

Principalship and Gender A Case Study, Theoretical Analysis, and Applied Policy Implications

Dr. Glynn W. B. Sharpe

Faculty of Education, Nipissing University
100 College Drive, North Bay, Ontario, Canada
P1B 8L7, Canada

Abstract

Leaders and individuals in positions of power can encounter many obstacles when making and enforcing rules and values. Issues of gender can also convolute leadership issues. The following paper presents an examination of the issues and confusion that have been experienced within a school and community. More specifically, the academic issues are discussed with respect to the administrative style of the school principal and the resulting upheaval that this style has produced. Moreover, the impacts that the principal's gender may have had on the academic community and the many barriers women face as principals are also addressed. The paper concludes with suggested recommendations that could be implemented to assist the parties involved as they work towards a more harmonious learning environment.

Keywords: Education, Principalship, Gender, Marginalization, Leadership, Policy, Theory.

“I have had to make a number of difficult decisions this year regarding discipline and dress code and I have been openly attacked for doing so. I truly believe if I were a male and principal of this school, there wouldn't be this kind of aggressive challenge to my leadership. It's been exhausting.”

Ms. Edison (not her real name)...Principal

1.0 Introduction

Gender is a term firmly rooted in culture that describes the characteristics that we apply to people because of their sex and the manner in which we *believe* they should behave based upon our cultural expectations of what is considered male and female (Shakeshaft, 1987). Being a female in a male dominated position may influence how others view both the position and the person in the position of power. Power is the ability to act and the capability of producing an effect, whether the effect is physical or moral (Webster, 1997). Thus, the manner in which power is distributed may differ based on gender; however, it is also possible that one's power may be interpreted differently depending on their gender. The significance of gender and power are pertinent to Ms. Edison's statement above and these will be examined and reflected upon throughout this paper. Finally, by virtue of gender, an individual in a position of power may be marginalized. Marginalization refers to the overt or covert acts and trends within societies whereby those perceived as lacking function or desirable traits are excluded from existing systems of protectionism, thus limiting the means for effective interaction (Mullay, 2007). The unfortunate marginalization of a leader in an academic community will be demonstrated and highlighted. The paper begins with a brief outline of the circumstances that led to the principal's disclosure. This will allow for a theoretical analysis of the scenario from this perspective. I will conclude with a number of recommendations that may assist the staff, students, and the greater community to work more collaboratively.

2.0 Background

The above quote was an excerpt from a principal under siege. The comment was shared in passing between Ms. Edison and myself during the height of the upheaval that profoundly affected the staff, students and community the school served. Needless to say, the challenge from the parent group that opposed Ms. Edison's leadership left her shaken, yet determined to stand behind all of the decisions she made as principal of the school. Parental involvement in the inner workings of a school can take many forms. It can be collective in nature or inherently dangerous (Acker, 1999). The latter dimension of Acker's point on how parents can affect a school became readily apparent. During a staff meeting, our principal announced to the staff that a petition had been sent to the Director of Education asking that she be immediately removed from the school. In the letter, the parent group outlined a series of complaints regarding Ms. Edison's administrative style as principal. More specifically, the parent group believed Ms. Edison to be overly harsh in the way that she spoke to her students and in the severity of the consequences delivered to those students who violated the school's rules. The parent group was particularly unhappy that an end of the year grade eight-graduation trip had already been cancelled within the first term of the school year.

The parent group believed that the entire graduating class was being punished for the actions of just a few of the senior students. The most contentious issue, however, was the strict enforcement of the board's dress code policy. The parents accused Ms. Edison of patrolling the school halls in search of inappropriate attire. The school staff was also involved with the issues being faced by Ms. Edison. During a staff meeting, Ms. Edison indicated that the Board's Superintendent was fully supporting Ms. Edison and that a meeting was being arranged between the parent group and board officials so that the issues could be addressed in a fair, open, and judicious manner. Following the meeting, the staff felt caught and concerned with what might happen in the future. Not surprisingly, the staff's fears were justified as students became aware of the circumstances. Growing knowledge among the school community ultimately led to a deterioration of both staff and student morale. An oppressive air of uncertainty began to permeate the school. Opposing camps of opinion became apparent. Parents who were not included in the original petition letter and who felt Ms. Edison was doing an admirable job wrote a letter of support and sent it directly to the Board of Education office.

