

WOMEN AND SECONDARY SCHOOL  
PRINCIPAL ROTATION/SUCCESSION: A STUDY  
OF THE BELIEFS OF DECISION MAKERS IN  
FOUR PROVINCES

*Cecilia Reynolds*  
*University of Saskatchewan*

*Robert White*  
*St. Francis Xavier University*

*Carol Brayman*  
*Ontario Institute for Studies in Education,*  
*University of Toronto*

*Shawn Moore*  
*Ontario Institute for Studies in Education,*  
*University of Toronto*

Our study investigated patterns of female participation as secondary principals that have varied across contexts and changed slowly. Researchers interviewed decision makers from a purposive sample of 10 urban and rural school districts in Ontario, Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia, gathering data from structured telephone interviews, policy documents, and statistical information. The needs of a system took precedence over those of individuals. Many participants denied that gender influenced their rotation/succession practices; however, they identified differences by gender in leadership style and aspirations. Complex rules of control affected the participation of women as secondary principals. Gender clearly affects the participation of women as secondary school principals.

Key words: gender, leadership, schools

Les auteurs analysent les modes de participation de directrices d'école secondaire, lesquels varient d'un contexte à l'autre et changent lentement. Ils ont interviewé des décideuses provenant d'un échantillon choisi à dessein de dix arrondissements scolaires urbains et ruraux en Ontario, en Nouvelle-Écosse, en Saskatchewan et en Colombie-Britannique. Les données furent colligées au moyen d'entrevues téléphoniques structurées, le tout complété par l'analyse de documents de politiques et de renseignements statistiques. Leurs conclusions semblent indiquer que les besoins du système l'emportent sur les besoins de la personne. Un grand nombre des répondantes contestaient l'idée que le fait d'être un homme ou une femme exerce une influence sur les méthodes de rotation/succession ; elles notaient par contre des différences selon les sexes pour ce qui est du style de leadership, des orientations et des aspirations. Des règles complexes de contrôle affectent la participation des femmes à titre de directrices d'école secondaire. Le sexe affecte clairement la participation des femmes en tant que directrices d'école secondaire.

Mots clés : genre, leadership, écoles

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By the middle of the twentieth century in Canada, as in many other countries, the majority of teachers were women while the majority of school principals were men. There have been proportionately fewer women teaching in Canadian secondary schools as compared to men and even fewer women historically who have been appointed as principals of secondary schools, especially non-religious and/or co-educational schools. For example, in the Toronto Board of Education in 1940, only 4 of the 88 elementary principals were women (4%) and only 2 of 18 secondary principals were women (11%). By 1980, 15 of 105 elementary Toronto principals were women (14%) and 4 of 31 secondary principals were women (13%) (Reynolds, 1995). This historical trend in the participation of women in the principalship shows a modest increase over these 40 years but one could question, as we do in this article, why the rate of change was so slow, what might have been happening in other contexts, and what is the situation today.

It is difficult to obtain recent statistics because numbers are often no longer available by gender; many places now combine elementary and secondary schools so that we could not see patterns only for secondary school principalships. Within the Canadian statistics that we could find,

we see that across Ontario in 1998, 28 per cent of secondary principals were women and by 2000, that had risen to 44 per cent (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2002-2003). In Nova Scotia, from 1975 to 2000, the percentage of women who were school principals of either elementary or secondary schools hovered around 26 per cent (Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 2002). In Saskatchewan, between 1985 and 1998, it has hovered around 17 per cent (Saskatchewan Education, 1998), and in British Columbia, while only 12 per cent of elementary and secondary principals were women in 1986, that percentage increased to 27 per cent by 1995 (British Columbia Teachers' Federation, [2006]).<sup>1</sup> This article contributes to the literature on rotation/succession by taking a systems-level perspective and by asking questions about how gender may continue to play a role in decisions about who becomes a school principal and how and when principals should be moved from one school to another. It investigates how "rules of control" (Clegg, 1981, p. 545) and other social processes operate to affect women's participation rates as secondary principals.

