Gender Issues in K-12 Educational Leadership

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Abstract

This paper serves as a review of the research literature on gender issues in K-12 educational leadership, with a primary focus on the principal and superintendency positions in the United States. The prominent common themes or topics found in the literature are discussed. More specifically, barriers to gender equity in educational leadership are identified, and qualities or strategies used by successful female administrators where such barriers have been broken are noted.

Keywords: gender issues, educational leadership, women, principals, superintendency

Introduction

Educational leaders are under pressure to reform public schools; such efforts are driven in part by the accountability and achievement demands from the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. Educational leaders are significant, as was found in the pioneering work by Edmonds (1979). He identified the principal's skills and capabilities as contributions of school performance. More recent work similarly noted that effective educational leaders can positively impact student and school success (Cistone & Stevenson, 2000; Darling-Hammond & Post, 2000; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). However, despite the critical nature of principals' or superintendents' roles, a disproportionately low number of women occupy these positions (Loder, 2005; Young & McLeod, 2001). Compared to males, females are less likely to become administrators (Holloway, 2000). At the same time, "No federal or national organization, including the National Center for Education Statistics, collects or reports annual administrative data by gender;" as a result, available statistics are minimal, and it is difficult establish trends over time (Shakeshaft, Brown, Irby, Grogan, & Ballenger, 2007, p. 103).

Although statistics are minimal, some reports have illuminated the low percentages of women in educational leadership. For example, the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2002) noted a disproportionate representation of women in the superintendency. Grogan (2005) stated that "although the numbers of women in the superintendency have more than doubled over the past ten years, they are still woefully small" (p. 24). More recently, de Santa Ana (2008) affirmed that there are more women becoming superintendents, with 15 percent in the nation. This value is significant given the considerable presence of female teachers in our public schools.

For the principalship, NCES (2007) indicated that between 1993-1994 and 2003-2004 the percentages of female public school principals increased from 41 to 56 percent in elementary schools and from 14 to 26 percent in secondary schools. Additionally, it is particularly important to note the small percentage of female principals at the secondary schools because promotions to the upper levels of administration, such as the superintendency, often occur from this level (Young & McLeod, 2001). Thus, in a field that is populated by women, the glass ceiling effect is still present (Addi-Raccah & Ayalon, 2001; Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006; Moreau, Osgood & Halsall, 2007). According to NCES (2006), 75 percent of public school teachers were females, so it is clear that females' percentages in leadership are not proportionate with their percentages in the teaching workforce.

Keeping such statistics in mind, Marshall (2004) cautioned that the field of school leadership will be repopulated by 2010, and vacancies will need to be filled. Perhaps the people who will fill these vacancies will be representative of our culturally diverse society, with equitable gender representation in the field of educational leadership. However, for such transformational changes to occur, an understanding and awareness of gender issues in educational leadership must also occur. To this end, this paper provides a review of the research literature on gender issues in relationship to K-12 educational leadership, with a primary focus on principal and superintendency positions. Barriers to gender equity in educational leadership are identified, and qualities or strategies used by successful female administrators where such barriers have been broken are noted. This study lends additional information to the current body of knowledge because it continues the dialogue about why women in the 21st century in a

developed country are still lagging behind in positions of educational leadership. Gender inequities currently exist in educational leadership, and the issue cannot be ignored. Women are over-represented in the education system; yet, they are consigned to lower positions. The current body of knowledge must continue to disseminate effective practices that can encourage female leadership, promote leadership among women with families, and reflect a feminine way of knowing.

