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Slow Path to the Superintendency: Women's Social Networks and Negotiation Skills

Carol B. Montz and Carolyn L. Wanat

Women superintendents in one Midwestern state participated in this study of their personal demographics, professional qualifications and career paths, and demographics of districts and boards of education that hired them. Participants identified characteristics, skills, and barriers to women seeking superintendencies. Thirty-one of 36 women superintendents completed a survey, with six participating in follow-up interviews. Initial analysis supports existing research on women superintendents. A second analysis of interview data using Babcock and Laschever's (2003) research on women's negotiation skills and social networks as a theoretical framework suggests implications to train and support women aspiring to the superintendency.

Historically underrepresented in school leadership, women have struggled to gain access to top administrative positions dominated by white males (Blount, 1998; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Marshall, 2004; Shakeshaft, 1999; Tallerico & Blount, 2004). The superintendency is the most male-dominated executive position in any profession in the United States (Dobie & Hummel, 2001). Engrained cultural and social norms have perpetuated men's overrepresentation (Grady, 1992, 1995; Shakeshaft, 1989, 1999), yet, "firm explanations for the under representation [of women in superintendencies] continue to elude us" (Banks, 2001, p. 77).

This study describes women superintendents in one Midwestern state. Women superintendents described personal demographics and career paths, demographics of school districts and boards of education that hired them, and skills, characteristics, and barriers they thought were important in their selection. Thirty-five acting women superintendents were asked to complete a mail survey. Six women provided detailed insights about their experiences in follow-up interviews with the first author, the remaining woman superintendent in the state.

We begin by outlining the study's theoretical underpinnings. Then we provide a historical context for women in superintendents' positions. Next, we discuss challenges women faced to be hired as superintendents, focusing on local contexts, women's personal situations, and specific qualifica-

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tions and barriers they overcame. We suggest social network theory as a perspective to explain under representation of women in the superintendency and conclude with implications for training and supporting women superintendents.

Theoretical Framework

Educational leadership and economics literatures provide theoretical perspectives that guided and informed this study. Both literatures argue that highly qualified women struggle to gain professional positions held by men due to gender bias, socio-cultural norms, and lack of support networks. Women must meet higher expectations than men to access positions for which they are well prepared. Our research supports that of education scholars who provide portraits of women who manage to break through well-entrenched barriers to become superintendents. Early research documented training and selection procedures that disenfranchised and omitted women from consideration of top administrative positions (Shakeshaft, 1987). While more women are being hired as superintendents, highly qualified women still do not secure positions as readily as male administrators (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Grogan & Brunner, 2005).

From economics, Babcock and Laschever's (2003) work on women's negotiation skills provides a framework to explain the inequitable struggles experienced by women. They argue that women do not have support of established networks, specifically instrumental ties, friendship ties, weak ties, and structural holes. Social scientists define instrumental ties as those based on an exchange of advice and information and a readiness to help others. Friendship ties are more social in function. Weak ties are relationships with acquaintances based on good will, positive impressions, but not much intimate knowledge of others. Individuals occupying structural holes maintain connections to people in an organization who are not personally connected to one another. Babcock and Laschever (2003) also propose that women do not recognize the importance of negotiating, thereby settling for

less or not negotiating at all. Their theoretical constructs help explain women's under representation in the superintendency.

Historical Context

As early education became more feminized through an increasing number of women teachers, educational administration positions were viewed as a gender-appropriate way for men to stay in education (Blount, 1998; Carter, 2002; Stine, 2004). Men have dominated the superintendency since local school boards created the position to oversee day-to-day operations of schools. Early college training programs set low admission quotas for women (Tyack & Hansot, 1982) and did not provide support for those who were admitted (Shakeshaft, 1987). Women were required to have different qualifications and credentials for licensure than men (Blount, 1998). Women experienced greater access in the "golden age of women administrators" (Hansot & Tyack, 1981). From 1900 to 1930, a larger number of women became local and state superintendents due to women's suffrage (Shakeshaft, 1987; Stine, 2004), formal organization by women teachers (Shakeshaft, 1987), and election of county and state superintendents (Tallerico & Blount, 2004).

