identify clear and specific examples of blatant sexism, but could recall times where they felt uncomfortable, but did not necessarily know if it could qualify as an example. Olivia referred to it as an "undercurrent" when dealing with some male employees, citing that the male caretaker was often uncomfortable taking directions from her.

Brooke pointed to a time when traveling with a group of fellow male administrators to a conference when, as the only female in the group, she was very cautious and aware of the perception attached to how she would interact with her male colleagues throughout the trip. She felt uncomfortable being one on one with a male colleague for dinner or tourist activities outside of the conference because of the perception it might have created with others. Sarah cited times where she was at a table with “a lot of cowboy boots” and was very aware of her gender being different than the others at the table.

Much of the discrimination often occurs because of socialized assumptions of what a principal is supposed to look like. Sarah identified a time when a person entered the building and approached the caretaker, assuming he was the principal, rather than her.

“our caretaker ... is like a ... like, he’s a caretaker. He wears his ... jeans every day, ... t-shirt, um, runners, and I ... like I think, I look, like I was at least a teacher ... there was a person who was like selling something, um, like, calendars or something. And he came in and he asked the admin assistant, um, “can I meet with the principal? Is the principal in?” And she said “just in a meeting, they’ll be right-”... she didn’t use pronouns however she said it. And I’m standing there talking to the caretaker, and then we stopped and we both looked at this person because we’d overheard that he was waiting for me. And then he shook hands with the caretaker and said, “You must be the principal.”

In other situations it is evident that a male parent or community member makes an assumption that a female administrator is weaker, less than, or doesn’t have to be listened to. Heather recalled a parent who repeatedly refused to check into the office at a school with two female administrators, but when a male administrator was appointed to the school, the parent would follow the rule. Crystal explained how a male was trying to intimidate her to change their child’s mark, knowing that it was coming from a perception of gender imbalance, and she eventually suggested, “Why don’t we get a male [teacher’s] perspective on this?” The parent accepted the mark and ended the conversation. Sarah gave an example regarding response to school alarms outside of school hours. It was thought that male principals should be able to check on a school alarm in the middle of the night, but female principals should not be expected to. Hannah dealt with a community member who had misread her name, assuming it was a common male name. The person phoned the school demanding to speak to the male principal. In this situation, rather than rile up the person more, she had the male vice-principal reply to the phone call pretending to be the principal. Similarly, when dealing with a conservative, traditional community, Leane recognized that there were times that the male vice-principal was “able to deal with some of those pieces as a male.” Crosby-Hillier (2012) points that this patriarchal stance is more common at a high school level where women are viewed as “women first, and leader[s] second” (p.98).



## Gender Based Aggressive Language and Use of Power

In addition to assumptions made on gender, participants also noted times where their gender impacted how others treated them. Again, this appeared to be both targeted, explicit comments and also comments that indicated implicit bias. Often comments are said in passing, such as when parents state that their child will not do well with a female teacher or assuming that, “there is no way a female teacher is going to make it in this [high] school” (Crystal). Colleagues often expressed similar thoughts. Heather recalled times when staff was relieved to find out that she was not applying for a principalship because they felt that they needed a male administrator. Sarah was congratulated on a new position with, “Congratulations girly!” from a male colleague. Furthermore, Heather was described to a parent by a colleague as the most “male female” indicating that she had the qualities of a male leader. Language like this suggests that women are less desirable than men and that they have less power and control.

In other situations, participants indicated that power was asserted through intimidating language by male colleagues and other stakeholders. Andrea recalls one time when she had to leave a meeting early for her child’s medical appointment. Despite giving advance notice and it being approved beforehand, her principal was told to get “that woman under control!” Parents and students would also resort to language calling a female principal a “bitch” or asking if “it was her time of the month.” Sexual language and actions were used by male colleagues and board members and included references to a teacher’s “hooters” being distracting for students, being encouraged that they should wear skirts to show off their legs, and sexual harassment such as indicating that sexual favours could be exchanged for contracts. Two participants mentioned being yelled at by superiors, with explicit language, for doing something “wrong.” In some cases, the survival tactic for women was embracing the swearing and sexual jokes to fit in and earn respect with male colleagues. After Leane addressed a vice-principal about the aggressive language used against her, he admitted years later, “You have my respect in a way that not many other people do.” Our interviews suggested that language can be a significant contributor to the subtle discrimination experienced by women on a daily basis.

