Walking a Fine Balance: The Life History of a Woman Principal

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The Life History of a Woman Principal

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This article describes the leadership journey of Kathryn, an educational leader, in relation to current research on women’s experiences as educational leaders. This life history was developed as a grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) study. Conducted over a two-year period, the semi-structured interviews used to conduct the study were influenced by Van Manen’s (1992) work on life history interviews as a means of studying individuals’ lived experiences. The interviews were triangulated through field note observations and document analysis. In addition to exemplifying life history as a research method, a framework for studying leadership development emerged based on the themes: commitment, personal competence, sense of self-esteem, reflection, appreciation of others, open communication, problem-solving, power sharing, collaboration, shared decision-making, and sense of visioning. The themes were explored in relation to the early years, the early career, and the leadership career of Kathryn as a principal. The findings remind us that many of the qualities closely linked with transformational leadership begin during family and early school life.

Introduction

When Kathryn chose her career, her ambitions were to become the best possible reading teacher and to provide children with positive learning experiences. Her career achieved that and much more as she grew from a promising young teacher to a curriculum consultant and then a successful school administrator. Throughout her life and career, Kathryn walked a fine balance. As a young child, Kathryn balanced her constantly changing world with the needs of home and family. As a teen, she struggled to balance personal achievement with issues of economic adversity. Throughout her teaching career, Kathryn balanced the traditional with the innovative. As a principal, she balanced the challenges and personal leadership dilemmas with the tasks of administration.

This paper has two purposes. The first is to describe the leadership journey of Kathryn in which her life and career in relation to existing bodies of research on women’s experiences as educational leaders is discussed. The second is to add to the literature on life history as a research method for studying women’s experiences as educational leaders.
About the Author

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Life History Studies in Educational Research

Since the days of the ancient Greeks, the lives of leaders have been subjects of curiosity and interest, and life history studies have been part of western literary heritage. Researchers in anthropology (Wolcott, 1973) have conducted life histories as part of their explorations into the intricacies of human experiences and to gain better understandings of people’s life cycles. Bass (1990) notes, “From its infancy, the study of history has been the study of leaders” (p. 3). Life history writings both enrich our understandings of individual leaders’ lives lived in context and bring about a general understanding of their time and place in history (Starratt, 1993). Goodson (1995) stresses the importance of theory to life history research, noting that life history research represents “stories of action within theories of context” (p. 98).

Recently life history studies have begun to appear among the methods used by researchers studying educational leaders (Hall, 1996; Beeson & Ribbins, 1998). Huberman (1995) studied life histories of teachers, and welcomed life history as a method for conducting educational research that placed the informant at the center of the research. He argued that oral histories shared by participants are likely to “be more faithful renderings of personal experiences than other modes of expression” (p. 130). He further argued that retelling a story allowed participants the opportunities to review and reflect on their experience and to gain a greater understanding of their meaning. Dominice (2000), an adult educator, used life history research as a tool for assisting adult learners to reflect on their experiences. He argued that, through their life histories, adult learners gain better understandings of their learning process, the experiences that have influenced them, and how to become learners that are more independent. Cole and Knowles (2001) argued that “[l]ife history research across disciplines is based on the fundamental assumption about the relationship of the general to the particular, and that the general can best be understood through analysis of the particular” (p. 13). The researchers broaden the role of life history research to include conducting inter-disciplinary studies on social issues and focus on life histories to link individual peoples’ lives and experiences to the larger frame of history.

While most life histories of leaders have focused on men, Hall (1996) conducted narrative life history studies exploring the lives of six women who were school heads in the United Kingdom. She traced their experi-
ences “from their families of origin, through school, college and early work experiences to family, educational and career experiences as adults” (p. 35). Prior to her own research, Hall noted very little research on ‘being’ a head teacher, and even less on being a woman and a head teacher. Hall discussed the significance of her study using the metaphor of the palm tree in the desert, noting that life histories of the six successful women heads represented “an oasis in the desert” (p. 196) where few studies of educational leadership have focused only on women leaders. Beeson and Ribbins (1998) also conducted a life history study of a woman head teacher. In addition to adding to our understandings of being a head teacher in the current educational climate, the Beeson and Ribbins’ study emphasized the value of life history research as a tool for personal and professional reflection of educational leaders in all aspects of their lives and work.

**Conducting a Life History Study**

**Choosing a Leader**

While the lives of school principals are often filled with challenges and changes, the times during which the study took place were particularly turbulent. In addition to constant curriculum changes, a greater emphasis was placed on inclusion in all aspects of educational life, including educational leadership. As a researcher, I wanted to find a leader who had emerged in that turbulent climate. My inquiries led me to Kathryn, a woman who had culminated her career of over thirty years as an educator by serving as principal for eighteen years. When she ended her career in the public schools, she was the longest-serving woman principal in her small urban school board situated in Northern Ontario, Canada.