Once male administrators and professional organizations recognized the power of the woman voter, they supported appointing superintendents and began to limit training opportunities for women. By 1951, most superintendents were appointed rather than elected, limiting women from consideration (Blount, 1998). Local boards selected superintendents most like themselves: white, middle-aged males (Tallerico, 2000). The number of women administrators declined to less than 2% from the 1950s through the 1970s due to three factors: reduction in strength of the women's movement after the suffrage amendment; national stigmatization of individuals who crossed gender-appropriate lines of behavior; and promotion of school administration as respectable work for World War II veterans with support of the GI Bill (Blount, 1998).

Feminist movement leaders of the 1970s and 1980s drew attention to almost nonexistent representation of women in school administration (Skrla, 2000). Professional education organizations and federal protection agencies promoted and provided advancement opportunities for women (Carter, 2002). While men occupied 85% to 96% of all superintendencies in the 20th century (Tallerico & Blount, 2004), women superintendents doubled from 6.6% to 13.2% in the 1990s (Glass et al., 2000). By 2003, 18% of superintendents nationwide were women (Bruner & Grogan, 2007) and by 2006, 21.7% were women (Glass & Franceschini, 2007).

Design and Methods

This case study included a mail survey of all women superintendents in one state followed by six individual interviews (Yin, 2003). Survey data de-

scribe district and board demographics; career paths and personal demographics of women superintendents; and important characteristics, skills, and barriers for aspirants to superintendencies. Interviewees told rich personal stories about their practical day-to-day experiences (Bernard, 2002).

At the time of data collection, 37 (9.6%) women held superintendents' positions. Nationally, 18% of superintendents were women (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). The survey was sent to 35 women. One woman left her position mid-year. The remaining superintendent conducted the study. Thirty-one usable surveys (88.6%) were analyzed using frequency distributions and percentages to provide a profile of women superintendents.

Survey respondents were asked to volunteer for interviews. Of 22 (70.96%) volunteers, two participants were selected from each of three enrollment categories: small (399 or fewer students), medium (400–999), and large (1000+). Purposive sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) was used to select beginning and experienced superintendents as well as those shared by two districts; in districts with stable, increasing and declining enrollments; and those who had seriously considered leaving the position. Interview questions were based on survey responses to allow comparison of survey and interview data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Coding categories were developed by comparing women's responses to interview questions.

Results

Results are organized by research purposes: demographics of school districts and boards of education; women's qualifications, career paths and personal demographics; characteristics, skills, and barriers in participants' selection. Survey results are reported followed by supporting interview data. Results are compared to other research.

District and Board Demographics

Most women became superintendents in small districts. Of 31 survey respondents, 19 (61.2%) led districts with fewer than 1000 students; seven (22.5%) led the smallest districts with fewer than 300 students. Interestingly, five (16%) women led districts with 2000 to 2999 students, the second largest enrollment category. The 2006 mid-decade AASA study reports that women are less likely to begin in small districts (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). Our results are not surprising, however, given that most districts in the state are rural.

Selection Process

Participants identified processes employed by boards of directors to select these women as superintendents. Of 31 survey respondents, eleven (35.4%) were hired in searches conducted by professional search firms, 15 (48.3%) in locally conducted searches, two (6.4%) by the state school

board association, and three (9.7%) by other methods. Of the six interview participants, four (66.6%) were hired through professional search firms and two (33.3%) by locals boards conducting the search. Local boards of directors participated in multiple activities pertaining to searches. According to 31 survey respondents, 19 (61.2%) boards identified selection criteria, staff, and community members to participate in the interview process. In addition, the 31 survey respondents noted that fifteen (48.3%) boards screened applications, and 26 (83.8%) boards were personally involved in interviewing these women applicants.