## Old Boys’ Club

Although many participants indicated that they had formed key relationships throughout their career, they also noted times where they were excluded based on their gender and reached a point where it became difficult for them to move up in the organization. Research shows that there is frequently evidence of informal mentorship opportunities for men centred around sports involvement and sports conversations. Most of our participants made reference to “an old boys’ club” that is evident in Saskatchewan education circles. Similar findings were found in the Alberta Teachers’ Association (2020) and the Manitoba Teachers’ Society (2016). In Saskatchewan, this is frequently linked to hockey culture, and some participants were able to develop a matrix labelling specific connections of male colleagues that they had to hockey circles. Diez-Gutierrez (2016) refers to this as invisible networks, “the subtle, implicit and in many cases unconscious strategies that men deploy to support other men as they move up the hierarchy” (p. 347). A primary example of this informal opportunity in Saskatchewan is the annual teachers’ hockey tournament, an event that has been taking place for over 30 years.

The event can attract upwards of 500 primarily male teachers, division staff, superintendents, and directors of education (Kretzel, 2014).

In the authors' experience, this event doesn't appear to be publicly advertised to all teachers across the province; nor is it supported by school divisions, local associations, or the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation. Participants made reference to a similar network being recognized at a school or division level based on athletics.

In some cases favoured male teachers were given preference or priority on supervision schedules, and some women we interviewed identified an evidence of a "boys' club" by seating arrangements at division-wide admin meetings. Ultimately, the old boys' network secures male privilege for male educators acting as an informal power network,

"by being a 'jock' or connected to a 'jock' culture, men (and boys) are able to trade on their status in ways that secures for them privilege and power. Situated in the politics of gender, women and men (and boys) who are not 'jocks' often times find themselves on the lower rungs of the gender hierarchy. (Crosby-Hillier, 2012, p. 76)."

While many of our participants "fit in" earlier in their career because of their specific sports connections, many noted that once they arrived at the administration level, they no longer seemed to fit in; "It never felt like the old boys club until I wanted in" (Robin).

## Glass Ceiling

Many of our participants speculated about human resources practices in their school divisions. It should be noted that the authors do not necessarily believe that there is a blatant or explicit bias in hiring practice – divisions are not actively seeking to exclude women from applying or being hired. However there is an "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" (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2020, p. 16). Often women are excluded because they do not necessarily look or act like previous employees. Sarah, who was recently hired for a senior leadership position, explained, "I don't think I would have got hired as a superintendent in many other divisions in this province because they are looking for a certain type." In other areas of the province, normative gatekeeping can appear differently.

Having worked in northern Indigenous communities, Andrea explained that there was a clear hierarchy based on gender and race: "If there was a male that was Indigenous, they were getting [the job]." Additionally, criticism came when participants' families didn't reflect the majority race of the community they worked in. Regardless of what the invisible barrier was, participants believed that they simply did not fit into the accepted model.

Normative gatekeeping connects to the idea of the glass ceiling, describing the invisible barriers that prevent many women from moving up in the hierarchy of an organization (Diez Gutierrez, 2016). The glass ceiling is associated with the ideal traits that we tend to associate with leadership. Bierema, in Alberta Teachers' Association (2020), explains that "leadership literature has long been dominated by representations of the ideal leader as an individual who operates within a culture- and value-free space, possesses masculine traits, and is, ideally, male" (p. 1). For our participants, the glass ceiling was certainly evident when they were applying for jobs as principal or as a superintendent.

When applying for principalship positions, participants noted that they were given messages that they weren't good enough to apply for larger schools. Leane was told that a position called for a "strong male" when interested in applying for a large high school in her division. After applying for a general administrative role, Brooke was given the feedback that she would only be considered if a principalship opened up at her current school — a rural, isolated school that can be hard to staff.

The women we talked to had been given the impression that they were good enough for specific "niche" roles but didn't fit into the larger vision of what a principal was.

