Graduate Student Symposium

Women’s Experiences in Administration in Faith-Based Schools

Lorraine de Monyé

University of Manitoba
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This research project explored women’s experiences in administration in faith-based schools. The underlying research questions were: What challenges, experiences and issues face female principals in faith-based schools and to what extent do these issues influence job satisfaction, performance and life away from work? What supports do female principals put in place to offset or enhance their ability to face or deal with these issues successfully? This research project was a course assignment and a pilot project for my thesis.

To answer these questions, I interviewed three women in administrative roles in faith-based schools from three provinces in western Canada. The schools represented similar faith backgrounds with varying enrollments and school configurations in urban areas.

I met with each participant at a mutually agreed time and place. Each participant received a letter of consent via email with my contact information and signed the consent form prior to the interview. Each interview took approximately one to one and a half hours. The interviews gathered data around the following challenges, concerns or issues:

a) Balancing life in the varying roles women acquire at work and at home (i.e. teacher, administrator, wife, mother (if applicable)).

b) Qualities needed to succeed in role.

c) Career path in administration.

d) Greatest frustration / greatest joy of engaging in an administration role.

e) Influence of the church / faith beliefs on women in leadership.
The role of a female administrator in a faith based school is unique and, as far as I know, has not been explored previously in the academic world, as have the experiences of rural and public school female administrators. In a faith-based school the influence of the church and theology impact the role of a female administrator. I have only begun to unravel the complexity of this topic. I am a female administrator in a faith-based school and want to support women who choose to pursue a similar role.

With this pilot project to my thesis, I am just brushing the tip of the iceberg of a topic that is deeper than I expected. At this point the following themes are evident from the interviews:

- Female administrators work hard to establish themselves as administrators, to the point of burn-out, finding balance is difficult.
- Faith in God has a huge impact on how the women perceive the incidents that happen in their job.
- Women feel silenced and isolated in their role as an administrator.
- Women struggle with their role as a leader in a male dominated environment.
- Feminist theory plays a role in the work these women do, although they do not realize the influence it has on their daily life.

I still have much to do before proceeding with my thesis. I feel there are four important elements that I must consider:

1) Write my own story. I wish I had done so prior to starting this project as I now must separate my story from the ones I have heard during the interviews.

2) Determine my stand on feminism. I need to fully grasp this theory and realize that I want women to have a voice.
3) Re-write my interview questions to reflect the depth of questioning I need with each participant.

4) Ask myself the interview questions I will ask the participants before I conduct my next interview.

I am passionate about my thesis topic, as I live it every day. I hope this thesis will encourage women who are considering administration in faith-based schools and open genuine dialogue between women who are currently administrators so they no longer feel silenced, isolated and alone.