The statistical trends we have uncovered show that in many parts of Canada, there are more women principals now than in the 1940s or even the 1980s, but, do these statistics support a view that women are taking over this role? How do district administrators account for variations across provinces and the relatively slow changes in women's participation rates at the secondary level? Our 2003-2006 study of decision makers across four provinces was designed to investigate rotation/succession policies and practices regarding secondary principals in those provinces. All participants were asked, "What are your impressions of career opportunities for males and female administrators in your board in terms of promotion and advancement? This includes rotation between schools." "In your experience, are there any factors related to advancement that might differ in relation to gender?" One participant made the following comment:

You're seeing a lot more females with secondary training beyond their teaching degree now than you saw before. Therefore that makes them eligible for administration. . . . There's definitely a return to women in education. It's almost scary at the university levels because men are leaving. . . . It's especially noticeable in Saskatchewan . . . graduation classes of hundreds and you can

count the men on two hands. . . . [Nevertheless] most of the principals from inner city places like Regina are predominantly male. Now why that is I don't know – did they apply or were they placed there or did nobody want the job? (executive of administrators' association).

This comment suggests that there may be more going on regarding the rotation and succession practices in Saskatchewan or elsewhere than statistical trends can reveal. Another decision maker in our study, when asked to consider the question of patterns regarding women's participation as secondary principals, offered these comments:

Fifteen years ago there were one or two secondary school female principals and the balance at that time [in 24 or 25 schools] were male. That has shifted with more females coming into the role of principal. I haven't done any analysis (to see) if females have moved more frequently than males. I think what's happened is that the males have retired or moved on to other assignments, some through promotion and some because of retirement. As a result, we've identified new principals . . . increasingly more females have come into the role. I don't know if they've stayed any longer ([female] urban district staff person, [Ontario]).

What are the current patterns of women's participation in the secondary principalship in different provinces across the country? Is it true, as the above quotation suggests, that educators will see more women in that role in the future? The authors of this article constructed a study in 2003 to investigate these and other questions about current leadership succession and rotation practices and policies in Canada.

#### OUR STUDY IN THE CONTEXT OF OTHER RESEARCH LITERATURE

Although some Canadian and American scholars have looked closely at concerns related to leadership rotation and succession, few if any of these scholars have examined them at the system level or considered the link between rotation and succession issues and gender. Because the beliefs of decision makers about who should take on a new principalship (succession) or who should be moved to or from a principalship and when (rotation) bears strongly on who can and does become a principal, we have studied the beliefs and practices of a selected sample of decision makers across four Canadian provinces. Our study is an extension of the work by Hargreaves, Moore, Fink, Brayman, and White (2003) that was

sponsored by the Ontario Principals' Council. We also considered other studies that focused on rotation and/or succession for school leaders (Aquila, 1989; Boese, 1991; Fink & Brayman, 2006; Macmillan, 2000; Macmillan, Meyer, & Northfield, 2004). Each of these studies, it is fair to say, concluded that "Sustainable improvement that benefits all students depends not only on individual leaders having the right traits and being trained in the right skills. It also depends on a process of successful succession" (Hargreaves et al., 2003, p. 89).

The need for effective leadership rotation/succession strategies has become more apparent because of the loss of experienced leaders to retirement in many school districts and the growing crisis in such districts for the recruitment and training of new leaders. In this context, Canadian and American scholars have investigated the effects of leadership rotation/succession on school leaders and the social, emotional, and cultural implications for school improvement. For example, Hargreaves and Fink (2006), in *Sustainable Leadership*, argue that effective leadership succession requires a coherent plan to coordinate the flow of leaders from one school to another, to emphasize the transfer of knowledge from the outgoing leader to the incoming leader, and to be sensitive to the emotional, social, and cultural upheaval that principal rotation and succession often generate. In this article, we support such claims and also advocate for the development and implementation of a coherent succession plan; we add that it needs to be one that includes a consideration of gender and perhaps other areas such as ethnicity or race.

Other studies have also focused on the outcomes of rotation and/or succession policies and practices for schools and/or for individual principals (Aquila, 1989; Boese, 1991; Fink & Brayman, 2006; Macmillan, Meyer, & Northfield, 2004; Macmillan, 2000). These studies, an important part of the picture, reveal how acceptance levels and required efforts for male and female school leaders vary from context to context, change over time, are not always predictable, and are often not controlled by the leaders (Collard & Reynolds, 2005). Individual principals are affected by district or system level policies and practices concerning leadership succession and rotation.