## School Culture

### Cleaning It Up

Many of the women we talked to perceived that they were selected for specific leadership positions because of a need to shift a school or organization's culture – the women used numerous variations of the term "clean it up" to describe the expectations they perceived were upon them. Several women described coming into schools where expectations for students had declined and there was a perception that students were "out of control." Andrea noted that "they needed someone who could go in, be consistent and make a decision" and described her skills in asking tough questions and forging relationships. The women also noted that they believed they were able to get different things done in a particularly efficient way. Robin said, "I get the jobs that need to be done. And I'm good at it." Many of the women identified specific work around the school that they did behind the scenes, such as beautifying spaces, purging junk rooms, setting up and managing new organization or scheduling systems. It was reported that these tasks were not parts of larger school plans, or things they were asked to do, but the women did the work because the school needed it. Crystal said, "We got shit done, but, like, I worked 14 hours a day." The concept of "cleaning up" the school culture also related specifically to the existence of school policies or the adherence to division-based policies. Women reported doing the difficult work of shifting unacceptable practices around student conduct, extracurricular activities, credit attainment, curricular programming, and academic achievement. This echoes research that suggests that when it comes to leadership skills, women tended to display superior abilities in the area of taking initiative, practicing self-development, integrity/honesty, and driving for results. (Folkman, 2015)

### Building Intentional Relationships

Our participants described a consistent and primary focus on building relationships as a cornerstone of the school cultures they tried to contribute to. In many cases, women ascribed their success as leaders to the relationships they had forged either during their tenure as teachers in those school communities or as administrators. Brooke, Olivia, and Crystal reported that their desire to enter into administration was tied to the relationships they had with adults in the school community they worked in. The women we interviewed sought to develop those relationships through soliciting feedback (Hannah asking staff, "Is this working? Is this not working?"), through collaborating with staff (to develop norms for staff meetings, to capture student voice) and by creating a safe and open environment for everyone. The priority that our participants have given to relationships would support the idea that building relational trust is central to creating a positive school culture.

While it seems likely that “building relationships” would be central to anyone’s leadership strategy, we thought it was significant that the women we talked to described very intentional ways that they sought to build those relationships. Heather described her attunement to people’s relational needs, saying, “I would have been in tune – like normally I am as a female and as a mom – I can pick up on the anxiety sometimes and then would have tried to figure out what that teacher needed.” Many of the women described sending cards or gifts to staff members in an effort to communicate that their work was noticed and appreciated.

They noted paying attention to the small things – like making sure that people had a place to plug in their cars – because they knew that those more basic needs required attention before bigger thinking could be attended to. It’s worth noting that doing these small things was referenced as a way that women built relationships. The intentionality behind relationship building was evident when Heather referenced making specific “bids” to different people; work in relationship building is evidence that not only does Heather know that relationships are important in schools; she has researched and put into practice the most important ways to do that.

This intentionality was also evident in the way Brooke and Crystal described the delicate work of bringing many people together to develop a school vision. Crystal highlighted her keen awareness of power dynamics in her school, noting that she needed to present her vision for school-based literacy as if it was coming from her male administrator. Similarly, Sarah noted that paying attention to different personalities and needs of staff was delicate, suggesting that “you [have] to be finessy about it.” This awareness relates well to Hartley’s (2018) ideas of emotional labour. Women are socially groomed to assess and respond to the different needs of those around them.

“You have to make sure your responses are carefully thought out with the other person’s emotions in mind. You have to ask in the right tone when you need to delegate work. You have to use restraint and be agreeable in uncomfortable situations. Putting yourself in the most advantageous position means thinking of how the other person is going to react.” (Hartley, 2018, p. 15)

Crystal echoed this idea by suggesting that she looks at the big picture in all things, and much like a puppeteer, pays attention to the specific manipulations required for each staff member or situation. That women have been somewhat socially groomed to take on this emotional labour might make them well equipped to act as what Deal and Peterson (2016) call anthropological sleuths. They suggest that leaders who wish to positively impact school culture “listen and look for clues and signs in the school’s present behavioural rituals and ... unearth mores and values in the daily doings. Nothing is ever as it seems, and these sleuths find unexpected interpretations of common human activity” (p. 230). The women who participated in our study are examples of leaders who are finely attuned to how to assess the cultures they are a part of and influence others to create the cultures to which they aspire.