**Methodology**

This life history was developed as a grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) study that was designed to generate a framework for studying leadership. The interviews for the study were influenced by the work of Van Manen (1992), who views life history interviews as important for studying individuals’ lived experiences. He asserts that life history researchers “are able to learn about the nature of . . . experiences and individual developments” (p. 72), provide anecdotes that give fuller meanings to individual’s lives and experiences, and develop theoretical and methodological background for working on specific approaches for conducting life history studies.

This study was conducted by means of in-depth semi-structured interviews, observations, field notes, and some document reviews. During the two-year study, Kathryn participated in six semi-structured interviews that averaged 2–3 hours in length. Interviews were conducted in Kathryn’s office in the school. The in-depth nature of the interviews provided thorough, accurate snapshots of her work and leadership during that two-year period.
The longitudinal nature of the research gave me opportunities to saturate the categories and units of information. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, checked and re-checked with Kathryn for accuracy. Points for further clarification became the subject of follow-up questions during later interviews. In addition to the interviews, I undertook six full days of observations of Kathryn at work and made in-depth field notes of each school visit. Some documents, such as memos to teachers and school newsletters were also examined. All data were coded, using open-coding strategies, to determine items and units of information in order to develop themes. Drawing on themes that emerged consistently from the interview data, concept maps were created to explore the relationships between the themes and to provide a more in-depth interpretation of the findings. A summary of the concepts and themes appears in Table 1.

### Table 1
**Studying Leadership Development**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Themes</th>
<th>Early Years</th>
<th>Early Career</th>
<th>Leading in Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>To family and friends</td>
<td>To teaching and children</td>
<td>To students, teachers, parents and community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Competence</td>
<td>Strong scholastic record</td>
<td>Strong record of university and teacher preparation studies</td>
<td>Graduate and administrative studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Self-esteem</td>
<td>Encouragement from personal successes</td>
<td>Encouragement from personal successes and successes of students</td>
<td>Encouragement from personal successes and successes with school leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring</td>
<td>Mentored and guided by a strong mother and many teachers</td>
<td>Worked beside the guiding influence of Charles</td>
<td>Concerned with mentoring vice principals and beginning teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>On personal strengths and growth areas</td>
<td>On professional successes and weaknesses</td>
<td>On personal, professional, and community successes and weaknesses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 1 (continued)

**Studying Leadership Development**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Themes</th>
<th>Early Years</th>
<th>Early Career</th>
<th>Leading in Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation of Others</td>
<td>Being appreciated and learning appreciation of others</td>
<td>Expressing appreciation for colleagues work</td>
<td>Encouraging others through appreciating their contributions to the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Communication</td>
<td>Talking things over with parents and friends</td>
<td>Talking things over with students and colleagues</td>
<td>Talking things over with students, colleagues, supervisors and community members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
<td>Facing and sorting out tricky family situations</td>
<td>Sorting out instructional problems with students and colleagues</td>
<td>Working with teachers, students, parents and community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power Sharing</td>
<td>Learning to take personal responsibility and use personal power for the good of all</td>
<td>Learning to take personal and professional responsibility and use power for the good of all</td>
<td>Taking personal and professional responsibility and encouraging others to use their personal power for the good of all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Working and playing in teams</td>
<td>Working and sharing with colleagues</td>
<td>Working with teachers, students, administrators and community members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Decision-making</td>
<td>Deciding with family members</td>
<td>Team-teaching with colleagues</td>
<td>Deciding with teachers and encouraging groups of teachers to decide together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Visioning</td>
<td>Deciding where you are going and developing a personal vision</td>
<td>Developing a professional vision</td>
<td>Joining with others to build a collective vision for the school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Formative Years
As a young girl, Kathryn recalled playing school with her cousins, who frequently gave her the role of the teacher and organizer. Those playtime experiences were her first indications that organizing and managing people were things she could do well. Having received many positive messages about her talents and abilities from parents and peers, she began to think about becoming a teacher and recalled dreaming about career possibilities. She commented:

When I looked at what options there were for women, teaching was one of the most acceptable. It had all sorts of pluses for women. I loved most of my teachers, so for me, a teaching career made a great deal of sense.

Elementary school life was exciting for Kathryn because her residential area was zoned and re-zoned frequently, and the re-zoning brought about her attendance at three different elementary schools. She commented, “I had to make friends quickly and I think that was helpful because I gained confidence. I also met some fantastic people.” Kathryn made friends at school, and credited her many friendships and accomplishments for helping her to develop a positive self-image.

As Kathryn entered secondary school, many of the people encouraged her talents for organizing, working with people, and leading. She commented, “I was involved in a lot of things as I grew up, and was getting messages that I could lead. For instance, when I was a cheerleader, I was voted captain.” Her passion and involvement in sporting activities continued, and she noted, “People wanted to be my partner in badminton, and I felt good about myself because I was able to accomplish something. I was also a pretty good student, always in the top ten.”