The School Board continuously and openly supported Ms. Edison and did so with a letter to those parents opposed to the school's principal. The board also invited both staff and parents to attend a meeting in the school's auditorium so that the issues could be discussed in an open and hospitable manner. The Superintendent of the school board held a meeting with over 125 staff, students, and parents in attendance. Questions and concerns were raised (e.g. discipline, dress code, etc.) and answered according to both the school and school board policies. The meeting was adjourned; however, the problems continued to simmer. A second letter was delivered to the Board office stating that the parent group was dissatisfied with the outcome of the meeting and stated that they would continue to seek Ms. Edison's dismissal. A micro political struggle within the school and the community at large was being waged. Power and influence was being wielded by opposing sides in hope of achieving preferred outcomes regarding dress code and discipline policies (Blase, 1989). A new school year approached under an umbrella of hostility and uncertainty.

3.0 A Theoretical Analysis

The issues and concerns portrayed in the school environment can be classified into a number of theoretical perspectives. Following multiple discussions with the academic community and observing the environment, it was apparent that the circumstances, which ignited the hostility, could be understood better through an examination of existing theoretical perspectives. Considering the scope and magnitude of the case, a number of theories could be successfully applied.

3.1 Four Paradigms of Social Theory

In viewing the school environment through a social perspective, it is apparent that aspects of Burrell and Morgan's (1979) four paradigms of social theory are particularly useful when examining this situation. The paradigms are Functionalism, the Interpretive Paradigm, Radical Structuralism, and Radical Humanism.

The first paradigm postulated by Burrell and Morgan has been labelled the Functionalist Approach. This approach adheres to order and equilibrium and is rooted in objectivism and structure. This paradigm outlines that with each problem that surfaces, there is an applicable formula for its resolution.

The second paradigm is entitled the Interpretive Paradigm, which purports a subjective yet ordered existence. Personal experiences play a major role in how the individual constructs his or her reality within their own world. In this paradigm, it is believed that there are too many rules that bind and restrict individuals.

The Radical Structuralism paradigm suggests that conflict brings about change and that chaos is a natural feature of the world we live in. The notion that we all have different visions, beliefs, and values causes surface tension in our everyday lives.

The final paradigm postulated by Burrell and Morgan is Radical Humanism. A Radical Humanist believes that we do need rules and regulations in our lives, but that the existing structures in place benefit only a few. This paradigm also suggests that subjectivity is an integral part within a conflicted world.

In viewing the school communities circumstances, it appears apparent that the issues can be explained through the Functionalist and Interpretive Paradigms. More specifically, it seems that the principal is functioning under the Functionalist Paradigm whereas the community at large would prefer that she functions within the Interpretive Paradigm. These conflicting views on how the school should function are likely the root of many of those issues involving the principal and many in the community.

3.2 Style and Philosophy

The administrative style and philosophy of education adapted by Ms. Edison can best be understood through Burrell and Morgan's Functionalist paradigm and the philosophical, psychological, and social implications that is associated with it. A Functionalist theorist would view schools as a special environment, which requires the enforcement of traditional rules of controlled group interactions (Postman, 1979). Ms. Edison has clearly shown, both formally and informally, that "the rules are the rules," and that "they are set in stone," regardless of the individual and any extenuating circumstances that may or may not apply to any given circumstance. In order to maintain this environment, a Functionalist would endorse discipline and order; moreover, Functionalists would stress that those students who are not able to follow the clearly outlined rules and code of conduct should be punished (Postman, 1979). Ms. Edison's school rules and code of conduct are strategically placed throughout the school and are enforced to the letter. There are no exceptions as Ms. Edison is clear and consistent regarding behavioural expectations.

