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Principally Women

Gender in the Politics of Mexican Education

Increasing efficiency of education is a major goal in Mexico, as in much of Latin America. Education provides much of the human and social capital needed for effective participation in society and at work. Fernando Reimers argues that serious improvements in the quality of education must focus on questions of purpose as well as of efficiency in the delivery of education. Too often the concern with efficiency overrides fundamental questions about the purposes of schools. Often policy reforms to address efficiency make unwarranted assumptions about contextual conditions that can turn the intended purposes of those policies on their heads; for instance, the current popularity of policies to expand the decision making authority of principals assumes that they have incentives and are capable of improving instruction in schools. Reimers shows how in Mexico there are serious problems that undermine the effectiveness of school principals: part of the explanation for the lack of efficiency in education lies with social attitudes that favor men and make it difficult for women to advance in their professions. This in turn creates deep problems for the purpose of teaching students an egalitarian and tolerant set of values, essential to effective citizenship in a democratic society. In this chapter Reimers demonstrates how to productively combine a focus on the purposes of schools with a focus on the efficiency of education delivery.

Women principals run schools whose students achieve at higher levels and have more effective and inclusive organizational cultures yet women are less likely to be promoted to the principalship than men. At the root of this situation are patriarchal and corrupt politics that undermine the foundations of the Mexican public education system and limit the opportunities for professional advancement for women. The National Teachers' Union (SNTE) long supported the dominant government party (PRI). Together with educational administrators, it controls appointments and other conditions of employment.

A top official in the Ministry of Education in the Fox (PAN) administration recently reported that "The union is a business for selling jobs. The inherited jobs open the

possibility that those who get them are not good teachers." Moreover, to become a principal, a teacher must help the union. The demands of union leadership, with work in evenings and on weekends, are hard to meet given other social expectations of women in Mexico. One interviewee reported, "We all know what goes on for women in the cantinas and with the sindicato and how some union leaders expect sexual favors from women in order to help them advance in their careers."

In Mexico, as in other countries in Latin America, most principals of elementary schools are men despite the fact that schools run by men are less effective than those run by women. For example, women principals run schools whose students achieve at higher levels and that have more effective and inclusive organizational cultures. Moreover, most elementary school teachers are women, and female teachers have higher levels of professional preparations and teach students who achieve at higher levels. At the root of this paradox—that those who are better at running schools are less likely to be promoted to manage them—are patriarchal and corrupt politics that undermine the foundations of the Mexican public education system. This paradox is problematic for several reasons. On the surface, because it leads to inefficiency. More importantly, this paradox is problematic because it shapes a powerful moral lesson for all students, boys and girls: that merit and ability in the quest for social and professional advancement are secondary to the ascribed characteristics of individuals and to the unfair and misguided traditional values of patriarchy. In Mexico, as in other places in Latin America, politics plays an important role in the appointment of candidates to the positions of teacher and principal. As a result, the odds of appointment and promotion depend on a number of characteristics other than the demonstrated competency to teach. Because of this, it is not uncommon that teachers are often required to spend time away from teaching as a way to pay dues to their political patrons. This chapter examines empirical evidence on the different likelihoods that men and women teachers have of being promoted to principal of an elementary public school in Mexico. It examines how schools managed by men and women differ, and discusses whether those differences relate to the processes that regulate the promotion of teachers to principals, to the experiences and competencies of teachers, or to the incentives attracting teachers to the profession.

Almost a century ago, John Dewey explained that how we teach is what we teach (Dewey 1916). The organization of schools provides powerful models to students about how individuals associate to accomplish tasks, about the roles different people play, and about how difference is valued, or not, as a resource to support collective action. As argued in the classic study of educational change by Seymour Sarason, the relationships among professionals in the school, between them and the students, and among all of them and the society outside the school define school culture (Sarason 1971). That principals play a role in shaping school culture is obvious; less obvious is the specific form this role takes in different contexts. A recent study of the role of principals in Paraguay highlights the fact

that research on the principalship in developing countries is extremely scarce (Borden 2002). Research in the United States and other early industrialized nations, in contrast, consistently points to school instructional leadership as one of the sources of school effectiveness (Blasé and Blasé 1999). Many of the approaches of school reform developed over the last decade in the United States, consequently, point to inducing changes in leadership, to redistributing leadership, and to developing new collaborative relationships and dialogue that reshape shared meaning and expectations among school professionals—in effect, to changing the culture of schools (Levin 1998).