Barriers to Gender Equity

Unseen Gender Inequities

The process toward equitable changes should be improved by reducing and eliminating current barriers to educational leadership positions. However, there seems to be "an implicit assumption that problems of equity for women have been solved and there are no issues left to address" (Coleman, 2005, p. 5). Moreau, Osgood, and Halsall (2007) found that many female teachers and other educational stakeholders did not recognize or identify a gender imbalance. Within educational leadership, Krüger, van Eck, and Vermeulen (2005) also mentioned that "there has hardly been any reference to gender, although women are still under-represented and thus under-utilized" (p. 241). Furthermore, Young (2005) indicated that "in recent years, ambivalence, resistance and antipathy have redeveloped around gender issues, making it more difficult for feminist scholars to continue to work for gender equity in the leadership field" (p. 35). Earlier, Young (2001) emphasized the lack of equal opportunity:

> discrimination still exists in terms of salary, benefits, recruitment, hiring, and promotion. Furthermore, women principals tend to be hired more frequently at the elementary level, while women superintendents are relegated to less desirable districts that are either small and rural or urban and troubled. These difficulties merely scratch the surface of the inequities that impact women in educational leadership, yet the perception persists that women have achieved equity. (p. 36)

Perhaps part of a reason for persistent inequities in educational leadership exists because male leaders tend to dominate the field and tend to make employment decisions.

Male Dominance

While females dominate the ranks of teachers, the field of educational leadership has historically been comprised of males (Tallerico & Blount, 2004). Similarly, Lárusdóttir (2007) affirmed that "the hegemony of masculine values over feminine in educational administration is not new. Educational administration as an academic field is a little over a hundred years old and for most of this time women have been largely absent from the field" (p. 263). Addi-Raccah and Ayalon (2000) also identified male dominance and hegemony within the field. As a result, "Workers that best fit the ideal-worker norm—White, male, married, and heterosexual—are perceived as the more attractive worker" (Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006, p. 500). Coleman (2001) recognized the masculine nature of the leadership culture and pointed out that it can serve to marginalize and isolate females. Thus, women may not seek leadership positions because the status quo does not appear to favor them (Coleman, 2005).

Stereotypes

If the status quo does not appear to favor women in educational leadership, it should not be surprising that stereotypes serve as a major barrier for aspiring female leaders. Indeed, unique stereotypical styles, characteristics, and behaviors are commonly attributed to each gender. For example, Krüger (2008) noted that:

> Women are said to be dependent, conformist, cooperative, passive, emotional, uncertain of themselves, kind, helpful, understanding, sensitive and weak, to name just a few of these preconceptions. Men are said to be independent, competitive, active, rational, sure of themselves, aggressive, dominant and strong. (p. 164)

An existing and pervasive stereotype in the field is that successful leaders must portray masculine characteristics and corresponding styles, which are often a mismatch for females (Brooking, 2008; Coleman, 2003b; Grogan, 2000; Krüger, 2008; Krüger, van Eck, & Vermeulen, 2005; Oplatka, 2002).

In general, a number of researchers have emphasized that leadership roles are considered to be masculine-oriented with behaviors of authority and discipline, whereas females are considered to be more emotional and collaborative (e.g., Adams & Hambright, 2004; Addi-Raccah & Ayalon, 2000; Brooking, 2008; Coleman 2003a, 2005; Krüger, van Eck, & Vermeulen, 2005; Shields, 2005; Wrushen & Sherman, 2008). In essence, because women might be stereotyped as being nurturing and emotional, others might believe that this will negatively impact leadership positions (Coleman, 2001; Krüger, 2008; Young, 2005). With the existence of these stereotypes, males are considered more favorable than females for leadership roles (Krüger, van Eck, & Vermeulen, 2005), even by female teachers (Krüger, 2008; Young, 2005). Further, male leaders are often given more freedom and latitude to apply a variety of leadership styles (Krüger, 2008). In the workplace, and specifically in public schools, the stereotypical frames of effective leaders have worked against aspiring female leaders.

Although stereotypes can work against females, more recently, collaborative approaches have been judged more desirable within educational leadership. Such collaborative approaches point to feminine ways of knowing "that are less linear, separate, and hierarchical than are men's" (Luttrell, 1989, p. 35). Specifically, a paradigm shift from a hierarchal approach to a community approach in educational leadership has emerged (Doyle, 2004). The widely used professional learning communities (PLCs) create significant demands for collaboration, involvement, and collective decision making (Buffum & Hinman, 2006; DuFour, 2004; Hord, 1997). Considering such a shift, bear in mind that "women are thought to be caring, tolerant, emotional, intuitive, gentle, and predisposed towards collaboration, empowerment, and teamwork" (Coleman, 2003a, p. 30).