The Functionalists approach can be demonstrated through some of the actions of the principal. For example, the school's dress code policy has been a controversial issue for many members of the community. Opinions on issues such as dress code can become contentious and oppressive. Although some professionals believe that schools should enforce a dress code because dress codes signify that a school, in fact, is a special place that requires certain types of behaviour (Postman, 1979), others do not share this opinion. In the present case, the board of education has reflected Postman's opinion on dress code in its Code of Behaviour and Expectations and Ms. Edison, in the functionalist manner, has taken a very literal interpretation of the Code of Behaviour and Expectations for students. Thus, Ms. Edison ensures that students who fail to comply with the dress code are reprimanded and denied the "regular privileges," (e.g. recess, school trips, etc) afforded those students that fall in line with the school and board-wide regulations. Ms. Edison believes that the school is indeed a *special place* and that it is our responsibility as teachers and educational administrators to convey what is considered to be acceptable behaviour among the student body.

Individuals writing from a Functionalist perspective have stressed that the most important values to be impressed upon young students are the abilities to get along with others and to accept the teacher's and principal's authority both within and outside of the classroom (Morrison, 1940). Other important values for Morrison include the students' willingness to accept the consequences of their actions, a sense of fair play when interacting with fellow students, a respect for others and their property, and cooperation and obedience to authority figures (Morrison, 1940). Ms. Edison has adopted these values into the school setting and she enforces these by reprimanding anyone who does not cooperate or who defies these rules. Thus, the values outlined by Morrison are continuously impressed upon the student body with school assemblies often being used as a vehicle for this message. Therefore, consciously or unconsciously, Ms. Edison has assumed many of the ideals present within the Functionalist paradigm. Thus, the atmosphere that the school principal has created on the school's campus is one of order, discipline, and consistency. However, when those who are to abide by the values and rules imposed upon them disagree in either the manner in which they are enforced or with the details of the value or rule itself, there is the potential for an atmosphere plagued by hostility and mistrust.

3.3 Voices of Dissension

Following rules and values is something we must all do everyday in order to reduce chaos and confusion. However, the rules and values placed by an individual in a position of power may not be agreeable to all. It is clearly stated above that a person in a position of power, in this case a school principal, has some clearly defined and specific rules and values under which she is running a school environment. However, in this case, there are a number of parents, students, and community members who vehemently oppose the rules and values in place and who may also oppose the principal herself. More specifically, the parents and students believe that Ms. Edison's administrative style is antiquated, ineffective, and domineering. These individuals have expressed concern regarding a number of issues. For example, the opposing group has noted that individuality, in the form of personal clothing choices, is being denied by the school principal. Thus, the parent group has expressed their concern for many of the rules and issues that are being implemented by the school's principal. Considering Burrell and Morgan's four paradigms, I believe that the parents desire an administrator who falls within the Interpretive Paradigm; however, as stated above, the principal appears to adopt a Functionalist paradigm. As stated, the Interpretivist believes in an ordered, but subjective social existence. An individual is able to construct his/her own reality within their world (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Thus, the parent group does not appear to want rules diminished, but instead they desire the rules allow for personal influences.

One who adheres to the Interpretive Paradigm feels that there are too many rules imposed upon the individual (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). A common argument among the parent group that opposes Ms. Edison's leadership is that there are far too many rules in place and that there is no flexibility in the structure imposed upon the students. Parents would like to have each situation analyzed *individually* with full consideration given to any circumstances that might have contributed to any student's perceived rule violation. Social order within the school is desired, but viewed through a more *subjective* lens of perception. Rigidity should be replaced by flexibility and decisions should be based on individual interpretation of the existing social reality within the school. Carl Rogers (1969) has provided a model of human interaction that I believe the parent group would like to see adopted by the school's administration. Rogers outlined three areas that facilitate healthy human relations: genuineness or the ability to be in tune with one's own feelings and those of the people around you; regard or the ability to convey respect for the individuals concerns, feelings and values; and empathy or the ability to understand another's perceptions and being able to put oneself into another's shoes. Thus, the parent group may believe that Ms. Edison fails to demonstrate these attributes on a consistent basis when dealing with their children.