Along with her many accomplishments, Kathryn also struggled with a number of challenges and dilemmas. She recounted:

I was not a rich girl, but I wanted to have things, too. I think ‘want’ helps to give you some drive to make the most of yourself. I learned to sew so that I could have some reasonable clothes. I was quite creative, too. I made my own patterns and Mom gave me some things that I remade. I got great feelings when other kids gave me compliments on things that I had made. I got messages that I had some talents. I could sing well and do artwork really well. There were all sorts of good things coming my way.

Kathryn’s abilities to create and to be self-reliant contributed to her strong sense of competence and self-esteem, which Cantor and Bernay (1994) considered essential traits for women to be successful leaders. Hall (1996) reported similar findings in the lives of the women heads she studied who had made important decisions about being academically successful,
being leaders at school; attaining higher education and having a career; choosing whether or not to marry and have children; and choosing to seek promotion to positions of school leadership (p. 35).

Hall (1996) also addressed the issues of wealth and social class in her findings of women leaders. She argued that the women’s choices about becoming successful and undertaking leadership could be influenced or constrained by factors such as the social class and educational backgrounds of parents, personal experiences with roles of women in their own families, sibling relationships, influences of role models, career choices, spouse support, and demands of parenting and the job. While Kathryn did come from a lower-income family, she asserted that she was not constrained by her family circumstances, parental educational levels, or social class, and instead credited her own need to succeed as motivation to make the most of herself.

Kathryn’s positive relationships with her parents had a great effect on her developmental years and contributed to her developing a strong sense of self-esteem. Crediting her father with giving her positive messages, she explained, “If I did an art drawing, Dad would say that it was really great.” In addition, “He always added a thought for me to reflect on.” She described her mother as very nurturing, supportive, caring, and a good listener. When Kathryn was ten, and her mother began to work outside the home, she noted, “Mom was always really supportive and you could talk to her about things. She was there to be a listener and you always knew that she cared.” Kathryn added that her mother always did the disciplining in the household, and she was a very good problem solver who was not afraid to confront issues. Her mother’s strength as a problem solver was most notable in her ability to bring difficult family problems to a resolution. Commenting on the greatest contribution her parents made to her own development, she stated, “I knew I always had the support and unconditional love we all need.”

Kathryn’s positive experiences with supportive, caring parents were similar to those reported in the findings of Astin and Leland (1991) and Hall (1996) who also found that the women leaders they studied reported having positive and supportive parental relationships. Hall argued, “[a]ll women, as girls, will absorb some of the feminine strengths and abilities which their mothers provide as role models” (p. 42). Kathryn also credited her mother with demonstrating that women could become financially independent, take charge of their own lives and those of their families. Similar to the findings of Hall (1996), Cantor and Bernay (1994), and Blackmore (1989), seeing her mother’s strengths modeled so dramatically served as a very effective model for her as a woman leader.

Kathryn’s experiences growing up in a home with a strong mother are also likely to have influenced her visions about women and power. She described her mother’s caring, listening, communicating and problem solving as creative uses of power. Similarly, Dunlap and Schmuck (1995), Regan (1995), and Hall (1996), found that the women they studied had
learned to exercise power in more creative and enabling ways from their mothers.

**A Budding Professional**

Kathryn began her teaching career by attending a one-year program at a nearby teachers’ college. She described doing well and working hard, crediting much of her success to her high level of energy and her passion for teaching. Kathryn recounted her first teaching years as enjoyable because of having a supportive principal and colleagues who encouraged her to try new things. Early in her career, she changed her entire classroom into a learning-center approach. She then had to learn more about the approach to keep it operational by reflecting on and learning from her own practices. Soon after she began, the positive effects of her innovation on learners drew her colleagues’ attention. When they told her she was doing great things for children, she gained additional confidence from their support.

The positive beginnings Kathryn experienced led her to believe that she had something to offer, and she became involved in leading projects within the school. Describing her first 8 to 10 years in teaching, she stated:

I didn’t aspire to be a principal. I wanted to be a teacher. I wanted to help children read. That’s why I became a teacher. My brother struggled with reading, and it was very hard on my family. That was part of my motivation for becoming a teacher.

Kathryn explained that she did not believe there was a valid reason that prevented her brother or others like him from learning to read and was always concerned when children did not seem to be learning. She examined her own teaching practices for factors that could interfere with children’s learning, and constantly struggled to develop her own competence as a teacher.

Team teaching also offered some interesting and challenging opportunities in her early career. She recalled her early experiences as teacher leadership during which she worked with colleagues to develop a variety of instructional and organizational strategies for enhancing classroom organization and teaching practices. Kathryn did not receive messages about undertaking leadership or administrative roles until she had been teaching for twelve years.