### USEFUL THEORETICAL FRAMES

In this article, decision makers' beliefs take centre stage. The beliefs under scrutiny here are those revealed in interviews of the sample in the study from which we draw evidence for our study. Although beliefs are held by individuals, we look across groups of individuals in similar roles, finding insight into what many theorists have named as "hegemony" – the "organized assemblage of meanings and practices, the central, effective and dominant system of meanings, values and actions that are lived" (Apple, 1979, p. 5). Such hegemony is sometimes referred to as organizational culture or as the collective mental programs of the people in an organization (Hunt, 1991). Others have identified this phenomenon as the construction and maintenance of "ideological frames" that become normalized so that such a set of ideas become "common sense" to members of the organization, and the beliefs that underpin the frames are largely rendered invisible (Ng, 1995, p. 36).

Those who attempt to study gender are quite familiar with a number of ways in which it tends to be "invisible." Sometimes this invisibility is explained by the documented claim that in many current cultures gender has become a binary social construct that posits only two categories – male and female – and that these categories are defined in opposition to one another: i.e., what is male is not female and what is female is not male. This oppositional view of gender categories often rests on assumptions or overt claims that biological facts support gender differences and that the gender relations that we know are natural and/or are just the way society is organized. What is particularly problematic about the view of gender as a male/female oppositional binary construct is that the construct has traditionally placed female as the less desirable or deficit category. The oppositional construct has also fostered a zero-sum view whereby any gains made by one gender group are a loss to the other gender group (Connell, 1987; Davies, 2003). All these aspects of gender can encourage people, such as decision makers, to deny complicity in any type of unfairness related to gender.

Argyris (1985, 1990) argues that when people do not want to admit that they may have a role in unfair processes, they adopt "organizational defensive routines" (p. 43). One such routine is denial of practices, another is a reticence to admit to flaws in practices, and related to that

reticence is a denial of any personal responsibility for such flaws or of any responsibility for correcting them. Argyris (1990) explains it this way:

Not only does such denial blind us to what is going on, but it also makes us blind to the fact that we are designing our own blindness. Organizational denial and the delusions that make it possible to deny the denial can lead to organizations that are strangled by their own defenses. And even that has to be denied. (p. 156)

Researchers exploring gender in school organizations have repeatedly noted that the perspective that gender has never been or is no longer an issue for school administration is a form of denial expressed by numerous interview participants in studies across Canada (Reynolds & Young, 1995; Wallace, 2004), the United States (Dunlop & Schmuck, 1995; Shakeshaft, 1989; Wallin, 2004), Britain (Hall, 1997), and Australia (Blackmore, 1999). What researchers in these and other countries have found, however, is that, despite such denials, investigations of men's and women's experiences reveal that patterns of discrimination and disadvantage persist for many women, especially those who wish to take on administrative roles in school settings (Collard & Reynolds, 2005; Wallace, 2006; Young, 2004). One female senior administrator in a rural school district in our study expressed it this way:

Gender's always a factor. Are we allowed to weight it? No. But of course it's a factor. I mean as you, I'm sure, know through practice . . . typical hiring policies and practices are 'masculinist' in orientation so, therefore, favour men. . . . We would always make sure there's a woman on the interview committee . . . to avoid grievance. . . . Gender would influence decision making if all other factors are equal. . . . If you ask the men, they will tell you that women have made great gains. We have far more women in school administrative positions than in the past. If you ask the women, they'll tell you that things haven't changed much. . . . There are more of them but the barriers are all still there. . . . If you don't have any women doing the hiring one could argue that gender issues will continue to prevail because they're invisible to the men. . . . One of our leaders in equity and social justice in the area is a man, so I'm not suggesting that it's as simple as being male/female — but it still is there. . . . Are we making progress? I would say yes. Right now . . ., we have eight high schools and two women principals. ([female] administrator in a school district, [Nova Scotia])

Declaring that educators are making progress with regard to women's participation in leadership roles is a simplistic response to a complex issue. Women's participation rates vary over time and by context, and their participation rates are slow to change. Race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation can be factors that often interact with gender (Collard & Reynolds, 2005). These data have led researchers to conclude repeatedly that, despite claims that gender is no longer an issue in school systems, the need for extra efforts continues if many women and certain other individuals are to be found acceptable as leaders in school settings. The argument for the need for extra efforts for women, Aboriginals, and many others rests not only on a social justice platform, but on a practical claim that diverse student groups need to see diverse leaders. Ryan (2003) puts it this way:

A starting point here is that the interests of groups of students who are identified as "different" or "minority" will best be served in schools that employ inclusive practices. Inclusive schools welcome, accommodate, and celebrate diversity, uniqueness, and individuality. (p. 82)

Pragmatically, schools need to use the entire pool of potential leaders to find those who are best able to serve the organization. Are current policies and practices related to rotation/succession giving equal consideration to men and women or to those of "different" cultural backgrounds? In 2003, the authors of this article set out to improve our understanding of how current policies and practices work and what outcomes result. In our study, we used the theoretical concepts just described (hegemony, oppositional gender categories, and denial), as well as Clegg's (1981) "rules of control" to question why women's participation rates as secondary principals vary across contexts and why these rates have been relatively slow to change.

As has already been mentioned, many studies of rotation/succession practices and their outcomes have focused upon individuals. Indeed, movement into or across leadership roles in organizations is frequently seen as primarily the result of the efforts and circumstances of individuals. Carlson (1979) explains:



Hard work, perseverance, skill, talent, creativity and similar attributes are evoked and attached to those who have successful careers. . . . No matter what influence such attributes have on the tracing of a career, the evoking of them is comforting and confirms a belief in justice. (p. 29)

A useful construct that allowed us to explore forces other than those described by Carlson are Clegg's (1981) "organizational rules of control" (p. 545). Clegg looks, not at the individual, but at the complex and inter-related mechanisms that can be identified as working across an organization to define and limit outcomes of the various policies and practices within the organization. He identifies a cluster or web of rules – technical, social-regulative, extra-organizational, strategic, and state – that affect activities and outcomes within an organization.

Technical rules, according to Clegg (1981) govern "how things are done around here" (p. 546). He has shown that some of these technical rules are formalized as policies or written regulations/requirements, while others are unwritten and largely understood by the old-timers, the insiders, or the dominant groups within the culture of the organization. Social regulative rules of control govern who can be seen as "a full organizational member, as someone who fits in . . ." (Mills, 1989, p. 38). Strategic rules develop when the overall good of the organization seems to demand them. These rules frequently govern who comes to be seen as the right person for particular jobs or roles at a given point in time. State rules, which come from the government, may affect how people must be dealt with in processes such as hiring or firing. The fifth type of rule of control within Clegg's framework is the extra-organizational rule, a set of rules not written into law, as with state rules, but rules that are more culturally based. Such rules may be linked to religious or societal understandings, beliefs, or norms.

#### THE STUDY

We designed this study in three phases to investigate principal rotation and succession patterns at a system level in four Canadian provinces representing a wide range of population demographics (Statistics Canada, 2001). The first phase examined a criterion-based selected sample of four school districts in Ontario (a rural Catholic and rural public; an urban/suburb Catholic and urban/suburban public). In phase two, we

collected data across Nova Scotia (one rural and one urban district) and Saskatchewan (one urban and one rural district). In the third phase, we found a similar criterion-based selected sample of school divisions (rural and urban) for British Columbia. A total of 10 school districts comprised our final sample. In all but one district we interviewed the Director or Superintendent, our point of initial contact, and another district staff administrator who took part in rotation or succession decision making (identified by the Director/Superintendent), as well as the Board Chair or a Board member (identified by the Director/Superintendent if the chair were unavailable). We also sought out the leaders of any province-wide principals' or administrators' organization and leaders in the teachers' federations. We did not select decision makers by gender because we focused on ensuring a sample of rural and urban districts across the four provinces. We did, however, note the gender of our participants in the data.

Data were collected by means of one-hour, one-time, taped, telephone interviews with our selected decision makers in each district.

Total N= 33 (24 males; 9 females):

9 Directors/Superintendents of Education (8 males; 1 female)

8 District staff (4 males; 4 females)

9 School Board members (5 male; 4 female)

5 Provincial leaders (5 males);

2 Principals (1 male; 1 female)

We chose the particular provinces to represent variability in educational policies, demographic contexts, and governance structures, and they were provinces where members of the research team had some experience as educators. We selected the specific school districts in each of the four provinces from provincial maps and website information to ensure that we could make comparisons between urban/rural and small /large districts in each province. We listed the school districts in each province in rural/urban and small/large categories and selected a random sample from districts by category until we found enough districts willing to participate to complete our criterion-based sample. Our Ontario sample was larger than that for the other provinces because it was in the first phase and also included both public and separate school

districts, which are not distinct in some other provinces. In the second and third phases, diminishing resources meant that we needed to scale back our original sample size to stay within budget.