Furthermore, I believe the parent group could describe Ms. Edison as a "closed school principal," in that she is viewed as authoritarian, inaccessible, inflexible, and unsupportive (Blase, 1990). Therefore, those who resent Ms. Edison's administrative style may desire a more approachable and communicative principal who appreciates a student's perspective. Although the parent group does not feel that rules and values should be diminished altogether, they do believe that the manner in which the rules and values are enforced is antagonistic and malevolent. The parent group would likely prefer to have a person in a position of power in the school to adapt the Interpretative paradigm in the delegation of rules and values. Thus, the parent group would likely prefer a leader who does enforce rules but who does this with more *subjectively*. Therefore, it is clear that many of the students and parents do not agree on the manner in which the school's principal is exerting her power. It has been stated that this difference of opinion and combative environment may be due to the principal's and communities differences in views of rules and values. However, it should also be noted that the issue of gender might play a part in the antagonistic atmosphere that has been created. Given that the person in the position of power, namely the school's principal, is female may impact the way that the community views her and the position that she is in.

4.0 The Barriers Women Face

By virtue of gender, the manner in which one is viewed, perceived, evaluated, judged, and supported may significantly differ. There is general agreement that women face more barriers to becoming leaders than do men do, especially for leader roles that are male-dominated (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). Thus, delegating and enforcing from a position of power may be complicated simply based on the gender of the person who is in the power position with females encountering more hurdles and biased opposition. Prejudice toward female leaders can be demonstrated through two distinct forms and is based solely on how the genders are viewed. Thus, a women's *potential* for effective and meaningful leadership can be viewed in a less favourable manner because leadership abilities are normally associated with men more so than women (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). Furthermore, a less favourable evaluation of the *actual* leadership behaviour of women may be undervalued because strong, authoritative behaviour is perceived as less desirable in women than men (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). Ultimately, then, women are initially evaluated less favorably than equally competent men (Shakeshaft, 1987).

Therefore, Ms. Edison may have been quite accurate in her assessment of the impact of her gender on the opinions and actions of others. For example, the decisions that the principal had to make regarding behaviour and dress code were very difficult; however, had a male principal made these same decisions, his actions would have been more likely interpreted as "strong" as opposed to "unfair." More often than not, men have dominated positions of power within schools as headmasters and principals. The prejudice women may encounter in leadership roles, especially when these roles have been historically male-dominated, is daunting. (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). Ms. Edison's demeanor appears to go against the cultural grain of what is deemed "acceptable behaviour," from a woman. The prejudice against women leaders is particularly strong when women behave in an especially masculine style. (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001) and according to Lee (as cited in Shakeshaft, 1995) males evaluate females more harshly. Would Ms. Edison's leadership have been as aggressively challenged if she were a male? I do not think that it would have been; however, I believe that this is a question open to speculation and debate. Lee's point that males evaluate females more harshly is particularly applicable in this case.