**Mentors or “Someone to Watch Over Me”**

Kathryn noted that in her early life, her mentors were her mother and women teachers. As she progressed in her career, however, her two important mentors were men. In her first year of teaching, her mentor was a supportive principal. She characterized him as being “[s]ort of like a father figure who helped me gain confidence quickly in my teaching.” Kathryn told of being able to try her hand at various kinds of active learning experiences. She would initially tell her principal what she had planned and how she would go about it. She would then get underway with the student activi-
ties. She commented that part way through, “He would come in, ask me how it was going, and get me to reflect on the value of the activity.” Kathryn also indicated that the principal had been willing to get any teaching materials she required, including games and manipulative activities. In addition, the principal “allowed me to develop as a teacher the way I thought it should go.” Although Kathryn worked with the principal for only a few years, she stressed the positive effects his influence had on her professional development. He was also helpful to Kathryn by encouraging her to work on committees at the Board level. Kathryn worked extensively with committees, and soon became a major figure on the professional development committee.

Later, during her work on board-wide committees, Kathryn encountered Charles, the superintendent of professional development. She sensed that Charles was impressed by her abilities to organize quickly because he invited her to serve on other professional development committees. Kathryn enjoyed her work with Charles because of his constant emphasis on engaging and helping others. She commented that Charles helped her “learn to network, organize, look after details, delegate, and invite others to do things.” Kathryn described her learning experiences as climbing a set of stairs, and that, as she reached one step, she would already be trying to put her foot on the next so that her skills would continue to grow. She commented, “I saw that I could do a lot of organizing and delegating despite the fact that I was a teacher rather than a principal or a consultant.”

Kathryn recalled Charles as a very inviting person, who was one of her main supporters, and who sent many opportunities in her direction. She noted, “Charles always saw the strengths in people. [He] would give you all the rope that you needed to go and do the job, and to keep in touch with him. He was truly great at delegating.” She described her working relationships with Charles and her first principal as presenting her with great learning opportunities for professional growth and development.

Kathryn noted, however, that the encouragement to move into leadership came from her women teaching colleagues rather than from either Charles or her principal. Similar to women’s experiences with psychological, ethical and moral development that were described by Gilligan (1982), Noddings (1984) and Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986), Kathryn’s positive working relationships among women tended to involve the problem solving, support and encouragement that often take place subtly in relationships among women, and are thought of as caring, modeling, and mentoring.

**The Leader Emerges**

Kathryn’s early experiences with leadership, both as a leader and a follower, were framed by bureaucratic theories of management that were based on behaviorist theories of social science (Dubin, 1968; Fiedler, 1967; Hemphill, 1958; Lipham, 1964; Stogdill, 1974). Bureaucratic man-
agement placed little emphasis on theories in democratic decision-making and participation involving teachers (Lambert, 1995; Watkins, 1989). Kathryn’s reflections on her leadership experiences, however, were filled with examples of leadership as modeling, collaborative problem solving, and the creation of teams and partnerships for the completion of various tasks (Dunlap & Schmunk, 1995; Lambert, 1995; Reagan, 1995). Her life history illustrated her need to walk a fine between the bureaucratic constraints of her role and her reciprocal visions of leadership as shared responsibilities.

Kathryn’s first formal leadership position was a secondment to the Board office as a consultant. During that time, she assisted the superintendent and teachers with the implementation of new curriculum and developing curriculum resources for the school division, and eventually, the province. She also served as a consultant to many committees, both at the school and system levels. Her organizational skills soared and her talents for working positively and creatively with others on solving professional problems came to the forefront. Her successful organizational strategies for committee work brought her to the attention of colleagues who encouraged her to apply for a principalship.

The Beginning Principal

After working as a consultant for two years, Kathryn became a principal. She described her move into administration, stating, “It was a good time to be working as a consultant because I had a lot of opportunities to create my own path. I went right from that role into the principalship. I didn’t have a vice-principalship.” She sensed that some of her colleagues frowned upon her skipping the vice-principalship. Kathryn noted that, in the very early years of her principalship, “I had to earn my stripes. I wasn’t just automatically considered one of the group.” Kathryn’s experiences were similar to the findings of Shakeshaft (1989) and Blount (1994) who reported small numbers of women in positions of educational leadership, and that those women were often ignored or resisted. Blount added that the women leaders she studied were urged to play down their female qualities, adopting masculine values and behaviors.

Kathryn focused few of her comments on the formal role of the principal, focusing instead on her work as a leader. When asked about her development as a leader, she commented:

I guess success in leadership as in anything is really hooked into the caring. I don’t think people can do well unless they know that they are cared for. My parents expected things from me in terms of responsibility, and I practice that in life, and that’s how I am as a leader. I care about those I work with, but I also expect them to make their best efforts in their work.