In other words, these characteristics are identified as transformational, shared leadership styles, whereas men are noted as having managerial, hierarchical styles (Coleman, 2003a; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Fennell, 2005; Grogan, 2005). In view of the shifts in effective leadership styles and the existing leadership perceptions, it would seem that women's perceived styles could benefit their opportunities for leadership positions. That is why Shields (2005) emphasized that

"women leaders do not need to be bullies or boxers, nor do they need to lead in the soft and fluffy ways suggested by images of little girls playing hotscotch [*sic*], or in the frenetic, reactive, and unproductive ways reminiscent of jumping rope" (p. 84).

Considering the paradigm shift in leadership styles, it is important to note that leaders' self-perception reports actually tend to be similar among men and women and often favor a more feminine style (Coleman, 2003a). Even more, studies revealed that educational leaders were perceived as equally effective despite gender, thus countering many stereotypical beliefs that masculine characteristics are needed for effective leadership (Adams & Hambright, 2004; Thompson, 2001). Of course, it seems logical that quality leaders are not simply defined by gender (Brooking, 2008). Nevertheless, "It appears that while the leadership characteristics commonly associated with the female gender are becoming more accepted and valued, the actual gender is not" (Young, 2005, p. 38). Hence, certain perceptions still keep women out of leadership positions or limit their abilities through stereotyping (Young & McCleod, 2001).

Sexism, Bias, and Discrimination

Stereotypes are also intertwined with barriers of sexism, bias, and discrimination against potential and current females in educational leadership. Women often face sexist practices, particularly in hiring, selection, and recruitment procedures (Alston, 2000; Brooking, 2008; Coleman, 2005; Young, 2005). Also, women lack social networks and have less training or fewer opportunities for development, and a general bias against them can occur (Addi-Raccah & Ayalon, 2000; Coleman, 2001). Because of bias, females often have to work harder to prove themselves as leaders (Adams & Hambright, 2004; Coleman, 2001, 2003a, 2005), which can also lead to burnout (Adams & Hambright, 2004; Oplatka, 2002).

Rusch and Marshall (2006) argued that there is a gender bias in expectations for administrative roles. They posited that gender filters exist, and they (a) reproduce and reify privilege and tradition, (b) are subtle and contradictory, and (c) modify conduct; in addition, such filters generally favor males in educational leadership. Along with bias, women encounter discrimination (Moreau, Osgood, & Halsall, 2007; Silverman, 2004; Young, 2005), and women and men are equally likely to discriminate against female leaders (Young, 2001). Therefore, "Although women are interested and qualified, they encounter constraints that limit their choices and decisions," such as sexism, bias, and discrimination, along the leadership pathways (Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006, p. 485).

Role Conflicts, Low Salaries, and High Job Demands

Other factors that have been found to serve as barriers along the leadership pathways have been role conflicts, high job demands, and low salaries. For example, Grogan (2000) clearly identified role conflicts when she noted that, for the position of superintendent, "The kinds of men and women often described as successful in the position have to act in ways that are sometimes at odds with their earlier roles as relational, nurturing teachers" (p. 125). In relationship to the principalship position, Loder and Spillane (2005) found that female administrators commonly faced role conflicts when shifting from teaching positions to administrative positions. For example, for one female administrator, they noted that "one of the

biggest adjustments she had to make as an administrator was to broaden her purview of the work domain." As another example, the authors identified the change in relationships with students, from being intimately personal to more compartmentalized and distanced. However, these authors mentioned that they were not sure whether the females' role conflicts were gender-related. Regardless, they suggested that educational leadership programs and professional development efforts should address such challenges in order to better prepare administrators for the shift in roles.