Local board members and private search consultants serve as gatekeepers to superintendents' positions with power to deny or allow consideration of women applicants (Tallerico, 2000); yet three participants had positive comments about search firms. One woman commented, "For some reason he [the consultant] was campaigning for me. And he had been nurturing me . . . so I was visible." The consultant promised to "stay with her" as long as she applied for superintendencies. Our data support the trend that more highly qualified women are applicants for superintendent positions, more women's names appear on slates of candidates for board consideration, and more board members see women as having skills to lead their districts (Kamler & Shakeshaft, 1999; Tallerico, 2000).

Hiring from Within

Thirteen (45.1%) respondents had current or previous experience in the district as building administrators, directors of curriculum and instruction, and associate superintendents. Nationally, 45% of women come from inside the district (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Grogan & Brunner, 2005). More women superintendents from the large enrollment category (58.3%) were hired from within compared to two (22.2%) women from the medium and five (50%) from the small enrollment categories.

Interview participants offer explanations about boards' preference for internal candidates. Four (66.6%) interviewees were hired in districts where they had previous administrative experience, had grown up in the community, or were recognized as competent administrators in neighboring districts. Being "a known commodity" was an important consideration in their selection. One participant thought she had "survived" her first year despite unpopular decisions because of her credibility as elementary principal in the district.

I think I was hired because they knew me. They knew enough of me as elementary principal that . . . if I didn't know how to do something I could probably figure it out. And I think I got the job because I proved myself. I've walked through the fire and I proved myself. You know, I was a proven commodity.

Two interview participants who were not hired from within thought willingness to become involved in the community was an important factor in their selection.

Superintendent-Board Relations

Boards of education that hired these women were diverse in size and members. Twenty-three (74.2%) survey respondents reported to five-member boards of education with eight (25.8%) reporting to seven-member boards. Nineteen (61.2%) respondents reported their current boards included one or two women members; three (9.7%) had no women board members; and one (3.2%) board had all women members. Five (83.3%) of six interview participants worked with women board members. Interview participants had positive comments about education, skills, and knowledge of both male and female board members. One superintendent admired her board president because, "She can tell it like it is." Another respondent's confidant among board members had admonished the board about questioning "whether a female candidate could do the job."

Building positive relationships with the board was important to participants and required time, commitment, and beginning again when there was turnover on the board. One participant who had four new board members than those who had hired her three years ago commented, "I've liked all the board members and we've worked well together. But you just feel like you've built a relationship and it starts all over every year with a new board." Another participant commented about the effect of turnover on superintendent-board relationships: "And then the board that hired me, I mean, they were pleased with whatever I did. But with new people, they have different expectations. You've got to be flexible and willing to change." One participant found herself working with several new board members after community controversy over changing enrollment centers.

It's a pretty scary place, isn't it? Because everything can be going very well and then you get some people that really think you should be moving on. You try to last through that. You just have to keep trying to do the things you think are right.

A superintendent in a district with a financial deficit requiring reduction of more than twenty staff positions and increasing taxes reported that two candidates ran for board positions on a platform "to get rid of the female superintendent." One participant summarized the tenuous nature of board-superintendent relations: "When you're in this job . . . there's no permanency with it. When the occasion arises, you may want to or need to be ready to move."

Professional Qualifications and Career Paths

Participants had strong academic credentials, traditional career paths, and little prior experience as superintendents. Their job searches were relatively brief, particularly for women with support networks. Once hired, participants were responsible for varied, extensive duties.

Academic Credentials

These women were well prepared academically: 10 (32.3%) held an EdD or

PhD, 17 (54.8%) an EdS and four (12.9%) an MA degree. Superintendents from large districts had more (58%) doctorates than medium-sized (22%) and small (10%) districts. Twenty-seven (87.7%) respondents had earned their highest degrees in educational administration. Nationally, 58% of women superintendents hold an EdD or PhD compared to 51% of all superintendents (Glass & Franceschini, 2007).

Four interview participants who held doctorates perceived the PhD as “opening more doors” for women candidates. While having a doctorate may not be a selection criterion, one respondent commented,

I do think boards want to be able to say they have someone with a doctorate. And some boards screen people because of it, so I think that helped me get screened in sometimes. One woman’s male mentor had encouraged her to get her doctorate. He admonished her, ‘Don’t let them tell you that a man got the job over you because he had his doctorate.’