Kathryn’s development as a leader appears similar to the findings of Cantor and Bernay (1994). They identified a leadership equation that
emerged from developing a competent self through learning, being assertive, and using power creatively and positively in order to enhance the work of an important cause for the community.

**Challenges and Dilemmas**

As a beginning woman principal, Kathryn faced some sharp opposition. She commented, “There was a fair amount of ruffling happening in the system for some folks when I became principal,” adding that she heard unpleasant gossip about herself and why she was promoted to principal so quickly. She continued, “There were a few comments that I was sleeping with the superintendent. Some suggested that I had gotten the job because I was a woman, and was the pet of the superintendent.” Early in her term as a principal, Kathryn reported feeling silenced and ignored among her male colleagues. While she was aware of the language games, rules of discourse, and “who can say what to whom” in various situations, Kathryn kept her voice soft and remained quiet much of the time. She also admitted that, particularly in the early years as principal, “I certainly didn’t want to make a mistake.”

Women administrators in earlier studies had also reported being subjected to sexist comments and gossip based on stereotypical expectations of women’s roles in schools (Ortiz & Marshall, 1988). The women leaders studied by Skrla, Reyes, and Scheurich (2000), and Brunner (2000) also reported experiences in which their male colleagues ignored or silenced them.

Kathryn recalled having to be very careful when she first attended principals’ meetings. She often felt unwelcome because she was the only woman. Kathryn also felt thwarted in her attempts to initiate changes to meetings and activities in which she took part. For instance, her desire to make principals’ meetings collaborative gatherings that focused on professional problem solving were ignored by her male colleagues for a number of years until the nucleus of women and younger principals grew large enough that she was able to use her influence to promote collaborative problem-solving and decision-making.

Unlike the findings of Skrla, Reyes, and Scheurich (2000) and Brunner (2000), however, there were times when she spoke up loudly and clearly. Those were times when she felt her competence questioned, or was being treated in an overtly sexist manner. In one situation, Kathryn described being the only female in a meeting and “being given the job of scribe when I was chairing the meeting. I had to say to some men, ‘You know, that’s not why I’m here.’ I even had one man say, ‘Well, why the hell are you here?’ When she explained the importance of the issues they were discussing to the children in her school, her male colleague became very quiet and much more cooperative. Kathryn’s descriptions of confronting male colleagues were situations in which her competent self and ability to be creatively aggressive (Cantor & Bernay, 1994) helped her to overcome difficulties and work in a positive manner with her colleagues. She described having to build her own credibility, noting that, over time more women principals
were appointed and that their presence in principals’ meeting had a positive effect. She stated, “There’s much more problem solving now, and sharing of the best ways to do your job at your school.”

Kathryn also described working through many painful dilemmas with teachers for which she felt ill—prepared from her educational and administrative studies. Although she lamented her struggles with implementing school change, she realized that she ultimately grew into a stronger, more skilled leader because of them. Kathryn faced one major dilemma when she was transferred to a larger school to assist the teachers in making some overdue changes to their classroom teaching strategies and curriculum. She had been asked to work with the teachers to change the attitude in the school and to develop a more positive learning environment for children. Armed with the Board’s agenda for change, she arrived and was soon informed that some of the long serving teachers were feeling threatened because she was their principal, and several male teachers had left the school prior to her arrival because they had not wanted to serve under a woman principal. Kathryn’s challenges increased when several senior teachers attempted to engage her in a power struggle. She admitted that she found the uncooperative, unfriendly attitudes of some of the teachers very unpleasant and unexpected, and that, initially, she felt overwhelmed by the challenges.

Kathryn described working extremely hard to convince and demonstrate to teachers that “We’re all on the same team.” Describing the school, she stated, “There was a culture there that I was not aware of, and so different from anything I had ever experienced. I wasn’t handling it well.” She finally decided to search for a workable solution to the problem with her superintendent, who supported her choice of confronting the teachers in an open discussion. After learning more about the teachers and their unhappiness, she had a very open discussion with them. Gradually, things began to improve. Kathryn learned a painful lesson from the situation, commenting, “I was functioning the way I had worked at Southland School where people were open and helped each other. That wasn’t the culture in this school.”

Kathryn’s second set of dilemmas involved addressing issues of teacher competence. She believed that every child could learn and was entitled to competent classroom teaching. While the majority of teachers she had worked with were successful in their teaching, a small number of teachers were not. In those cases, Kathryn was required, under board and Ministry policy, to document the work of those teachers. In three cases, she had been able to help the teachers realize that they were ill and could best recover by placing themselves on long-term disability. Through problem solving with teachers in difficulty, Kathryn had also helped many to grow and improve. She used strategies such as teaching with them, modeling some new teaching practices for them, and giving them small goals to meet each week (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999; Glickman, Gordon, & Ross Gordon, 2001). Although Kathryn acknowledged that the teachers needed assistance to improve their competence, she tried to treat each teacher re-
spectively, and encouraged them to activate their own problem solving skills to find solutions to their challenges in teaching. Similar to Leithwood et al’s assertions, Kathryn “assured teachers that the problems they [were] likely to encounter while changing their practices [would] be taken seriously . . .” and efforts would be made to help them through those problems (p. 72).