It was the men of the community who spearheaded the petition drive to remove Ms. Edison from the school. Men in positions of power are allowed much greater behavioural latitude than are women in similar situations (Carli, 2001). A man's likeableness and his influence on people depend much less on his communication style than do a woman's (Carli, 2001). Women who lead in an authoritative manner receive less favourable evaluations than women who lead in what is seen as a more democratic fashion. (Carli, 2001) Ms. Edison's leadership style is viewed as undemocratic and has been interpreted as stiff and unyielding. Moreover, men appear to receive equally favourable evaluations of their leadership regardless of their use of an autocratic, authoritarian or democratic style of leadership (Carli, 2001). I believe Ms. Edison, a woman in a position of power and considerable influence, is the victim of gender stereotyping and its long reaching implications. Women who prove to be competent and have succeeded at what has been traditionally "men's work," violate what is considered normal and acceptable behaviour. Women, in this regard, arouse disapproval and are penalized for this disruption. Women are regarded very differently than men who engage in precisely the same type of behaviour (Heilman, 2001). This, without a doubt, has been the case in this particular situation. Men, as stated, have traditionally assumed leadership roles in educational settings. This has helped shape societies perceptions about which gender group has the right to control education (Richards, 2002).

5.0 Conclusions

Decisions, rules, and values are implemented and enforced by individuals in positions of power. However, those who the rules and values are imposed on may choose not to respect them. A number of reasons why rules and values may not be followed have been discussed and include personal styles, opinions, and gender. Thus, when enforcement styles are not palatable to those who must follow rules, when opinions differ on how issues should be dealt with or enforced, and when the gender of the person in the power position is viewed as a hindrance, the system in which the rules, values, and decisions are being implemented may not function smoothly. Although it is possible to resolve issues, it may be particularly difficult when all participants are not willing to communicate appropriately. A number of possible solutions to the issues currently being faced by the school community are presented below. Although these are not meant to be an ultimate resolution to the issues being dealt with, they are likely early proactive measures that can be implemented in order to reduce the tension being faced.

5.1 Recommendations

Given the turmoil at the school and in the community, it is pertinent that a number of issues be addressed which include the principal's administrative style, the manner in which issues have been addressed by the community, and how these beliefs have impacted both staff and students. Administrative behaviours, policies, and practices in a school have a profound impact on school effectiveness and morale (Edmonds, 1979). There is no statement in this paper that is more telling and to the point. The school resonates with confusion, hostility, and unanswered questions that must be addressed. A mediator has been suggested but not yet implemented in this particular case. Much work needs to be initiated before the school in question can begin to heal itself. There is no quick fix for these issues; however, some intermediate steps can be taken to attempt to work towards resolving the turmoil. This case is not unlike any situation where there is a wide gulf of opinion on what needs to be done to find a workable solution. Not surprisingly, I believe the correct form of action should include suggestions from both camps. Ms. Edison appreciates and feels most comfortable in an environment that is structured with clearly defined boundaries. The parents desire some flexibility within the structure.

They also want a principal who emotes and is perceived as more approachable and in tune with the needs of the students and the community. According to Blase (1991), the most effective principals are control-oriented and that such control involves a give and take within the normal structure of the school environment. Ideally then, the students would perceive the school Administration as more genuine, empathic, and in tune with their specific needs. A sense of ownership and commitment to the school's behavioural goals can be nurtured. Being a female seems to have a negative impact on how one is perceived and responded to. Although gender does not automatically determine a pattern of communication or modes of conduct, the socialization processes and personal experiences of men and women often differ considerably and, thus, the way that they express themselves and relate to others often differs (Papalewis, 1995). Therefore, by virtue of gender and socialization, women in positions of power will have extremely different experiences than men. Moreover, the manner in which they are responded will also differ. For example, when a female errs she is often not informed of her "mistake," (Shakeshaft, 1987). Thus, instead the perceived "mistake," is corrected without her knowledge. This statement in no way implies that Ms. Edison has made a "mistake."