Career Paths

Men and women have different career paths to the superintendency (Blount, 1998; Brunner, 1999; Gupton & Slick, 1996). Women remain in teaching more years than men before accepting their first administrative positions (Glass et al., 2000; Grogan & Brunner, 2007). Respondents had extensive teaching experience. Fourteen (45.2%) had taught for 6 to 10 years, 7 (22.6%) for 11 to 15 years, 4 (12.9%) for 16 to 20 years, and 4 (12.9%) had taught for more than 20 years. Two (6.5%) superintendents had taught for fewer than six years. Interviewees reported similar teaching experience: four (66.6%) had taught 6–10 years before becoming administrators and one (16%) had taught between 11–15 years. One (16%) woman had fewer than five years’ teaching experience.

Our respondents followed traditional administrative career paths to the superintendency. Fourteen (45.1%) survey respondents moved from teacher to principal to central office/curriculum positions. Nine (29.0%) moved from teacher to principal positions before becoming superintendents. These data show that building level experience was extensive. Thirteen (41.9%) respondents began as elementary principals. Only one (3.2%) superintendent had been a high school principal and three (9.7%) had been junior high/middle school principals. Nationally, women superintendents (48%) generally have served as elementary principals (Grogan & Brunner, 2007), with a majority of men (51%) serving as high school principals (Glass et al., 2000). Nationally, 43% of superintendents come from a central office position (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). Interview participants had similar career paths to survey respondents.

Experience as Superintendents

These women were relatively inexperienced superintendents. Sixteen (51.6%) survey respondents reported three or fewer years’ experience. Four (12.9%) were in their first year, and 12 (38.7%) were in their second

and third years. Four (66.6%) interviewees reported three or fewer years' experience. Nine (29.0%) survey respondents were in fourth, fifth, and sixth years. Only four (12.9%) had ten or more years' experience. Small district superintendents had more experience than those in large districts with 70% of small district superintendents having four to nine years of experience. Thirty-three percent of large district superintendents were in their first year as superintendents. Nationally, women average six years in the superintendency including first and subsequent positions (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Grogan & Brunner, 2005).

These women had stable careers. All survey respondents but one had been educators in one state. Twenty-seven (88%) had experience in one district. Three (9.7%) superintendents had served in two districts, and one (3.2%) had been superintendent in four districts. All interviewees had superintendents' experience in one state with four having experience in one district.

Interview participants had insights on women as newcomers to the superintendency. They thought there was a relationship between the number of retiring administrators and increasing willingness of board members to hire women, particularly in rural districts. As one woman commented, "I think the women are getting the jobs . . . but I think it's because the pool . . . the applicants of men . . . has gone down. And so . . . [rural districts] . . . they've got to have a superintendent." Another woman remarked, "There are just fewer qualified men applying for more jobs so women have a better chance now."

Length of Job Search

Once actively seeking a position, survey respondents were hired as superintendents fairly quickly. Seventeen (54.8%) found a position in less than one year. Eleven (35.5%) found a position in one or two years. Three (9.7%) respondents searched for a superintendent's position for five or more years. Among interview participants, four (66.6%) were hired within less than a year and two (33.3%) were hired within two years. Nationally, 73% of women had jobs within one year of beginning to search (Brunner & Grogan, 2007).

Support Systems

Mentors encouraged respondents to search for superintendencies. Not all respondents had mentors. Sixteen (55.2%) survey respondents reported having a male mentor, two (6.9%) a female mentor, and one (3.4%) superintendent had a male and female mentor. Ten (34.5%) women reported not having mentors and two (6.5%) did not answer the question about mentors. All interviewees had one or more male mentors. Nationally, 76.9% of women believed networking helped superintendents acquire positions and approximately 65% of women identified lack of professional networks and mentoring as barriers to the superintendency (Glass, 1992). Interview participants discussed having been "singled out" by a male administrator or

college professor. They were encouraged by principals of schools where they had taught, central office administrators, and other men who saw their leadership potential. One woman commented that her mentors “challenged me. They encouraged me . . . they weren’t afraid of constructive criticism when I needed it. They really believed that I was a good leader.” Three participants talked about negative role models who created “acidic school climate” and “overlooked” them for positions to “keep [them] in their place.” Negative role models provided incentives for women who knew they could be positive educators.