Kathryn described a third major dilemma that occurred at a principals’ meeting later in her career. During deliberations on teacher staffing, Kathryn commented extensively about her concern and displeasure with the teacher placement strategy as endorsed by the Board and the Teachers’ Federations. She expressed her views that, because teachers were placed in teaching positions based on their seniority rather than the talents and skills they had for the positions, the process was not truly just or fair to teachers or students. She also expressed her frustration that other principals and superintendents were not willing to support her concerns with the process.

Kathryn’s reactions to her colleagues’ lack of support on the placement issues were similar to Brunner’s (2000) findings on women administrators who persisted in becoming involved in unsettling discourses that caused discomfort and brought resistance from others, but ultimately led to the adoption practices that are more effective. While initially Kathryn felt angry because others had ignored her concerns, her seniority and strong record of positive achievements as a principal prevented her from being broadly discredited or viewed as incompetent by her colleagues. Nevertheless, she did express immense frustration that none of her colleagues would support her concerns about the negative impact the teacher transfer process had on maintaining positive staff development in schools, and work with her to change it. Her final comments on the matter were that if the principals’ and teachers’ federations worked more closely together and were more assertive regarding such negative processes, the likelihood of changing to a fairer, more just, process would be much greater.

In summary, Kathryn did face many issues related to “inequality because of gender bias” (Brunner, 2000, p. 106) early in her career. However, unlike the women in earlier studies (Skrla et al., 2000), she did not give up and leave her administrative role, nor did she succumb to strategies that covered up or debunked gender bias (Brunner, 2000). Although Kathryn struggled with various dilemmas throughout her career, she confronted and found ways to work with others in her midst to manage each. Unlike the women studied by Brunner; Skrla, Reyes, and Scheurich; Blount; and Ortiz and Marshall; Kathryn changed major dilemmas into problem for solving, often using collaborative leadership (Lambert, 1995) with teachers to overcome challenges, to create more trusting and open environments, and to develop better learning environments for students and teachers.

**Defining Leadership**
At the end of the interviews, Kathryn was asked to reflect on the question: “How do I lead?” She described her way of leading as:

I think I lead by getting involved. Sometimes by modeling; I model some things like I did when I was teaching. For example, we are planning units together with teachers, and I am sharing in some of the teaching. I get involved with the children where teachers can see what I am doing. In some cases they do the planning first, they teach one group, and then I teach one group. [Through those experiences, we are] giving teachers opportunities to share ideas.

In addition to illustrating Lambert’s (1995) collaborative style of leadership, Kathryn’s leadership style assisted teachers in building their own competence (Cantor & Bernay, 1994). The collaborative, people-oriented style of management noted in Kathryn’s work was also reported extensively by Coleman (2000) in her survey study of female head teachers in the United Kingdom. The following is an example of Kathryn’s collaborative leadership strategies with teachers in which she serves as a guide on the side to encourage leadership to develop from within the group:

Another example that is the really exciting is the division work. We have given some tasks to the divisions to work through where they help each other and share ideas. For example, in the primary division, I raised several things that I wanted teachers to work through. That led to teachers deciding that they needed to have a session where they shared how they do promotion of reading and literature. They had a session about how to do a reading project involving making book bags. They used everyone’s great ideas. I invited a teacher that I know from another school who brought her materials to show the teachers here. I couldn’t go to the meeting because of prior commitments, but the meeting brought some input. They came out with the best of what all of these people are doing, and have experienced, and put together a process that they’re using for choosing books. I think that is just so phenomenal. Firstly, that we’re getting people. Secondly, that they are running their own division meetings. My vice-principal and I get an agenda, and we’re invited, too, because we asked to be, and we attend as many meetings as we can. But they’re taking control, which is what we wanted. So they’re setting direction.

Kathryn described some of the issues with power that occurred in the teachers’ groups:

Now there are some interesting issues with power there, too. But I think that saying to teachers, “You’re the ones who are close to the children. You know what all the daily problems are. You don’t need me to be there to solve some of these and make the very best decisions. I want to stay informed, because if I need to help with direction setting, I need to know what issues you are talking about.” But I try to send the message that, ‘yes, you can be doing all this, and not wasting time, and getting things done quickly—for children’. I try to build in some time for them to do that. I’m giving real time to that. The vice-principal and I took the primary children last week so that the primary division teachers could meet and plan the ‘kick off’ to their unit on Canadian authors. So we try to provide some
in-school time, and then the teachers continued on after school. It was about fifty-fifty, school time and their time.