There are several related sets of reasons to look carefully at social interactions, leadership, and shared meanings in the school. One reason to look at school culture and social relations is that it is in this social context that teachers carry their work. As teachers talk to colleagues, principals, and parents, these conversations hold the potential to affect how they conceptualize their work (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2003). This is the reason that contemporary ways of thinking about how to support the professional development of teachers emphasize these conversations as central to empowering teachers to teach for understanding. "Teachers learn by doing, reading, and reflecting (just as students do); by collaborating with other teachers; by looking closely at students and their work; and by sharing what they see." (Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin 1995, 598). At a practical level, one reason to study the role of principals in Mexico is that strategies for school improvement increasingly depend on decentralizing decision-making authority to the school under the assumption that this will most directly support initiatives that will lead to enhanced opportunities for student learning. The popular strategy to decentralize decision making to principals assumes that principals are competent and that they have incentives to attend to the learning opportunities for the students in the schools they manage. If there is a weak alignment between their selection and future professional prospects and the learning opportunities of their students, as suggested in this chapter, this challenges the essential premise that schools will improve if principals' decision-making authority is enhanced. This strategy is consistent with views of educational improvement that suggest that education is a very complex and poorly understood business and that as a result it makes sense to move away from input-based policies to policies that focus on incentives to improve outcomes and that delegate the task of improvement to local actors such as principals (Hanushek 1995). On the surface, this shift in policy approach is predicated on the assumption that principals and teachers have the capability to improve instruction, something that assumes that the incentives to hire them are in line with securing those capabilities.

Another reason to look at the gendered social interactions in schools is that students learn from them. The conversations in the classroom between teachers and students are only a small part of the context that enables students to develop personal knowledge and meaning. Students learn about gender relations by observing how other students treat each other, how teachers and school staff treat

them and their peers inside and outside the classroom, and how their parents are treated by teachers and school administrators. The playground, the school entrance, the hallways, the cafeteria, and the school lavatories are, because of the social interactions that take place in them, learning environments that matter to students. The nature of these interactions provides not just powerful lessons to students, but a context that influences how what happens inside the classroom is constructed by students. When schools offer students a strong sense of community, students are more engaged with school work and are more likely to act ethically and responsibly and to develop appropriate social and emotional competencies (Schaps, Battistich, and Solomon 1997; Solomon et al. 2000.) A number of current comprehensive reform strategies in the United States have a strong component of community building. James Comer's School Development Program, Henry Levin's Accelerated Schools Program, and Eunice Shriver's Community of Caring Program are examples.

A third reason to look at social interactions in schools, particularly at how teachers and principals relate to parents and community members, is that students' lives outside school influence how they engage with school work. Building bridges of trust and communication between the worlds of home and school can support the academic engagement of students (Henderson and Mapp 2002).

A fourth, perhaps more compelling reason to look at these social interactions and shared meanings, and this encompasses some of those mentioned earlier, is that they define what the school is about. Thomas Sergiovanni has explained that in order to support deep change in the operational core of schools, it is more effective to think of them as communities than what is most common, which is to see them as bureaucracies or markets (Sergiovanni 1994, 1998). It is in this view of schools as communities committed to the good of all students that Anthony Bryk, Valeria Lee, and Peter Holland find the explanation for the greater effectiveness of Catholic schools with low-income students in the United States (Bryk, Lee, and Holland 1993). As explained by Stromquist, examining gender relations is central to understand whether the institutions of education contribute to democratic citizenship (Stromquist 1996, 407). This is particularly important in Mexico as there is evidence that teachers in Mexico do not take the development of gender equity as an important objective of schools. In a random survey of elementary school teachers conducted in 2002 only half of them mentioned that one of their objectives was to promote gender equity in their schools (Fundación en Este Pais 2004).