In our interviews, we used a structured protocol that focused on (a) individual and school factors most significant when planning for principal rotation; (b) respondent's impressions of career opportunities for male and female high school principals and senior administrators; (c) the relationship between career advancement and gender; (d) those responsible for principal rotation decisions; (e) professional development for new and experienced principals; (f) trends in the high school principal's role over time; (g) the district's succession planning process; and (h) future challenges regarding principal rotation and succession.

We transcribed and coded interview data according to school district location and size (urban = 6 or more high schools, or rural = 5 or fewer high schools), province, provincial organization, interviewee position, and gender. We supplemented this interview data with relevant district and provincial education policy documents, archival and statistical information, as well as results from surveys conducted by our participants and reports they provided.

Our broad strategy of data analysis enabled us to identify themes and issues (hypothesized and unexpected) that emerged across interview subjects and district/provincial contexts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The relatively small sample, however, limits generalization from the study. Although we must be careful about generalizing our findings, the insights provided are helpful and increase educators' knowledge about the phenomenon under investigation.

## FINDINGS

Two major themes relevant to the discussion in this article emerged from our data. One was the agreement among our participants to place the needs of the overall system above the needs of any individual leader, whether male or female. Another way of putting this observation is to see the leader as servant to the system. Such a leadership definition appeared repeatedly as an ideal in our interviews. The following comment is similar to many others we heard:

[T]here is a profile of a person who is a natural leader, whose management skills can be developed, whose instructional leadership skills then can be supported, but the character of the individuals is very much an important part of it . . . we would say it is a person for whom the job is not them. The job is not about me. My job is to serve. I'm not in this job to serve my ego. ([male] executive of a principals' association)

Using Clegg's perspective on rules of control, we interpret this finding as revealing a technical rule in use across the systems we studied. That rule, although unwritten, specified that decision makers see those who can serve a system's needs as a first priority as the most worthy of receiving opportunities. When decisions need to be made about who should move and where they should go, this technical rule comes into play. This quotation illustrates how this can work:

[T]here is varying language around what we call transfer and in some cases that language includes some kind of consultation process where the principal who is being moved has some input . . . that being said, this so-called consultation is almost non-existent and what actually happens is that school boards simply look at the pool of people who are in their year of scheduled transfer and make more or less arbitrary decisions with very little input from those in the field. ([male] executive of principals' association)

Although in and of itself such a rule does not appear to have anything to do with gender, if it is combined with what Clegg calls extra-organizational rules that spell out what society or other cultural forces say men and women can and should do, this rule can affect other seemingly gender neutral perspectives such as an assessment of an individual's merit or their hard work. Views about family as priority for women or about men needing to protect women, or women not as able to discipline students can affect decisions about their suitability as leaders. Many senior administrators in our study articulated what they perceived as distinctive female leadership traits, attitudes, and behaviours. Some respondents suggested that females display a particular set of leadership traits that distinguish them from male leaders. Namely, women leaders are more socially "intuitive," "collaborative," "collegial," "consultative," as well as "emotionally responsive," "nurturing," and "motherly." To

illustrate how such extra-organizational rules can work, consider the following comments by one of the participants:

[T]he focus of men to go on from classroom teacher to vice-principal, ultimately to principal seems to be a little more noticeable than in women. [Women are] still a little more laid back, a little more comfortable in the classroom. . . . You would have to be a very special female person to handle the pressures along the line of the people being critical of your decisions. . . . I think [the female vice-principal] is being targeted more because there's a perception that there might be vulnerability. . . . I'm thinking that women are a little more vulnerable in that regard. Not to say that men are stronger emotionally but they don't seem to be targeted in quite the same way. ([Male] rural board official)

Another of our participants commented on his view of how extra-organizational rules have worked with regard to women principals in the context he knew:

I hearken back to an era when there were few female administrators. The first [women who] came on, I don't know whether it was a perception that they had to prove more or whether that was a reality, but it seemed that in the beginning females were not particularly embraced with open arms. . . . Something that has changed over the years, what I'll refer to as the 'old boys' network,' 'the way we're going to do things' and 'this is my school.' . . . I'm finding that more females are bringing more outside experiences . . . a more diverse training background. . . ([Male] rural district staff)