Kathryn also discussed her own views about power and leadership:

I see power coming from how resourceful I am. If I really know my staff and what their needs are, I can be more effective because I can help teachers more. Power will come from being a good listener. That was something I had to work on. I was just ‘talk, talk, talk and let’s go on’. It is something that I still work on. I think you are given power by the way you are able to help someone else. The power of authority, I don’t think, gets you very far in this day and age. We are teaching people to be critical, and to go to the people and resources that help them. If there’s a colleague who knows 20 times more than the principal knows about teaching math or using co-operative learning in a particular area, teachers will go to them. That’s what’s going to be useful to them. As far as the role and the responsibility of principals, we have incredible power around employment. In some ways, that carries a lot of weight and impacts people’s lives. I’ve gone through documentation with a couple of teachers in the past, and I’m really struggling with one right now. That is another kind of power, through your role in a position of responsibility.

Kathryn described the ways she talked with teachers about using their sources of professional power to develop their work with students. She commented, “I’ve said to teachers, ‘You can do a lot of fantastic things in your school even when your principal is not involved a great deal’.” She continued:

I often felt that I had more power to ‘get things cooking’ as a teacher. It is harder now not being a team teacher full time. When I was teaming with other teachers, we could get things rolling much easier because I was with them all the time and we were doing things together. I still believe that the best way to initiate things is to do things with teachers.

Kathryn’s descriptions of power in her work with teachers seems most similar to theories of “power with”, where power is a shared energy that groups of individuals are able to use to do things together that they would have been less likely to accomplish as individuals. Kathryn constantly sought initiatives in her work where she was able to work with others to accomplish or implement ideas developed by a group. “Power with” is associated with such definitions of power as “energy and competence rather than dominance” (Hartsock, 1983, p. 224), power as being “grounded in different sensitivities, experiences and frameworks of critique and analysis” (Kreisberg, 1992, p.62), and in relational contexts based on collaborative working relationships (Blase & Anderson, 1995). Each of the examples she cited involved teamwork, solving a problem together, and playing down the voices of formal power in favor of those of the individuals closest to the problem.
However, not all issues of power can be solved at the level of the school. Some issues of power that greatly affect the work in the school occur at levels beyond which principals have control. Kathryn described one such situation, commenting that, as a principal, it left her feeling disempowered. A few weeks earlier, she had had the unpleasant task of declaring most of the teachers on the staff to be redundant to the system due to their positions on the seniority list. She found the task and the follow-up extremely distressing. She commented:

There are certain things that contractually take power away from the principal, and from the school. And one thing that drives me insane is our transfer vacancy process. Because we don’t get any opportunity to choose who comes to our school, we can’t make matches that are supportive to the goals we have developed. The teachers, especially the ones who arrive later, often take positions that are not the best for them, and with which they are not happy. Then they move too frequently so principals and teachers don’t get a chance to build their support groups. It’s very frustrating trying to develop teachers. The professional development and supportive culture that you get going gets torn apart halfway through the year. As soon as February comes, people start wondering and worrying about whether they’re going to be identified, on the basis of seniority, to be the movers again. And it’s very destructive. There’s a real loss of power there. I’d like to say give me whoever you’re going to give me (because the Federations want to control that) but let me have them for a few years. Let them stay for a few years so that there’s some stability in their lives. Because it takes several months to know your colleagues and start working with them and for a colleague to be able to trust someone enough to say, I can’t do this co-op learning, can you come over and help me? Or what did you do when your students were doing something like this? And to do that kind of problem solving with others. You don’t do that in September or October. You start doing it November, December, January, and then all of a sudden you’re going to be thinking you have to do all of this groundwork over again with another group of teachers. It’s very damaging to school cultures and very stressful, and I think it is unnecessary stress for teachers.

Kathryn tried to address the issue of yearly teacher moves at principals’ meetings, but did not think that the group as a whole took an assertive enough approach in trying to get the teachers’ federations to change their policies. She was also distressed by the fact that there seemed to be poor working relationships between administrative groups and teachers federations, and that teachers and students were caught in the middle. Kathryn noted that, although her mission in working with teachers was to support them so that they could work effectively with students, as a principal she “got pegged as the enemy” by the teachers’ federations. She added that the mistrust she felt between the principals’ group and the teachers’ federations was harmful to building teams in schools. Kathryn also felt disappointed that the teachers’ federations, who were supportive of their former mem-
bers taking leadership positions, offered them no encouragement and sup­port once they appointed to leadership roles. Kathryn commented, “There’s a lot of support from the federation to get you a job as a leader, but after that you’re on your own.”

The greatest hurdles noted between the two groups in the situations with teacher placements were those of the scarcity face of legitimate power in which “power consists of separate entities struggling against one another for strength, control, superiority, and their separate interests (Kreisberg, 1992, p. 51). Kreisberg notes that, in addition to expressing dominance rather than enabling, the scarcity perspectives of power restrict relation­ships between contesting groups and limit the options that groups have for problem solving. Despite the inherent difficulties, Kathryn continued to raise questions about the teacher placement process at principals’ meetings and in other forums where her concerns would receive attention. She vowed to continue her struggle to improve the system of placing teachers in posi­tions that would offer opportunities for them to make the best use of their talents.