The culture of Mexican schools provides students with powerful moral lessons on what is important, the role of agency, and the value of difference or the sense of justice in the purposes of schools. The massive expansion of schooling that took place in Mexico during the twentieth century was predicated in part as an instrument to explicitly shape new social relationships among different social groups in communities. The state-sponsored National Teachers' Union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación, SNTE) actively enlisted teachers to work toward national integration, the economic transformation of rural communities and the

consolidation of a national and centralized political system (Arnaut 1998, 208). Particularly in rural communities teachers were, especially between the 1920s and 1940s, commonly expected to play the roles of community leaders and agents of change. A study of rural teachers after 1921 describes their work as follows: "Of course teachers had to teach reading, writing and basic numeracy to their pupils, segregating boys from girls, with occasional references to the history of Mexico. But their task went beyond that. The most important task was to reinforce the social organization of the town and motivate people to collaborate in tasks of collective interest, such as opening a post office, building roads, increasing productivity in farming and crafts, and influencing family relationships to make them more pleasant" (Bonfil 1997, 237; my translation).

This historical reference is important because it suggests that the teaching profession was constructed as having a significant political role. Political groups and interests were thus invested in shaping the selection and advancement of teachers because they were expected to play an important political role. The gendered nature of political relationships—the differences of how men and women were groomed for political leadership—thus also played a role in the gendered nature of the education profession. In this way, public schools were set to reproduce gender relations in a patriarchal society.

The persistence of patriarchal norms in Mexican politics is illustrated by the media responses to a meeting of women political leaders that took place on October 6, 2003. "Among the participants there were former governors, ex-leaders of political parties, deputies, senators, feminists, writers, representatives of social organizations, and even the First Lady, constituting what was called the Grupo Plural. The next day the media announced the meeting with an avalanche of sexist comments questioning the participants' intentions, and accusing them of hiding the 'real' purpose of their meeting. Most of the articles, editorials, TV and radio news that covered the event ridiculed, mocked, and disqualified these twenty-one women, and, in a sense, all women interested in politics and political power . . . The Grupo Plural was accused of being a 'Club de Lulu' (the Little Lulu's Club, referring to an only-women club), and hiding political intentions of some of its members . . . the meeting was called El Aquelarre ('witches' sabbath')" (Cardenas 2004, 4–5). Attitudes toward gender equity appear to be more conservative in Mexico than in most other Latin American countries. A gender equality scale based on the World Values Survey places Mexico below Colombia, Argentina, Peru, the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Chile, and Uruguay; only El Salvador and Brazil have lower scores on this scale representing values in favor of gender equality (Inglehart and Norris 2003).

Because schools were to serve patriarchal politics, men were more likely to be promoted for political leadership. Male teachers were thus more likely to be favored by the political groups who expected those promoted in this way to serve their political purposes. The disproportionate advancement of men in the education profession, particularly to the positions of principals and supervisors,

created educational environments that were obviously unfair and inefficient, both in terms of their educational purposes, and arguably also in terms of their political and larger social purposes. This process placed men in positions of authority over women teachers, many of whom would be more qualified and competent than their male supervisors.

Engendering Leadership in Schools

Thirty-seven percent of Mexican principals are women,[1] much lower than the percentage of sixth-grade teachers (43 percent) and significantly lower than the total percent of female teachers (63 percent). Furthermore, and paradoxically, the percentage of female principals is lower among those appointed more recently: among those principals with more than 20 years of experience 43 percent are women, whereas among those with 11–20 years of experience and those with less than 10 years of experience, 22 percent are women. Among teachers who teach only one grade (86 percent of the total), the percentage of female teachers diminishes consistently as the grade increases, from 74 percent in the first grade to 54 percent in the sixth grade. The disproportion of female teachers in several grades is inequitable for various reasons. Teaching in lower grades is more demanding and has lower prestige than teaching in higher grades. Classes in lower grades typically have more students than those in higher grades. It is in the earliest grades that the problems of inadequate development of pre-literacy skills, inadequate readiness, and deficient pedagogies translate into high rates of student failure. As children are retained in a grade, the age heterogeneity of the class increases; this further increases the complexity of teaching at those levels. Teachers teaching in higher grades enjoy not only the benefits of working with the students who have "survived" until the highest ends of the system—and the consequent satisfaction derived from working with students who are academically more successful—but, because they have smaller classes, they also have more time for other activities, including participating in professional development courses and cultivating the support of union leaders, all of which eventually translate into greater support for being promoted as principals.

