

Equity in leadership:

The Road ahead



by
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I still remember my fifth-grade teacher, Miss O'Hara. She was young, single, and 'From the City'. She brought an energy and enthusiasm to the classroom that was like nothing I had experienced to that point. She often wore a blue blazer, slacks, and runners; while this might not seem unusual now, at the time it was a world apart from the expected professional attire for a female at a very traditional school. Don't get me wrong: I loved all my previous teachers, but there was something different about Miss O'Hara. She was inspiring and fun, filled with laughter, and she moved beyond formality and invited us to get to know her on a personal level. Miss O'Hara cast off the trappings of the strict and strait-laced ways of running a classroom that were the norm. We worked hard in the classroom; she had high expectations, but she also brought a sense of humanity. We wanted to do the very best we could because, somehow by her very presence, she inspired us to be better. At the time we were entering early adolescence, Miss O'Hara honed in on who we were as individuals, and she inspired us to be the very best we could be. She was the first teacher to organize a two-night overnight camping trip to Camp Nazzichuk, and we still talk about it. The experience of Miss O'Hara was really the first time I saw myself reflected in an adult in the school. It was inspiring.

At the same time, our Principal – who was also a woman – was a stolid, strong leader who ran a tight ship. She, too, had high expectations and demanded the very best of us. Whenever she entered the classroom, we all stood up immediately

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and bleated out in unison, "Good morning!" We followed instructions without question. Her style of leadership was defined by a swift, unconditional, and unwavering decisiveness about how things would run. Her style as a school leader was very different from Miss O'Hara's style as a classroom leader. And while we cannot judge the leadership styles of the times based on the standards of today, Miss O'Hara's impact on her students was considerable; unlike the austere stature of our very capable Principal, we felt that Miss O'Hara really 'knew' who we were. She asked us questions and genuinely wanted to know what we thought. We felt like what we had to say mattered, that we had a voice, and that we belonged. We believed that it mattered that we came to school every day, not out of a sense of obligation or duty, but because we were part of making the school a wonderful place.

When it comes to setting the tone of a school, where everyone knows they belong and that their voices matter, Principals play a critical role. Simply by their presence, Principals characterize and define the culture of the school, working hard to make sure students, families, and staff know that they are welcomed and are an integral part of the fabric of that place. When students feel a sense of belonging

at school, we know that outcomes improve. We know as well that schools should be a reflection of their community, and I often wonder how many students who attend our schools see *themselves* reflected in their place of learning. That thought brings me to the topic of equity in leadership.

At the risk of being pedantic in setting the stage, equity and equality are not the same thing. Equality means that if we have ten children and ten cookies, each child gets one cookie. Everyone gets the same: it is fair. Equity is different. Equity means we recognize that different people have differing needs and starting points. For example, in schools, equality means that each student receives the same novel for a reading study unit. Equity means we provide a novel that is tailored to each student's unique needs, to ensure that all students have an opportunity to experience success. It is not always easy to do, but it matters.

In the context of school leadership, equity means that leaders actively work to understand and address the diverse needs of those in their school communities. This involves creating policies, practices, and supports that account for varying levels of resources, backgrounds, and challenges of the students, staff,

and families that come into our schools. Diversity in leadership allows for a heightened awareness of systemic inequalities, which can be a catalyst for proactive steps to mitigate the impact of inequity on the entire school community.

Diverse representation among school leaders is a critical aspect of equity in leadership. In British Columbia, we welcome people from all over the world and have a diverse population. Many educational institutions face a disparity between the demographic makeup of their student populations and their leadership teams. The consequences of a lack of diversity in leadership can include limited perspectives, fewer role models, and equity gaps. There is a risk that a homogenous leadership team might not understand the needs of a diverse school community. When we have a representation of leaders that accurately reflects the diversity of the population, this helps to create systems and policies that are inclusive; there is a greater chance that a broader representation in leadership will ultimately better serve the needs of a diverse community.

Students from underrepresented groups benefit from seeing leaders who look like them, and who have navigated similar challenges. This visibility can inspire and motivate students, providing more students with tangible role models and very real examples of success. Looking back, this is what Miss O'Hara did for me. For the first time at school, I saw a female leader who was full of energy, curious, and spirited, who asked gently provocative questions about the status quo and expanded our perspectives. She was thoughtful, hardworking, focused, and smart. She didn't conform, didn't wear dresses that hit just below the knee – as was the norm – and she presented a different vision of the world. Looking back, I suspect being a trailblazer was not easy for her; I remember that she left after a few years at my school.