However, just as in the wider society where extra-organizational rules are formed, not everyone agrees about differences between men and women. Several participants did not see female leadership as different from that of males. The following comment is indicative of such a stance:

Sometimes we have males [who] just are very . . . warm and fuzzy people. They work well at a certain school. On the other hand, we had one [female who was] very strict and stern. She works at one of our schools where some of the students come from a military base. She works fine there so there are no preconceived notions. ([Female] rural board official)

These findings suggest that extra-organizational rules play out in complex ways within organizations such as school systems. These rules can change over time and they can be configured differently in different contexts. Whatever these rules are, we argue here that they affect how an organization treats men and women, particularly in roles such as the secondary principalship.

A second relevant major theme in our data was our decision makers' belief that *fit* was most important when considering rotation or succession. This finding illustrates how what Clegg calls a social-regulative rule in an organization can work. Social-regulative rules can keep men and women in their "appropriate place" unless such rules are openly challenged and changed. This next comment shows how this change can happen in relation to gender and the principalship:

We had some thinking years ago . . . [that] a male authoritarian figure in our high schools was probably necessary and desirable. . . . I question that. We would certainly be happy to see a female, whose leadership style might be a little bit different, in the high schools . . . ([Female] rural administrator)

There is a link between the need for fit and the first theme about meeting organizational needs first. Participants commented that an individual should be able to fit almost anywhere within a system. The decision makers in our sample commented that all potential principals should be trained to adapt to any school environment as a measure of their professional development over time and the accumulation of an increasing set of leadership skills that they can transfer from one context to the next. These leadership goals revealed more of what might be called a "one size fits all" approach in contrast to seeking the one principal who is right for a particular school. The following comment illustrates the view about the need for a good fit:

I think it all goes back to . . . the fit of the community or the needs of the community. That's the underlying thing. [One] school needed someone to go in and be tough and firm and clean up the attitude of the students and the lady in question has done a fabulous job. . . . I knew her as the vice-principal in one of my schools. She's into peer mentoring, she's into conflict mediation, and when you look at what was going on there with students fighting, suspensions and

expulsions, you needed somebody who could do that. She was a perfect fit. ([Male] urban board official)

The following comment reveals that the needs of a system are the prime consideration when decision makers seek a good fit:

If . . . it comes down to people being tied or very close together then you have to look at other criteria that can help you make a choice. . . . In other systems I've worked in, we went to a point system based on their resume and their experiences and professional qualifications. It was part of a total point system that determined where they were ranked. . . . Then, we looked at the needs of the school and tried to match that up with what the person would be able to bring. . . ([Male] rural administrator)

Repeatedly in our data, decision makers talked about the need for balance by gender on leadership teams. This view of balance seems tied to ideas about oppositional gender categories. If you have a female leader on a team, then you must balance it off with a male leader, or vice versa. This view can be linked to societal understandings or Clegg's extra-organizational rules; it may also become a technical rule or "just how we do things." Our data did not show that balance had become a strategic rule, nor in any of the provinces we studied had it become a state rule. This comment is typical of what our decision makers said about the need for gender balance:

I've always given a pretty high priority to the balance of gender on an administrative team in a school. I believe that there should be a good balance . . . if there are two [school] administrators ideally one should be female. So those factors might say that a principal in a school should remain there or stay there seven or eight years. . . . I speak against an automatic 'let's move everybody every five years.' I say let's look at the circumstances, let's have some criteria, let's use some factors and let's look at each individual case. ([Male] rural administrator)

Some participants expressed the view that gender or even racial differences "just happen" and, therefore, no strategic rule is necessary for minority teachers to rise to the top if they are indeed the "best people."