This gendered division of school work models gendered roles to students, who see that the chances that a teacher will become principal are almost three times greater for males than for females. These differences send powerful signals about the role of merit and ability in qualifying people for leadership positions, particularly as proportionately more female teachers are qualified to teach than their male counterparts (98 percent versus 96 percent), and as female teachers have higher education levels and more teaching experience. Among teachers, those with only a high school degree or less are 7 percent men versus 3 percent women. By contrast, 60 percent of the female teachers have a degree from a normal teacher training school, compared to 52 percent of the men. A normal teacher education degree is a professional degree, for primary school teachers it represents 4 years of educa-

tion. Until 1984, students in normal schools had completed 9 years of basic instruction; after 1984 the requirements were increased to 12 years of basic instruction prior to being admitted in normal schools. On average, female teachers have 17 years of experience, whereas male teachers have 15. The lower probability that women will become principals is significant not just relative to the higher qualifications of female teachers in Mexico, but also relative to other countries in Latin America, where the percentage of women teachers who are appointed principals is higher. Furthermore, while in most countries in Latin America the percentage of female principals increases among the younger cohorts, this is not the case in Mexico. The percentage of principals who are women in Mexico is 57 percent among those older than 61 years, 52 percent for those ages 51 to 60, 36 percent for those ages 41 to 50, and 47 percent for those between 31 and 40. In Brazil it increases from 38 percent among those older than 61 to 51 percent among those between 31 and 40.[2] It appears that the processes that explain the under-representation of advancement of women from teaching positions to the positions of principals in Mexico are resilient and have not improved over time.

Two processes influence the more limited representation of women among principals in Mexico: first, the processes resulting in lower proportion of female teachers in Mexico than in other countries in Latin America, and second, the processes resulting in the lower odds in Mexico of women teachers being promoted to principal. The ratio of the percentage of female teachers to the percentage of female principals in Mexico, an index of proportionality in the gender composition of both roles, is one of the lowest among all countries in Latin America (see Table 16.1), particularly in public schools and significantly more unequal in rural areas.

In urban schools in the capital in Argentina, for example, 97 percent of the third- and fourth-grade teachers are women, and 93 percent of the principals are women, thus the percentage of female teachers relative to the percentage of female principals is 95 percent (an index of 100 percent would indicate perfect equality in proportionality in women's representation among principals relative to their representation among teachers). In the capital of Mexico, in contrast, the percentage of female teachers is 71 percent, that of female principals 40 percent, for an index of inequality of representation of 57 percent. It is surprising that there are such gender inequalities in the opportunities women have to teach and to run schools in Mexico since women are more likely to choose the teaching profession as a vocation than men. Whereas 81 percent of the women teachers polled say they chose to teach because they felt a vocation to do so, only 62 percent of the men polled give this reason to choose the profession. In contrast, 24 percent of the men say they chose teaching because they needed a job, while only 11 percent of the women give this reason. Among the men, 8 percent say teaching was the only professional option in their community, while only 3 percent of the women say they chose teaching because it was the only option.

Among principals, the same pattern of differences between men and women in the motivations to choose the teaching profession is observed: 81 percent of the

Table 16.1

Percentage of Teachers and Principals Who Are Female and Ratio of Percentage of Female Teachers to Percentage of Female Principals in Several Latin American Countries (third and fourth grade, 1998)