Interviewees sought mentors through professional networks. All were members of formal superintendents’ networks in counties or intermediate educational regions. Three women were participating in the mentoring program for new administrators offered by the state’s professional organization. Networking provided an opportunity to talk about school issues and to socialize. Three women did not know other women superintendents. One of the more experienced women felt intimidated and uncomfortable as men “would look through” her at regional meetings. The other more experienced superintendent had observed that younger men superintendents are more willing to “somewhat” include her in the male network and to regard her as a colleague.

Participants thought that mentoring and networking are critical because of the loneliness of the job. Unable to make friends with staff, superintendents must look outside the district for support and assurance. One commented, “Outside of the networking, you would almost perish because you think how could this be happening to me, and what am I doing wrong.” Participants found loneliness could be overwhelming during the first year, particularly if they faced difficult issues. One superintendent noted that two male members of her administrative team made overt discriminatory remarks that she was “too different” from her predecessor to be successful. The most experienced women had become somewhat accustomed to the loneliness. One commented, “That’s how it’s [feeling lonely and isolated] going to be if you’re the superintendent.”

Superintendents’ Responsibilities

Despite their relative inexperience, respondents had many responsibilities. Interviewees from small and medium districts served as elementary principal, personnel director, curriculum director, and, on occasion, as a shared superintendent between two districts. Five (83.3%) interviewees were responsible for curriculum review and development, school improvement plans, and reports required by state and federal agencies. The participant from the largest district commented that superintendents in smaller districts did not have a team of “directors” to assist with district responsibilities.

Personal Demographics

All participants were Caucasian. Nationally, 7% of superintendents are

women of color (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Grogan & Brunner, 2005). Twenty-eight (90.3%) women were 46 years old or older with the other three (9.7%) women being 36 to 40 years old. Two (33.3%) interviewees were 36–40; two (33.3%) were 51–55; one (16.6%) was 51–55; and the remaining superintendent (16.6%) was 56–60. Nationally, the estimated mean age of superintendents in 2006 was 54.6 years (Glass & Franceschini, 2007).

Participants faced challenges maintaining a family. Nineteen (61.3%) survey respondents were married, seven (22.6%) were divorced, four (12.9%) were widowed, and one (3.2%) was single. Five (83.3%) interview participants were married, and one (16.6%) was divorced. Nationally, as many as 13% of superintendents were divorced, citing demands of their career (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Grogan & Brunner, 2005).

Interview participants emphasized the importance of having supportive husbands. Three women were married to farmers which did not appear to hinder career advancement. One farmer bought and sold several farms across the state to follow his wife's career. Another woman cited financial compensation of the superintendency—salary and health insurance benefits—as reducing the financial strain sometimes associated with farming. Another superintendent whose husband was retired commented that her husband “just takes care of everything at home.”

Husbands and families supported and encouraged these women. Husbands were sounding boards when school issues frustrated their wives. One woman commented, “Who could you talk to if you weren't married?” A retired teacher, one husband understood “the politics” of school. One participant noted, “You know, my family, my parents and my husband's parents are proud of me. I told my kids not to tell their friends that I was the superintendent, but, you know what, they introduce me that way. They're all proud of me.”

Participants faced challenges raising children while trying to meet the demands of administrative positions. Four women were absent from their children and home more than they would have liked. Most stated that a “clean house” was no longer their highest priority. Three husbands had assumed more responsibility and had developed close bonds with their children. The one participant who did not have children summarized the challenging task of combining the superintendency and family: “It would be an impossible task to raise children while being superintendent.” Nationally, 35% of women superintendents had raised children under the age of 20 while holding a superintendent's position (Brunner & Grogan, 2007).