As females face role conflicts when they shift roles, they also face high job demands and insufficient salaries within educational leadership positions. Loder (2005) documented the physical and emotional toll on female leaders when they accepted administrative positions. Similarly, Mahitivanichcha and Rorrer (2006) acknowledged that the superintendency has high job demands, and they made particular note of low salaries and "a systemic structure, which includes a dominant time structure around which all workers are expected to organize their lives" (p. 487). Adams and Hambright (2004) polled participants in their teacher leadership program and found that teachers' love of teaching overpowered their desire for leadership positions, and teachers mentioned the desire to avoid dealing with difficult parents and lack of appropriate salaries. In other words, some teachers believe that leadership responsibilities are not worth the additional time and stress. Grogan and Andrews (2002) referenced insufficient salaries in light of "the additional stress of meeting state benchmarks to remain accredited in this era of high-stakes testing and accountability" (p. 237). Additionally, "Expansions of scale, decentralization, and increasing autonomy of schools are making the business of running schools more complex and principals are being asked to do the impossible" (Krüger, 2008, p. 156). It seems reasonable for females to take into account the role conflicts, insufficient salaries, and high job demands of educational leadership positions, especially when considering that today's females must often balance work and family obligations.

Family Obligations

In many families, women are expected to maintain traditional family roles independent of existing or new job responsibilities. When females obtain or seek positions as educational leaders, it is not easy to balance their work and family obligations (Coleman, 2001, 2005; Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2008; Moreau, Osgood, & Halsall, 2007; Wrushen & Sherman, 2008). For example, Grogan (2000) reviewed the literature on the superintendency over the past 50 years and acknowledged that "a superintendent is not encouraged to put his or her own family needs first" (p. 125). At the same time, the system tends to support "married male workers who have the full-time domestic support such that they can be free of home and family responsibilities" (Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2008, p. 493). It makes sense, then, that women who obtain positions of leadership are often not mothers (Coleman, 2001).

Although Coleman's (2001) study was conducted in the United Kingdom, her findings were similar to those above. She explored reasons for the lack of women in educational leadership and found that women might have to choose their career over family. She noted that part of this might be attributed to the gendered roles of females as domestic caretakers and posited that women might take time off work to care for children or elderly relatives. For the most part, research findings have made it "woefully apparent that the overwhelming

responsibility for managing work-family conflicts falls largely on women administrators" (Loder, 2005, p. 768). Females' career goals or aspirations related to educational leadership are impacted by family obligations.

Similarly, Silverman (2004) highlighted concerns about family obligation and added that women might have to move to obtain such positions, which they are not always willing to do. As a result, women might be less committed to jobs that require more time investments because of their combined work and family roles (Addi-Raccah & Ayalon, 2000). Therefore, these obligations often lead others to question whether women are capable of being effective educational leaders.

Confidence, Aspirations, and Risk-Taking

It is also believed that women sometimes question their own capabilities of being educational leaders because of a lack of confidence or aspirations (Coleman, 2001, 2005; Krüger, 2008; Wrushen & Sherman, 2008). For example, Wrushen and Sherman (2008) revealed that some women felt uncomfortable describing themselves as powerful. Coleman (2001) noted that, for women, careers may be seen as only one part of life, so they are reluctant to progress to other positions. Further, she argued that women may not apply for a job unless they truly believe they have all of the qualifications, whereas men might apply even if they do not believe they have all of the qualifications. Therefore, risk-taking characteristics play a critical role in advancement and employments decisions. Lack of confidence and aspiration might occur because women may have experienced more failure and rejection than their male counterparts (Coleman, 2001). As a result, it is often believed that "a combination of a woman's aspirations, experiences, and responses to those experiences is what ultimately determines her decision to enter or not to enter educational administration" (Young & McLeod, 2001, p. 469). Hence, leadership preparation programs should consider proactive steps to address these concerns.

Breaking Barriers to Gender Equity

Effective Practices

Women face many real dynamic barriers to movement from teaching into leadership roles; however, these barriers can be broken. Fennell's (2005) study identified common themes in the live experiences of six women principals. Although the study did not investigate gender differences, it highlighted women's practices used to overcome barriers. Fennell established that these female leaders (a) worked to develop a collaborative environment under a common vision, (b) valued people and their contributions, (c) used power and made it expandable to others, and (d) resisted practices that interfered with the overall goals, thus confronting issues as needed in their positions as educational leaders. These leaders employed the stereotypical female styles to proactively promote change. Although the characteristics may be considered stereotypical, such characteristics pertain to the feminine way of knowing, which is embedded in social relationships (Luttrell, 1989).