Country	Mega-Public	Mega-Private	Urban-Public	Urban-Private	Rural
Teachers					
Argentina	97	89	95	92	96
Bolivia	78	59	74	87	5
Brazil	100	100	100	98	100
Chile	84	79	88	75	81
Colombia	91	89	77	88	66
Cuba	94	na	94	na	9
Honduras	100	100	92	100	69
Mexico	71	97	72	75	57
Paraguay	na	na	95	93	96
Peru	73	88	71	56	57
Dom. Rep.	85	88	74	87	65
Venezuela	91	100	92	89	81
Principals					
Argentina	93	71	96	78	88
Bolivia	75	42	79	51	0
Brazil	91	56	93	83	99
Chile	5	61	4	3	43
Colombia	75	5	48	46	64
Cuba	75	na	79	Na	68
Honduras	31	83	61	100	62
Mexico	4	71	41	81	35
Paraguay	na	na	87	89	69
Peru	35	56	33	68	23
Dom. Rep.	48	6	44	100	41
Venezuela	62	42	69	72	56
Ratio of percentage of female principals to percentage of female teachers					
Argentina	95	8	101	85	92
Bolivia	96	72	107	58	0
Brazil	91	56	93	85	99
Chile	6	77	45	39	53
Colombia	82	57	62	52	97
Cuba	81	na	84	na	76
Honduras	31	83	66	100	9
Mexico	57	74	57	109	61
Paraguay	na	na	92	96	72
Peru	48	64	47	122	4
Dom. Rep.	57	69	59	115	63
Venezuela	69	42	75	81	69

Source: Author's calculations using database of UNESCO (1998).

Note: The category mega refers to cities with more than 1 million people. Urban refers to cities with less than one 1 million people.

women principals say they chose teaching because they felt a vocation, compared to 63 percent of the men; 12 percent of the women did so because they needed a job, compared to 23 percent of the men; and 4 percent say they did because it was the only option in their community, compared to 8 percent of the men.

Why would the union-dominated boards that select teacher candidates favor men who choose teaching out of economic necessity or because there are no other options in their communities, over women who are attracted to the profession of teaching? The gender dynamics in the politics of the union are a largely unexplored topic worthy of examination. In a presentation I made to a hundred leaders of the national teacher union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educacion SNTE) in June of 2002, the most senior members of the leadership, I remarked on the fact that less than 10 percent of them were women. In a follow-up discussion over dinner with the most influential of those leaders, including one woman in a group of twelve, I brought up the question.

The woman in the group explained that the demands of union leadership, with work on evenings and weekends, are hard to meet given other social expectations of women in Mexico. Only to underscore the complex nature of the social processes that construct gender bias, however, the president of the union is a woman. In May of 2004 I asked the Secretary of Education of a northern state in Mexico (paradoxically a woman) why there were not more women in her position, and shared with her some of the findings I report in this chapter. She explained, "It's very simple. In order to advance professionally in education, and to be promoted, everyone needs the support of the *sindicato*. A lot of the business of the *sindicato* is done in the cantinas on Friday nights and weekends. It is not easy for women to do this work and fulfill their other obligations to their families. In the environment of the cantinas there are very few women teachers and because of this they are often treated and expected to behave in ways that are not compatible with the honorability of a woman in Mexico. So this makes it very discouraging for women to seek leadership in the union. It's very difficult to talk about these things in Mexico even though we all know what goes on for women in the cantinas and with the *sindicato* and how some union leaders expect sexual favors from women in order to help them advance in their careers."

Why is the teachers' union so important to the professional opportunities of women, and of men, in Mexico? The Mexican teachers' union, the SNTE, is controlled primarily by groups within the party that ruled Mexico during seven decades, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Teacher selection and assignment to schools in Mexico are done by joint committees of the SNTE and the educational administrators in each state. Because the SNTE also influences appointments of educational administrators, they have an important role in selecting and assigning new teachers.

While there is no systematic research on this topic, common lore among educators in Mexico is that initial assignments are typically to the most marginalized rural areas and that as teachers gain experience they can request to be transferred

to schools that are located in urban centers until they "crown" (*coronar* is the expression used by teachers in Mexico, literally to crown) their service in the center of the capital of the state. It takes approximately twelve years for a teacher to end up in an urban school from the initial appointment to a rural school, but the actual velocity of this shift varies across teachers for reasons that are not transparent to those outside the inner workings of these committees. However, many teachers who graduate from the more prestigious normal schools do not begin their careers in rural areas. The teachers' union plays a decisive role in processing and authorizing these requests for transfer. There is very limited research on how patrimonial politics and union politics influence teacher supply and retention in Mexico, but some of the extant research suggests that the union has often pursued its own corporate and political objectives and advanced the political interests of the Mexican government at the expense of the professional interests of teachers (Arnaut 1996).