Characteristics and Skills

Women view school leadership differently than men (Bjork, 2000; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Glass et al., 2000). They consider two characteristics as important in advancing to the superintendency: interpersonal skills, specifically ability to maintain organizational relationships and responsiveness to parents and community groups, and

knowledge of curriculum and instruction (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Glass et al., 2000; Grogan & Brunner, 2005). Women think board members believe women lack certain leadership skills, seeing women as weak managers, unqualified to handle budgeting and finances, and allowing their emotions to influence administrative decisions (Glass et al., 2000).

Characteristics

Participants were given a list of 20 characteristics identified in other research as important in selection of superintendents. They were asked to identify characteristics they thought were important to their boards of education. All 31 (100%) survey respondents agreed or mildly agreed that the following characteristics were important: competent, confident, cooperative, decisive, firm/fair/consistent, intelligent, proactive, problem solver, and resilient.

Interview participants offered perspectives on characteristics that were important to their boards. All agreed with survey respondents that competence was important. They spoke at length about how their boards judged them as competent. Being “home-grown” contributed to the sense of competence. One respondent commented, “I think it’s easier to break into [the superintendency] . . . easier for boards to give that trust and leadership to somebody they know than to somebody they’ve only met for two-three-four hours.” Another participant thought her board saw her as competent because she was willing to work as a half-time superintendent. She saw herself as “the best this small district was going to get” and “there weren’t any men going to move here for a half-time job.” A superintendent who was new to the district agreed, stating, “They don’t hire a woman if they don’t think she can do the job.”

Five (83.3%) interviewees thought integrity was the most important characteristic in their selection. Integrity was not included on the survey, but one survey item—being firm, fair, and consistent—arguably is similar to integrity. Twenty (80.1%) survey respondents agreed that being firm, fair, and consistent was important in their selection. Interview participants defined integrity as being honest, truthful, consistent, trustworthy, open, and “knowing what you believe and making decisions consistent with those beliefs.” Four (66.6%) interviewees were hired to rebuild trust among district staff, board members, administrators, and community.

Three (50%) interviewees believed integrity was essential to build and maintain positive relationships with administrative teams and boards of directors. Speaking of the misappropriation of funding by a district administrator, one superintendent reported it to the board though, “It would have been easier to look the other way because he was going to retire in a year or two.” She “struggled with this issue” out of concern for her reputation and relationships with the administrative team and board of directors. Ignoring the issue would have caused her to “question my integrity,” a quality that was “really important” to her. Another participant spoke of “some real ugly things said” about her leadership by one of her administrators who “sabotaged” her.

taged" her. Her philosophy was, "You put it all out on the table. . . If you're not honest with each other, you're never going to have a true team." Another woman spoke of the board's expectation that she conduct "honest evaluations" of "questionable" practices of an athletic director. She commented, "I knew that if I was going to be an effective leader, I had to address this issue with integrity. And the board expected me to take care of it [the dishonesty]."

Two respondents described consistency as a form of integrity. One believed that responding to situations in a consistent manner built trust among staff and community. She stated, "When a problem occurs, people know I'm going to be . . . consistent . . . that I'm always going to be honest." Consistency was particularly important to a superintendent from a small district: "Well, from where I sit . . . in this little town. I would say integrity . . . knowing who you are. Because I think the most important thing I have is the trust of the community."

Agreeing with survey respondents that problem solving was important, interviewees defined this characteristic as listening, collaborating, brainstorming, and knowing where and who to ask for help. Two participants used "win-win" problem solving that considered mutual interests, encouraged cooperation, and built teams. One participant commented, "When more people are involved in the decision making process, more people are satisfied with the decision."