Also, with experience, peer mentors, and training, women have become more comfortable in leadership roles; as women persist in leadership roles, they might "take on more risks, becoming more daring and less afraid of personal consequences" (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003, p. 361). The willingness to risks might also be related to power attainment and skill development. From interviews of women in elite educational leadership positions, Shields (2005) concluded that women who understand power, can effectively and wisely use it to overcome gender issues, and are able to promote positive changes in leadership. Further, a common style for female leaders involves a focus on collaborative activities—instruction, skill development, and relationship building with their educational stakeholders (Grogan, 2005), which are consistent with the current paradigm of effective education leadership. With such paradigm shifts in process, and as they become more widely accepted, females relate better to educational positions.

Mentors

For educators who aspire to leadership positions or currently obtain positions as educational leaders, mentors are a critical for job effectiveness (Coleman, 2001; de Santa Ana, 2008; Grogan, 2005; Méndez-Morse, 2004; Sherman, 2005). For example, de Santa Ana (2008) advised aspiring superintendents to stay focused, gain experience, take risks, and develop networks, and enlist effective mentors. Sherman (2005) affirmed that leadership development programs can help aspiring leaders identify potential mentors, coordinate mentorship, and promote mentoring opportunities. Also, Méndez-Morse (2004) observed that many mentor relationships do not have to match gender. Still, effective mentor relationships that incorporate a gender match are functional and can provide support for personal experiences with gender barriers (Magdaleno, 2006, p. 13). However, Sherman (2005) cautioned that mentorships or stand-alone leadership preparation programs cannot influence change—they must be an integral part of K-12 systems. Such programs must implement strategies to recruit women, have formalized processes for recruitment, have an induction program for new administrators, and training after placement (Sherman, 2005). Mentor relationships and other support structures can help women obtain, succeed, and retain educational leadership positions.

Balance of Work and Family

Even though some women in positions of educational leadership may struggle with balancing work and family obligations, women have creatively balanced both responsibilities. However, the extent of this balance will clearly be case by case. A single approach is not appropriate or sufficient—important issues include marital status, characteristics of spouse, and family structure. For example, "Compressing time—juggling different thoughts, decisions, and tasks simultaneously, or multitasking—permits women to accomplish more than one task at a time, including balancing job and family responsibilities" (Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2008, p. 492). Earlier, Mahitivanichcha and Rorrer (2006) recommended that collaborative efforts among educational leaders take place to help leaders alleviate the cascade of job demands. Also, Grogan (2005) pointed out that "the United States is founded on stories of white women and women of color whose work to manage a home and family affairs has never been described as leadership, though it was crucial to the survival and success of all" (p. 21). Women can contribute to effective leadership, and those who strive to become effective leaders can

implement various life course strategies to help balance work and family efforts. Loder (2005) illustrated that women often plan when to get married, when to have kids, and how to carefully integrate life-changing events. Women must carefully consider such events to facilitate an appropriate balance between work forces and family obligations.

Higher Education

Advanced degrees are entry requirements for leadership positions; however, a decision to earn an advanced degree requires significant planning and related transitions. These decisions require a balance parallel to those discussed above. Higher education has been experiencing a transition in the enrollment numbers within educational leadership programs. Shakeshaft, Brown, Irby, Grogan, and Ballenger (2007) noted that "anecdotal information from preparation programs indicates that the majority of the students are women" (p. 104). Therefore, this could expand the number of qualified female candidates for positions of educational leadership. This, hopefully, will promote more female leaders in schools and lead to more gender equitable leadership.

The Synergistic Leadership Theory

The effective practices highlighted above further demonstrate that women should be themselves and should not feel the pressure to conform to patriarchal practices in order to move forward. Women's practices of inclusion, collaboration, valuing others and their contributions, and the ability to balance work and family are helpful in breaking barriers to gender equity in educational leadership. In any case, Irby, Brown, Duffy, and Tautman (2002) affirmed, that even though such practices are widely advocated, they are not incorporated in common leadership theories. Irby et al.'s (2002) synergistic leadership theory (SLT), however, "openly acknowledges the feminine organization as a major component," which lacks in other leadership theories (p. 315).