The Mexican Teachers' Union, the single organization that has represented teachers since the mid-1940s, plays a very large role in hiring, retaining, and promoting teachers. This is achieved through large union representation in the positions of school principals and supervisors, and in the system of teacher selection and transfers and promotions, which shape the careers of teachers (Arnaut 1998, 207); the "*comisiones mixtas,*" is where union representatives and administrators decide on teacher appointments and transfers. "Most teachers believe that, after completing their education in the normal school, their basic source of professional development is their daily work. But their daily work is related to the Union. There is no teacher that does not have an intense and frequent relationship with the affairs of the Union. And it could not be otherwise for the relationship with the Union influences their income and their being able to stay in the profession, their job, their working conditions, expectations for promotion, benefits payment of their salary and even processing of their ability to retire with benefits." (Arnaut 1998, 209–210; my translation).

From an educational standpoint, the lower likelihood of women to be promoted to principals is problematic not only because this reduces the exposure of girls and boys at an early age to women in higher-status professional roles, but also because students in schools headed by female principals have higher academic scores, more of them obtain good scores on curriculum-based tests, and they are less likely to repeat grades than students in schools headed by male principals. Female principals are also more likely to live in the community in which the school is located (51 percent versus 44 percent). Female teachers have higher expectations for the educational attainment of students than male teachers—29 percent of them expect students to reach high school or college, compared to 18 percent of male teachers. In schools with higher concentrations of low income students, female principals are slightly more likely to hold more positive views of students' dedication to school work; 34 percent of them find students motivated, compared to 28 percent of their male counterparts. There are

no differences in what male and female principals say they do, as characterized by the percentage of them that talk with teachers about instruction or other matters or who visit classrooms. Nor are there gender differences in terms of how principals perceive relations between teachers and principals.

The processes that explain the limited participation of women in teaching and particularly in managing schools are probably multifaceted. They may include social expectations and customs of a patriarchal society. They may also reflect the large role of the male-dominated teachers' union in shaping teacher appointments and the expectations that teachers should be involved in union partisan activities, which often take place on evenings and weekends. If combining the expectations of holding a teaching job with the traditional social expectations placed on women in patriarchal societies is challenging, the additional expectations of evening and weekend duty in union politicking place demands that are extremely difficult to meet. This is not to suggest that the men who combine their teaching and union duties do a poor job, just that they can more easily perform these two sets of obligations because patriarchy places different burdens on them as far as how the material demands of attending to the needs of a family and keeping up a household are distributed. Supportive of the hypothesis that the union plays a role in the opportunities of women to be principals is the striking contrast in the percentage of female principals in public schools and private schools, where the union plays no role. Whereas in urban public schools 44 percent of the principals are women, in private schools almost twice as many (79 percent) are women. In rural areas and indigenous schools, where even more traditional values characterize local leadership, the percentage of women is even lower—33 percent in rural schools and 19 percent in indigenous schools.

The blatant inequalities in the opportunities for women to be teachers and principals in Mexico are problematic not merely because they challenge the basic sense of fairness of a modern democratic society, and the basic human rights of women, but especially because there is evidence that female principals run their schools more effectively than their male counterparts. There are, for example, differences in how safe teachers perceive a school to be depending on whether the principal is a man or a woman. When the principal is a woman, male teachers are as likely to find the school safe for staff and for students as are female teachers. However, when the principal is a man, female teachers are less likely to say that the school is a safe place for staff and students (80 percent) than when the principal is a woman (87 percent). These differences hold for each of the different kinds of schools in Mexico (public, rural, and indigenous). There are no differences in the percentage of female or male principals who find their school a safe place for staff and students.