Problem solving with others appeared to be Kathryn’s main way of using her own power for working out difficulties brought to her by teachers, students or parents. She worked on instructional problems with teachers in classroom situations as much as possible and encouraged teachers to work together with their colleagues to overcome issues as well. Kathryn also dis­cussed using problem solving with students around disciplinary situations. In both cases, she tried to begin the process by raising some critical ques­tions about the situation and the outcomes, and encouraged others to do the same, in the hope that the process would encourage a greater sense of confidence and ownership for the problems and solutions.

**Studying Leadership Development**

The purpose of this paper was to study the life history and development of one woman leader to provide an example of a life history study. The find­ings from the study are summarized in Table 1. The themes presented in the table provide a conceptual map of the research. The leadership themes of Kathryn’s life are displayed in three stages of her developmental sequence. Nine leadership themes have emerged that support the framework and add to our understandings of the development of educational leaders.

Even though, many of Kathryn’s experiences took place during a period when leaders were portrayed as bureaucratic managers (Fiedler, 1967; Burns, 1978), her strategies of leadership stand out in contrast. Her leader­ship style is multi-faceted, in that she fulfills the functions of a manager but moves beyond them, serving as a democratic and caring leader (Greenleaf, 1974). Kathryn’s life history portrayed a leader who was collaborative, em­powering (Grogan, 1999) and strongly influenced in developing her atti­tudes and actions as a leader by her early life. Similar to the findings of earlier researchers, (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984; Blackmore, 1989,
1999) many of Kathryn's leadership experiences grew out of family responsibilities and partaking in many school activities. Her own early struggles kept her focused and committed to the ethics of caring and justice (Noddings, 1984), and children's rights to a good education (Grogan, 1999). Unlike the women leaders studied by other researchers, however, (Blackmore, 1989; Grogan, 1999, 2000; Brunner, 2000; Skrla, Reyes & Scheurich, 2000), Kathryn, ultimately, refused to be silenced or limited by the sex-role stereotypes, and through gaining credibility, constantly worked to make a contribution for the students, teachers, and parents with whom she worked. Personal reflection, through self-questioning and open discussions with others, emerged as one of the key ways Kathryn sorted out problems and situations (Marshall, 1995; Foster, 1989). Kathryn expressed the view that, without thoughtful and reflective discussions, she could accomplish little in understanding and working effectively with others.

One question that arose as the findings were considered was whether Kathryn was a feminist leader. Kathryn did not directly label herself as a feminist; however, when one considers the emphasis she placed on the ideals of justice, democracy and equity, coupled with her concerns for power sharing and an emphasis on working with others to achieve growth and change, the kinds of feminist characteristics identified by Marshall (1995), Capper (1993), Weedon (1987), Shakeshaft (1989), and Lambert (1995) were noted. Strong similarities occurred to the leadership and management characteristics that Coleman (2000) identified as common to women leaders in her survey study of female secondary head teachers in England and Wales, many of which were similar to the characteristics associated with the label feminist. Since no direct reference was made in the study to the label feminist in relation to Kathryn, readers can be left to draw their own conclusions about what a feminist leader is the degree to which Kathryn meets the criteria.

Conclusions

Almost ten years have passed since the renewed call for widening our approaches to the knowledge base in educational administration and leadership. At that time, Anderson and Page (1995) noted that there had been little or no effort to acknowledge school leaders as human beings with life histories, genders, social class affiliations, and ideological commitments. Papalewis (1995) noted the lack of women's voices in leadership positions, research on leadership, and research on the importance of mentoring in the development of women leaders. She commented, "Given what we know about women's orientations toward relationships, it may be that mentoring relationships may be even more important than formal knowledge in helping women grow and develop as educational leaders" (p. 200). Life history
research is a useful method for studying the changing conceptions educational leadership and for widening the theoretical knowledge base.

While basing conclusions about leadership on the evidence of one life history study “may appear shaky” (Hall, 1996, p. 200), the framework for studying life history offers opportunities to explore and learn from the uniqueness each experience and situation brings to understanding leadership. Kathryn’s life history reminds us that many of the qualities closely linked with transformational leadership in schools begin long before leaders become principals or teachers. The importance of family and early school life in children’s development is noted along with the reminder that school leaders often face loneliness, challenge and hardships in their work. Kathryn’s life history and those of other leaders have the potential to add to and enlighten our understandings of leadership as a developmental and multi-faceted concept. The life history method also allows readers the opportunity to explore the double-edged swords of leadership experience and the importance of finely balancing them to create positive learning environments for teachers and their students.

References