In BC, women who aspire to occupy leadership positions can find a 'glass ceiling' or a 'sticky floor'. We have just seen a woman make a run for the presidency of the United States of America for the second time in history and, at the time of this writing,

we cannot predict if further history has been made. And while Canadians had the opportunity to be led by Kim Campbell as the first and only female Prime Minister of Canada from June 1993 to November 1993, other capable party leaders including the New Democratic Party's Alexa McDonough and the Green Party's Elizabeth May have not achieved that office. There continue to be obstacles that can impact the careers of women seeking to advance to leadership roles.

In her dissertation entitled, "Patterns of Success: A Study of Women Secondary School Principals' Self-Perception of their Career Journey in British Columbia", Paula Gosal shared that "In the Canadian K-12 education context, the principal's chair in a secondary school represents one of those leadership seats that remains elusive to women as it is more likely to be occupied by a male." (Armstrong and Mitchell, 2017; Porat, 1991; Reynolds et al., 2008; Tabin and Coleman, 1993). Data retrieved in February 2021 from BC K-12 School and District records shows that of the possible 225 secondary Principals, 65 are female (29%). In a workforce where 55% of secondary school teachers are female, one may expect that the composition of female Principals would follow a similar trend. Where are the female leaders? What is curious, and would be important to learn, is an understanding of the particular work that female Principals have undertaken and endured in order to navigate their role to the seat. Further, this learning may support districts in their work to encourage more women and those from diverse populations to hold leadership roles in secondary schools.

A broad diversity in leadership matters, and it is not solely the gap in the presence of female leaders. What can be done to encourage those who do not traditionally aspire to the role to become engaged and see leadership as a possibility? I remain curious as to how we can achieve and ensure fully inclusive practices throughout the system. Where current representation is reflective of the population of the communities we serve, we must examine the mechanisms that have contributed to equity.



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In the everyday work of school leaders, here are a few things we can do in our buildings that promote equity in leadership:

- Be curious
- Come from a place of courage; as Simon Sinek says, “Know your why.”
- Celebrate differences
- Lead with care and respect for all
- Lean in when needed
- Don’t be afraid to respectfully challenge the status quo
- Always ask “whose voice is missing” when making decisions
- Support the Alliance club

- Support the creation of clubs such as Indigenous Leadership Club and clubs for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of colour) students and allies
- Create and share widely an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion calendar



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- Share the achievements of all students, and cast a wide net when doing so

Equity means that we are ‘okay’ with feeling uncomfortable and unsettled. We acknowledge that all of us come to the plate with different backgrounds,

and one is not 'better' than another. Place, space, and voice exist for all. Our role is to create safe spaces where all of us grow and learn from differing perspectives.

The Reconciliation, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (REDI Champion) goal in the BCPVPA 2023-2026 Strategic Plan states the "BCPVPA leads and champions Truth and Reconciliation, diversity, cultural competency, and equitable opportunities to ensure a safe and inclusive educational community." A core value of our Association is welcoming and championing diversity amongst our own staff and leadership team. Our collective desire is to be inclusive in our practices, and our intention is to create an environment in the system where all leaders feel supported and empowered to contribute fully. Through our program offerings and resources, we strive to help our members to learn and understand diversity in the schools and communities in which they serve. Our goal is to enhance cultural competencies in our membership and beyond, and to work towards ensuring safe and inclusive educational communities.

In our professional learning opportunities at BCPVPA, we are mindful of reaching out to emerging leaders from underrepresented groups as this can help build a more diverse leadership pipeline. Program offerings focus on providing skills, experiences, and networking opportunities for emergent leaders, and leaders at all stages of their journey.

Reference

Gosal, P. (2022). Patterns of Success: A Study of Women Secondary School Principals' Self-Perception of their Career Journey in British Columbia [Doctoral dissertation, University of Kansas].

The BCPVPA is also collecting data this fall that will better identify the diversity of our members. Our survey invites self-identification as it relates to Indigenous/ Aboriginal Peoples, Racialized Persons, Gender Identity and Gender Expression, and Sexual Orientation, and will help us to know our members even better. Regular collection of this data will help to ensure accountability, and contribute to the measurement of progress towards more equitable representation of leaders in school and district roles throughout the province.

By addressing the lack of diversity in school leadership, we can create more equitable and inclusive environments that benefit all students, staff, and families. The presence of diverse leaders brings a broader range of experiences and perspectives to decision-making, ultimately supporting a more equitable educational experience.

When I look back, I can only wonder about Miss O'Hara's own experience when she came to our small community. Did she feel included? Did she feel like she had a voice? While my grade five perspective cannot give me all the answers, I feel certain that the kernels of my courage came from her. I am forever grateful that she took the risk, made the trek, and inspired me to "take the road less travelled" as a leader.



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Our stories are a part of us.

When we listen to the memories and experiences of others, we make connections, learn, and thrive. We invite you to share your own stories, what you have learned as an educator and leader, what inspires you.

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