It is hard to determine whether these opinions are held because unsafe schools are less attractive to female candidates for the position of principal, or because female candidates lead schools in ways that are conducive to safer environments, or because the same influences that lead supervisors and appointment boards to

disproportionately advantage men in their opportunities for promotion to principal exert other corruptive influences in the schools in ways that jeopardize the sense of community and safety in the school for teachers and students. What is entirely clear is that children and teachers in schools run by men are more likely to perceive the school as unsafe. We cannot discount the possibility that a factor that contributes to making schools unsafe is the fact that they are run by men, particularly given that it is female students and teachers who are most likely to find those schools unsafe.

One of the ways in which schools run by men appear to limit gender equity is that there are fewer women in those schools teaching in the higher grades. Perhaps there are school cultures that are less likely to block the opportunities for women's career advancement. It is possible that female principals open opportunities for other women to teach in higher grades, which in turn consolidates a culture of greater parity. In schools where the principal is a woman, it is more likely that women will teach in the highest grades; this is the case in the school in every kind of school. In urban public schools, for example, 65 percent of the sixth-grade teachers are women where principals are women, compared to 53 percent where principals are men. The gap is 83 percent versus 65 percent in private schools, 62 percent versus 25 percent in rural schools, and 44 percent versus 12 percent in indigenous schools. Given the point made earlier about the advantages associated with teaching in the higher grades, the greater parity in opportunities for teachers to teach in all grades where principals are women increases women's opportunities to be promoted to the position of principal more so than do the conditions existing in schools where principals are men.

Not only is female leadership associated with a safer sense of community in the school, there are also better relations with the community outside the school where women are principals. Participation of parents and students is more likely when the principal is a woman, in all kinds of schools. The percentage of schools with a student association in urban public schools is 43 percent when the principal is a woman, compared to 38 percent when it is man. In private schools the respective figures are 55 percent versus 52 percent, in rural schools 44 percent versus 41 percent, and in indigenous schools 57 percent versus 49 percent.

Similarly, female principals are more likely than male principals to report that the parent association functions appropriately in the school. In urban public schools the figures are 83 percent versus 79 percent; in urban private schools the gap is smaller, 94 percent versus 93 percent; in rural schools 82 percent versus 77 percent; and in indigenous schools 73 percent versus 70 percent.

Participation in general, of students and parents, is also more likely when the principal is a woman than when it is a man. In addition, the quality of participation may be higher with female principals as suggested by the fact that the gap in student scores in a curriculum test is greater between schools where parents participate and those where they do not in schools where the principal is a woman than in schools where the principal is a man.

Engendering Teaching

Since principals are promoted from the ranks of teachers, the different chances of men and women to be principals can originate in the transition from teacher to principal (in the decision of who should be promoted), in the experiences and opportunities that teachers face before being appointed principals, or in the selection into the teaching profession. The previous sections in this chapter have suggested that norms governing the transition from teaching to becoming a principal play an important role. Are there additional differences associated with the gender of teachers that exist before this transition?

In a society such as Mexico, where men and women have different social and economic opportunities, it is reasonable to examine whether teacher gender influences who joins the profession. Presumably, where the occupational options for women are fewer than for men, one could expect the general quality of female teachers to be higher than that of men because women of higher levels of general ability would choose education whereas men of higher ability would have other professional options available to them. Indicative of social customs that constrain women's work, the proportion of women who work for pay in Mexico is half that of men (42 percent versus 82 percent) (ECLAC 2003, 174). This gap remains even within groups with similar levels of schooling. For instance, among those with some college education, 83 percent of the men work, compared to 55 percent of the women. Among those who work, on average women earn significantly less than men, even when they have comparable levels of education. In urban areas, for example, college-educated women who earn wages earn 60 percent of the earnings of their male counterparts (ECLAC 2003, 193).

Relative to this highly inequitable context in the work opportunities facing men and women in Mexico, teaching offers women more equal opportunities. Forty-three percent of the sixth-grade teachers in Mexico are women (63 percent of all the teachers are women, with the proportion of women teaching declining at higher grades). Consistent with the hypothesis that the teaching field attracts women of greater general ability than their male counterparts, students of female teachers have higher levels of literacy on the curriculum-based tests than students of male teachers. Students also rank the effectiveness of their female teachers higher (see Table 16.2).