The following comment expresses this view and is typical of many in our data:

When I joined the district four years ago most of the administrative positions were filled by men. Most of the hires over the past four years have been female. . . . It wasn't that we set out to find a female administrator for a particular assignment. It just so happened that at this time the applications that we're receiving from females are superior to those that we're receiving from males. We want to find the best applicants to fill these administrative positions. . . . Gender is not going to deter us from accomplishing that task. . . . Three of the four we've just hired attached to the secondary school have been female. . . . Gender is not an issue (and) race is not an issue. . . . Teachers who were active in workshops, presentations, the other initiatives . . . have been of interest when we've been looking to fill principal positions. ([Male] rural administrator)

Repeatedly, senior administrators claimed that they make principal rotation decisions on the basis of a variety of individual criteria that they see as not connected to gender or race, including career stage, leadership style, performance ratings, and professional background. They admitted, however, that because the needs of the system are paramount, an applicant's gender or race may become a consideration under special circumstances. We heard about this being the case for single-sex female schools or in communities that are First Nations (Saskatchewan, Nova Scotia), Afro-Canadian (Nova Scotia), or ethnically diverse (British Columbia, Ontario). In such cases, the stated ideal was to have at least one member of a school administrator leadership team reflect the social values, cultural understandings, and historical traditions of the local population. The following quotations are typical of what we heard regarding the need for teams balanced by race/ethnicity:

We probably don't see the same level of diversity that you would see in Ontario, however, we are starting to see a bit more in the lower mainland area of Vancouver, simply because of the immigration. We've got a large number of Asian and East Indian communities here now and that is starting to influence some of the selections [for school administrators]. . . . It's also an awareness in terms of the recruitment. People are starting to take notice of the fact that in our school if we have a large Oriental population, our leadership ought to reflect that. ([Male] urban school administrator)



Well, I think we are very conscious of [ethnicity and race]. We do not have a criterion that indicates when we bring our hiring panel together that it needs to be addressed. I think we're very conscious of it especially regarding our Aboriginal population but I guess our statement on that would be that we really encourage people of Aboriginal origin to apply and we encourage them to get into the mix and compete. We have not consciously made any decisions to promote someone of Aboriginal heritage over someone that perhaps is more qualified . . . but we are looking at promoting people in terms of getting into the mix in the competitions and have tried to accomplish a more representative work force in that way. ([Male] urban school administrator)

Although our participants stated that gender and to some extent ethnicity and race did not play a role in most rotation/succession decisions, they admitted that when the needs of a school warranted such a consideration, it was a factor in their decision.

We noted that our participants were trying the best they could to work within the complex set of rules that affected their decisions about school leaders' rotation and succession. What was visible to us across the data, however, were two contradictions. One contradiction was related to the objectivity of the process they used. In some cases the participants described steps designed to make the process as objective as possible, but they admitted that considering subjective information about individuals and school communities was necessary to fulfill their goal of getting the best fit for the needs of the community and for getting a balanced administrative team in the school.

A second contradiction was related to comments about whether gender, ethnicity, or race played a part in their rotation or succession practices. Repeatedly, we heard that our participants believed that these are not factors in their decisions, and yet we also heard about how, when they tried for the best fit and for balance, gender, ethnicity, and race are frequently taken into consideration.

In this article, we are not saying that the individuals we studied were deliberately blocking or advancing women, Aboriginals, or people from minority groups. We point out, however, that despite the good intentions and best efforts of those we studied, we observed and have described in this article how a complex set of organizational rules of control can operate to maintain, rather than alter, traditional patterns.

## CONCLUSION

In this article we have illustrated how senior administrators' beliefs (conscious or subconscious) concerning gender, ethnicity, and race affect rotation/succession decisions by examining decision makers' beliefs about gender and leadership and by employing Clegg's rules of control in organizations. Despite repeated claims by our participants that gender was not a factor in decision making, we have described how technical, social-regulative, and extra-organizational rules can operate to affect the participation of men and women as secondary principals across Canada. The description of the operation of these rules of control helps explain differential participation rates by women in specific contexts and over different time periods. It also helps to explain why changes in women's participation rates have been slow. To bring about change, it is insufficient to alter only one of the types of rules of control that are in operation within an organization. Change in only one type of rule can be ineffective if the other rules operate to negate overall change. It is not that a change in one set of rules is not helpful in bringing about overall change, but it is insufficient. When two or three of the rules of control work to support each other, then it is far more likely that overall change will result.