It is used to highlight the point that a more meaningful and healthy line of communication needs to be established between the parents of the community and administration. Any perceived “problems” should be addressed in an open and honest fashion prior to the involvement of Superintendents and Directors of Education. Would the men of the community have approached a male principal with their concerns head on versus contacting the board office? I believe that they would have. Having said that, I believe Ms. Edison’s gender has had a profound impact on this case. I also feel that there is a real need to address gender stereotyping in the school. Role-playing in drama and media studies that examine traditional gender stereotypes must be an active component of the curriculum in order to stimulate thinking outside of what is considered gender specific. Acker (1999) suggests that women’s typical leadership styles are often superior to those of men and better suited to running effective schools. However, when there is a lack of communication and antagonistic relationships primarily due to the gender of the person in power, it would be difficult for the leader to be effective. Resolving the multitude of issues faced by a school where the leader and community have differing administrative beliefs, styles, and opinions is problematic. Thus, there cannot be one simple solution to the antagonistic relationship that has been established. However, by addressing the differences, opening the lines of communication, and implementing methods to attend to gender stereotypes in the community, it is possible that the existing relationship may begin to heal.

5.3 Discussion

There are many issues that can impact the smooth and harmonious functioning of a large institution such as a school. When different styles, opinions, values, and methods of reprimand collide, the result can be a break down in communication as well as dissention and combative relationships. This paper demonstrated that some of the issues that are apparent in an administrative conflict situation could be explained through differing opinions based on social theory paradigms. Thus, when a principal leads in a Functionalist Paradigm with inflexible rules and a segment of the community would prefer to operate under an Interpretive Paradigm, the results can be chaotic and distressful. If issues of power and gender are a dimension of a work environment then the result may be heightened workplace turmoil. Over time and without intervention, these gender-based issues may become so immense that any type of resolution could very well be impossible. Therefore, early in the development of conflicting opinions, it is vital to allow for open lines of communication in order to bring about meaningful resolution. Moreover, gender issues must be dealt with conscientiously and openly while expressing empathy and understanding for differing opinions. Ultimately, the strategies outlined above will surely help bridge the divide between any two groups that are conflicted.

References

- Acker, S. (Ed). (1999). Parents. In *The Realities of teachers’ work*, (pp. 136-149). New York, NY: Cassell & Continuum,
- Blasé, J. (1989). The teachers political orientation vis-à-vis the principal: The micropolitics of the school, in J. Hannaway & R. Crowson (Eds.) *The Politics of Reforming School Administration* (pp. 113-126). New York: Falmer Press.
- Blase, J. (1991). The micropolitical orientation of teachers toward closed school principals. *Education and Urban Society*, 23(4), 356-378.
- Burrell, G. & Morgan, G. (1979). *Sociological paradigms and organizational analysis*. London: Heineman.
- Carli, L. (2001). Gender and social influence. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57, 725-741.
- Edmonds, R. (1979). Effective schools for the urban poor. *Educational Leadership*, 37,15-23.
- Eagly, H. & Johannesen-Schmidt (2001). The leadership styles of men and women. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57(4), 781-797.
- Heilman, M. (2001) Description and prescription: How gender stereotypes prevent women’s ascent up the organizational ladder. *Journal Of Social Issues*, 57(4), 657-674.
- Morrison, H. C. (1940). *The curriculum of the common school*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Mullaly, B. (2007). Oppression: The focus of structural social work. In B. Mullaly, *The new structural social work* (pp. 252–286). Don Mills: Oxford University Press.
- Papalewis, R. (1995). Fe/male voices: Leadership and the knowledge base. In R. Donmoyer, M. Imber, & J. J. Scheurich (Eds.). *The knowledge base in educational administration*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Postman, N. (1979). *Teaching as a conserving activity*. New York, NY: Dell Books.
- Richards, E. (2002). *Who are we? Understanding oneself as marginal* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). OISE/University of Toronto, Toronto, ON.
- Rogers, C. (1969). *Freedom to learn*. Columbus, OH: Charles Merrill.
- Shakeshaft, C. (1995). A cup half full: A gender critique of the knowledge base in educational administration. In R. Donmoyer, M. Imber, & J. J. Scheurich (Eds.). *The knowledge base in educational administration*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Webster’s New World Dictionary*. (1997). New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, Inc.