The gap between students of male and female teachers is greater for students with two literate parents than for students who have only one or no literate parent. Students with two literate parents score a full point more on a curriculum based language test administered to students in the sixth grade, on average, when they have a female teacher. This gap is a half a point for students with only one literate parent and a third of a point for students with two illiterate parents. The advantage of having female teachers is about twice as large for girls as it is for boys, in each of the categories of parental literacy. When examined separately by type of school, this gap in student achievement by teacher gender holds in urban schools, but not

Table 16.2

Mean Differences in Student Reading Literacy[a] and in How Students Rank Teacher Efficacy by Gender of the Teacher (percent)

Gender of teacher		Average Spanish	>11	Understands teacher	Teacher answers	Understands norms	Teacher helps	Learns much	Teacher expectations
Female	Mean	12.00	52.08	56.25	66.01	49.57	67.61	68.32	87.57
n = 1,063	Std. Deviation	2.91	28.47	19.27	20.36	20.02	19.38	17.59	14.66
Male	Mean	10.56	37.49	51.25	64.73	45.43	60.69	64.72	82.97
n = 1,398	Std. Deviation	2.74	28.73	22.44	23.77	23.44	23.39	22.88	19.97
Total	Mean	11.18	43.77	53.41	65.32	47.31	63.69	66.28	84.97
n = 2,467	Std. Deviation	2.90	29.54	21.30	22.37	22.18	22.06	20.87	18.02

Source: Author's calculations using database of EVEP, Mexico, Secretaría de Educación Pública (2000).
[a]Class average and percentage who attain more than 11 points on an exam with scores ranging from 0 to 25.

in rural or indigenous schools. This suggests that, in contexts where teachers are highly educated and where schools are adequately endowed with instructional resources, students, and particularly girls, benefit more from having female teachers. In schools where teachers have lower levels of education, and where minimal instructional conditions are sorely deficient, the characteristics associated with teacher gender cannot compensate for those deficits.

Conclusion

Even though there are more female than male teachers in Mexico, and females have higher levels of education and more experience, they are less likely to be promoted to position of principal. This, in itself, sends a powerful message about the role of merit and ability in career advancement to all students, and about the gendered division of work in schools. Students in schools headed by female principals have higher levels of reading literacy and are less likely to experience academic failure. Female principals are more likely to live in the community where the school is located and *hold higher expectations* for the educational attainment of their students. Male and female teachers find schools safer for themselves and for students when the principal is a woman. In schools headed by female principals, women are more likely to teach in the upper grades of elementary schools. The superior results of students in schools with female principals, and the better climate as reported by professional staff in these schools, could be the results of two different processes. One possibility is that because women in Mexico have more limited opportunities to work, those attracted to teaching and to being a principal are more competent than their male counterparts, who have more options. An alternative is that there are indeed gendered differences in the leadership styles of women and men that make female principals more effective. While the evidence examined does not allow for a definitive answer to this question, the low percentage of female principals suggests that there is potentially much room for improvement in school management that would increase the opportunities for women to be promoted to the positions of principal until the "reserve" of highly talented female principals is exhausted, should the first process suggested be the main cause for the differences. The real question that needs urgent attention is, "Why aren't more women being appointed as principals in Mexico?" This will be a difficult question to answer and to act upon because it challenges the cultural and political norms and traditions that govern how public resources in education are used and, more basically, the very different social opportunities that men and women face in Mexico.

Notes

1. The figures provided in this chapter that refer only to Mexico reflect the author's analysis of data collected by the Dirección General de Evaluación of the Secretaría de Educación Pública, through nationally representative surveys of schools in which students were tested and principals and teachers were interviewed. Unless otherwise noted, the data

reported here correspond to the administration of these surveys in the year 2000. Comparative data for Mexico and other Latin American countries reflect the author's analysis of data collected by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Office for Latin America and the Caribbean in a survey of primary schools in the region administered in 1998.

2. These figures are the author's calculations of data in UNESCO's 1998 survey of primary schools.

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