### **Matriarchal Leadership**

When asked about the types of cultures that existed in schools where they led, the women we talked to were overwhelmingly focused on the students in their care. The women described their role within their schools as protective of and committed to the kids for whom they were responsible. In many cases, women reported that prior to their taking on leadership roles, they felt students were not being treated fairly or cared for enough.

Every single woman described a deep belief that there existed a need to “fight” for kids:

- “I witnessed so many people not treating kids OK.” (Hannah)
- “The kids needed some other opportunities.” (Brooke)
- “I love the kids. Like, the kids deserve better. Somebody had to fight for them.” (Crystal)
- “I fought for kids who didn’t have anyone else to fight for them.” (Robin)
- “I was not willing to let other kids suffer from racism and homophobia.” (Leane)

They also described the school cultures that they led as being student focused and they described it as a priority for kids to be known and to *feel* as if they are known. Again, they described intentional ways that they sought to make this happen: Crystal read a book with every single student in the school and Heather memorized school photos and names before the school year started. We found that our participants were primarily focused on improving conditions for students.

Our participants described school cultures that were closely linked to parents and the larger community that they served. Again, the women described specific and intentional ways that they went about building partnerships and, in some cases, they chose what to get involved in based on a careful assessment of where their efforts might have the biggest pay off in terms of human capital. This lines up with Deal and Peterson’s (2016) advice about how to engage communities in culture building. “The same sensitivity required for shaping culture internally must be applied to linking the school to parents and other members of the community” (p. 184). While we heard many examples of how women volunteered their time (school clubs, local government, church, local first responders, coaching, playing sports, recreation boards, and local service organizations), we noticed that they described the *reason* for their involvement. Some of the women had long histories in the communities where they led. Olivia said, “It’s this building, this school, these kids” and described being committed to creating a better community for the future. Andrea described her commitment to her previous school community being so strong and ingrained that it was natural for her to take a leave from her current job in order to go back to that school when they experienced a traumatic event. Participants we talked to not only recognized the need to contribute to their community by way of volunteering and getting involved, they did so because they cared deeply about making their communities stronger and healthier through their leadership.

### **Leadership Traits**

When describing school cultures they were involved in, several additional leadership characteristics became evident. The women we interviewed embraced the idea of vulnerability. Hannah said, “I’m pretty vulnerable and confident and self-appreciative of the fact that I screw up every day.” Heather echoed this sentiment and said that she emphasizes side-by-side learning, taking risks and making mistakes – “I don’t pretend to know everything.” They did not believe that strong leadership meant having all of the answers. They were intentional about gathering feedback about their work on an ongoing basis and always checking in with staff to see where improvements might be necessary.

While our participants were intentional about gathering feedback, they also believed that giving feedback, especially tough feedback, was critical to creating positive school cultures. Sarah notably said, “Sometimes people need a kick in the ass ... but it comes from a place of love.” She described her belief that there is more to giving feedback than making someone mad or avoiding a difficult conversation. This connects to Brown’s (2018) notion that one of the biggest issues that gets in the way for organizations is that we avoid tough conversations. She says,

“The consequence [of not giving tough feedback] is a lack of clarity, diminishing trust and engagement, and an increase in problematic behaviour, including passive-aggressive behaviour, talking behind people’s backs, pervasive back-channel communication (or the “meeting after the meeting”), gossip and the “dirty yes” (when I say yes to your face and then no behind your back) (p. 9).”

Brooke described a consequence of giving tough feedback in the following way: “[staff didn’t] like me when I got into VP because I really called them on their stuff.” Again though, participants described being very intentional about *how* they provide this feedback, referencing care going into written feedback about teaching practice and specific planning going into crucial conversations. The positive impact of providing feedback cannot be understated. Not only did these women promote high standards and growth, when we consider this willingness to give tough feedback alongside women’s intentionality in building relationships, we can conclude that these women contributed to their organization’s professional capital by building relational trust (Fullan, 2018).