The leadership model by Irby et al. (2002) has the following four factors that serve as dynamic interactions: (a) attitudes, beliefs, and values; (b) leadership behavior; (c) external forces; and (d) organizational structure. These four factors have six interaction pairs, and there is no structural hierarchy or linear nuance (Irby et al., 2002; Leonard & Jones, 2009). Further, the model contains "both male and female leadership behaviors, a range between closed and open organizational structures, and infinite possibilities of external forces and attitudes, believes, and values" (Irby et al., 2002, p. 312). Leonard and Jones (2009) noted that effective 21st century leadership can be fostered through the gender inclusive framework of SLT.

Closing Comments and Recommendations

Gender issues in the field of K-12 educational leaders exist, and various barriers faced by women are dynamic; the field is slowly changing. More than ever before, opportunities for women to overcome traditional barriers are available. However, Grogan (2005) warned that "until there is a more equitable distribution of women in the highest levels of educational leadership, we are sending a message that says women's leadership is still not much valued" (p. 26). "The absence of women … means that women's influence on policy changes, decisions,

and practice in the field is limited" (Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2008, p. 486). The development of appropriate structures and support systems to promote gender equity in educational leadership are critical for effective education change—we need our most effective leaders independent of gender.

As part of the process for achieving gender equity, a reconceptualization of effective leadership must occur; this is above and beyond the need to recruit, develop, and retain highly effective women. At the same time, while it is important to look at overall issues of women in educational leadership, "It cannot be unilaterally assumed that experiences of women based on their social and ethnic location are the same or similar" (Fitzgerald, 2003, p. 433). It is necessary to take note of gender issues in educational leadership, but within-group consideration must also take place, such as ensuring proportionate racial and ethnic representation. Additionally, Loder (2005) cautioned that:

> it makes very little sense to continue drawing conclusions about women's progress in achieving gender equity in educational administration based on comparisons between 'today's' women administrators and 'yesterday's' men administrators, which may be invalid or erroneous comparisons. (p. 770)

Past patterns must also be challenged. It is important for "others to think about contemporary leadership in ways they have not before—both by understanding the superintendency's past patterns within their social contexts and by generating new questions about this and other sex-segregated leadership positions in education" (Tallerico & Blount, 2004, p. 656). All school leaders need professional development and awareness training in gender related issues, which will support new and aspiring leaders as they address existing barriers. Effective female leaders should make efforts to support new and aspiring leaders—they should share successful experiences. Such supportive activities have many benefits; negative perceptions and stereotypes can be challenged, a wide pool of successful women leaders can be developed, and would-be leaders can be encouraged to move forward.

Educational institutions and professional organizations must support and encourage research on gender issues in educational leadership. Federal and national organizations must improve data collection procedures and examine additional variables, such as sex, in their studies about educational leadership. Of course, "It is the responsibility of K-12 leaders, men and women, worldwide along with universities and bodies preparing school leaders to maximize opportunities for all practicing and prospective leaders so that the capabilities of a larger and more diverse population of school leaders can fully be realized" (Wrushen & Sherman, 2008, 466).

Collaboration among all educational stakeholders is vital because gender inequities exist in educational leadership. Stakeholders must recognize the existence of gender roles and gender influences in women's efforts to obtain leadership positions (Wrushen & Sherman, 2008). This recognition is critical because "turning the differences to our advantage is becoming increasingly necessary" (Krüger, 2008, p. 156). Schools can benefit from both perspectives, and advantages of any differences should help to enhance educational outcomes (Krüger, 2008). Knowledge of and use of the SLT model can promote gender inclusive leadership and integrate holistic

leadership efforts toward educational change. As Leonard and Jones (2009) acknowledged, "Using SLT as a lens to view modernist leadership theory enables one to understand that women can lead effectively without having to behave aggressively or in a masculine manner to be successful" (p. 4). Thus, an equitable representation of a talented, qualified pool of females and males is crucial in educational leadership.

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