Our study revealed that larger school districts were more likely than smaller districts to have formal policy directives to manage rotation or succession decisions. However, none of the rotation policy directives we examined specified gender or ethnicity/race as factors for consideration. We found only one school district with a written succession plan in place. Our data shows that high school principal rotation worked quite differently in rural contexts than in urban districts. Rural districts with a small number of high schools (sometimes only one) did not require formal policies or procedures for principal rotation and succession. Communication between senior administrators and high school principals about rotation and succession was informal. Perhaps this response was a reflection of differences between urban and rural social structures and relationships. However, in most of the small and large, urban and rural systems in our study there was a reliance on the local knowledge and judgment of senior administrators. As we have argued in this article, in all cases, final authority for decisions rested within a small group of

decision makers whose knowledge and judgment were affected by Clegg's various rules of control. As we have shown, these rules, when combined with beliefs by this core group of administrators, can operate, perhaps unwittingly, to diminish opportunities for the participation of women or people of certain ethnic or racial minority groups in roles such as secondary school principal.

### *Implications*

One of the implications of this article is that strategic or even state rules to encourage women, Aboriginal, and ethnic minorities to participate as school principals would serve school systems well. As has been shown in this article, existing practices cannot be relied upon to increase participation rates by women, Aboriginals, or ethnic minority leaders in a timely fashion. Data from our study indicate that school-district, senior administrators routinely organized rotation and succession decisions and plans as objectively as possible. Typically, especially in urban districts, this plan means developing formal criteria that are written into personnel hiring policies and procedures, including who is authorized to participate in rotation or succession decisions. This procedure does not mean, however, that subjective judgments about gender or ethnicity/race and leadership do not affect the rotation and succession process. What we suggest in this article is that both awareness on the part of school district senior administrators and school board trustees and a standardized written policy, a strategic rule, specifying gender and ethnic/race equity as part of the desired outcomes, needs to be in place to guide rotation and succession decision makers. This practice would be a much stronger direction than what currently exists to ensure fair procedures to foster within school systems increased participation rates for women and ethnic or racial minority leaders.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Our research team was dismayed to find that in many jurisdictions statistics are not available that separate out secondary principals from their elementary counterparts by gender and to discover that in many places, statistics by gender are no longer being collected.

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*Cecilia Reynolds* is Professor and Dean of the College of Education of the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. Her research has focused on gender issues in education and she has published three books on that topic (*Women and Leadership in Canadian Education* (Deselig, 1995), *Women and School Leadership*:

*International Perspectives* (SUNY Press, 2002), *Leadership, Gender and Culture in Education* (Open University Press, 2005) and has edited a book on equity issues and globalization, *Equity and Globalization* (Detselig, 2003). Her latest chapter appears in the book *Women Teaching, Women Learning* (Inanna Publications, 2006) and is focused on the "The Ideology of Domesticity." Her work on single-sex schooling, boys and learning, and global citizenship education has been widely drawn upon by the media and the field.

*Robert White* is Assistant Professor at St. Francis Xavier University where he teaches courses in both the Bachelor of Education and Master of Education programs. Research interests include Critical Pedagogy, leadership issues, and social justice. Development of student voice and the critical interface between leadership and literacy continue to be a focal point of Robert's work. Robert's research has also delved into the field of corporate investment in educational institutions and educational issues relating to globalization. Publications include a monograph entitled *Succeeding Leaders? A Study of Principal Succession and Sustainability* (OPC, 2003), *Burning Issues: Foundations of Education* (Scarecrow Education, 2004) and *The Practical Critical Educator* (Springer, 2006).

*Carol Brayman*, a retired secondary school principal, consults on issues related to school leadership and success. A doctoral candidate specializing in leadership and diversity studies at OISE/University of Toronto, her research focuses on the impact of succession planning and management on principals' personal and professional lives and school success, as well as sustainable leadership practices which contribute to efficacy. Carol's publications include *Succeeding Leaders? A Study of Principal Succession and Sustainability* (OPC, 2003); Principals' succession and educational change, *Journal of Educational Administration*, 42(4), 431-449, (2004); Leadership succession and the challenges of change, Educational Change Special Issue, *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 41(4) SAGE (2005).

*Shawn Moore* worked as a Senior Research Officer in the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, from 1980 to 2005. Mr. Moore's areas of research interest include teachers' work and educational change, the impact of reform on school culture, and parent involvement in education. He is currently working on a Wallace Foundation-funded study of the impact of leadership practice on student achievement. His most recent publication is entitled, *Voice, Nostalgia and Teachers' Experiences of Change*, with Andy Hargreaves and Ivor Goodson.