### **Continuous Improvement**

Finally, our participants were committed to getting better. For them, they didn’t want to get better to get the next job, they just wanted to improve teaching and learning. Leane said, “I have no aspirations. My only aspiration is, can I change something tomorrow? Can I learn something from somebody else tomorrow?” Others referenced a desire to reach specific goals related to their school or division. Sarah suggested that her leadership was “[committed] to continuous improvement and to the ideals of supporting staff and students and getting better every day.” This sentiment aligns with Sinek’s (2019) notion that leaders who are concerned with themselves can be disastrous to an organization. Leane said, “I do what I love doing and if an opportunity comes open, then I’m - I’m all for it. But I am not a ladder climber, and I will not play games.” Organizations who allow leaders who are driven to maximize their own wealth and status will ultimately damage the culture of the company, its overall reputation and ultimately the decisions that are made (Sinek, 2019, p. 161). For our participants, their motivation for leadership was clearly not for individual gain or status; their foremost desire was to improve teaching and learning in the organizations in which they served.

# Recommendations

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Ultimately, it was clear that the women we interviewed contributed positively to their school cultures. While the scope of our study was quite limited, we feel confident in making three recommendations to organizations who wish to improve the experiences of female leaders.

First, provide women with clear opportunities for mentorship. Mentorship “is a crucial career tool with positive implications for women and that access to a mentor relationship is essential for women educators who are aspiring to positions in the educational hierarchy” (Sherman, 2000, p. 141). These opportunities should be both formal and informal; aspiring leaders need a chance to connect with many different types of leaders. They need a chance to observe mentors in action and then debrief what they have observed. They also need opportunities to build relationships with mentors who encourage and guide them through career transitions. Organizations should make efforts to encourage various opportunities for potential leaders; especially, if an organization identifies an “old boys’ club,” efforts should be made to create counter opportunities where females are targeted. Additionally, it is the obligation of female leaders to mold and support young women of potential; current female leaders need to actively encourage and nudge new teachers to take on leadership roles, aspire to leadership positions, and mentor them. In short, there needs to be more of “Hey, do you want to grab a coffee after work?” in addition to the formal programs offered by divisions. Hannah suggested that women need to “find a person they consider their true north.” It is critical that women have opportunities to develop real and meaningful relationships with other women that they aspire to be.

Second, organizations need to be aware of the “old boys’ club” and be intentional about creating a culture where identified skills and achievement are recognized. Gruenert and Whitaker (2015) offer a matrix tool that is intended to help school leaders plot where individual teachers fall within a school’s culture. The tool is helpful in determining who has influence over whom and of those, who is exhibiting the qualities the school is desirous of. It may be helpful for school divisions interested in exploring their own “old boys’ club” to use this tool. Of your school leaders, who is connected to whom? Who is influencing whom? Is that what you want? What might you do about it? Gruenert and Whitaker’s (2019) most recent work on school culture encourages us to realize that organizational culture is like a movie – people will fill the roles that exist in the script.

Using the matrix tool to explore the connections between current and, aspiring leaders may provide valuable insight into an organization's current script and, perhaps, prompt a rewrite.

Third, all leaders need to recognize and understand how our society and organizations continue to be rooted in a patriarchal system. In the ATA report, 65 percent of males disagreed that males have a greater chance of advancement in leadership positions, whereas 60 percent of females stated that men have a greater chance of advancement. We understand and talk about how "gendered power relations impact interpersonal dynamic, decisions, and development" (Bierema, 2016 in Alberta Teachers' Association, 2020, p. 15). Organizations must actively work to dismantle the patriarchal system in place by calling out gendered language and behaviour in the workplaces. Women need to share their experiences with each other in an effort to create an expectation of new norms.



# Conclusion

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Having female leaders in our school system is not just for a sense of equality, or to ensure proportional representation of the larger teaching profession. It is for the girls we teach and lead. When they see females as teachers, and only men in leadership positions, we perpetuate an idea that men lead and women follow, and we continue to transmit a patriarchal worldview from generation to generation. As we come to the end of our project, we acknowledge the determined women who paved the way for us, the strong women who serve as our role models and mentors today, and hope that our work will “make the mountain taller” for the ones who come after us:

“I stand  
on the sacrifices  
of a million women before me  
thinking  
*what can I do*  
to make this mountain taller  
so the women after me  
*can see farther*”  
- legacy (Kaur, 2017, p. 213)

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