Survey and interview participants had differing opinions about assertiveness. While 29 (93.5%) survey respondents identified assertiveness as an important characteristic, only two (33.3%) interviewees identified assertiveness. Four (66.6%) interviewees perceived themselves as less assertive at a personal level, but all six thought they needed to be assertive at the organizational level to achieve the district's goals. Each participant defined assertiveness differently: being an independent thinker, being able to stand up for oneself and one's beliefs, "creating" a climate for change, and "standing firm, doing what's right for kids." One participant distinguished between personal and organizational assertiveness: "I don't think I'm really an assertive individual, but I can be assertive in my role if I need to accomplish something."

Extending the characteristic of assertiveness, all 6 interview participants discussed "power" at length. Oddly, none of the survey respondents, from whom interviewees volunteered, selected power as an important characteristic. In fact, 14 (45.5%) survey respondents disagreed that power was important. Participants thought power of the superintendent was based on positional authority. They described power as a tool to dominate or influence to accomplish the goals of the district. Three participants thought power was the ability to positively influence others to accomplish goals with or through people. One superintendent commented, "By giving power to other people, that's how you become powerful in a sense. I don't think I seek power. I don't even really seek responsibility. I mean, you know, it's like I'm aware that I have a lot of power and influence." Another participant

described power as the “face of the district,” allowing her to work internally and externally to “make things equitable and fair for all students.” These superintendents saw their power as beneficial to work collaboratively with the school and community to make changes for the betterment of the district. One respondent had used “power over” and “power through.” She commented, “When I first came here, because of all the problems, it would have definitely been power over...This is what we’re going to do [to fix these problems].” Later, she started involving others in decision making. These women agreed that power was one strategy to make changes and advocate for students.

Skills

Respondents rated importance of 20 skills in their selection. All 31 (100%) survey respondents either agreed or mildly agreed that three skills were important: involvement of others in decision making, knowledge of curriculum and instruction, and maintaining a positive public image.

Interview participants disagreed slightly on the skills they identified as most important. While 23 (74.2%) survey respondents ranked a positive public image most important, five (83.3%) interview respondents reported that board members made comments during their interviews indicating the district needed an improved public image. They defined positive public image as being visible at school and community events, showing care and concern, responding positively to situations, providing frequent and accurate communication, including parents and community in school improvement efforts, and building school-community relations.

Human relations skills also were important. Twenty-two (71.9%) survey respondents identified human relations skills, and all 6 interview participants perceived effective human relations skills as necessary to create a positive culture and climate. Human relations skills included respecting and valuing staff and students, communicating effectively, and working with others to accomplish goals. Participants reported that women are more in tune to “emotional intelligence” to create inclusive schools where relationships between students, teachers, and parents support improved student achievement.

Nineteen (61.3%) survey respondents identified knowledge of curriculum and instruction as important. All interview participants identified competence and skill in curriculum and instruction. Five (83.3%) interviewees, with primary responsibilities in curriculum and instruction, thought the current focus on student achievement creates opportunities for women to move into the superintendency. National surveys also show that women’s extensive education and experience in curriculum and instruction makes them attractive candidates (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Grogan & Brunner, 2005).

Fourteen (45.5%) survey participants thought the ability to be a change agent was an important skill compared to five (83.3%) interview participants. Local board members questioned candidates about their willingness

to take on challenges that required changes in the district. One superintendent commented that her board wanted a superintendent who would lead the district: "They were tired of running the district. The teachers were tired of the board trying to run the district. The community was tired of them trying to run the district. They needed and were ready for a change in how the board operated." Despite gender stereotyping that women do not have adequate knowledge of budget and finance to lead a school district (Glass et al., 2000), only eight (25.8%) survey respondents and three (50%) interview participants reported that knowledge of budget and finance was an important skill in their selection. Women who thought knowledge about finance was important were hired by districts with significant financial problems. One superintendent discovered that financial accounting had not been documented for over a year: "Someone had just been writing checks. No one in the district knew how much money the district had." Another found her district's expenditures were over budget by almost half a million dollars. Women for whom finance was not an important skill were hired by districts with steady enrollments, adequate carryover, and "excellent" business managers. Despite differing opinions about the importance of finance, all six superintendents had taken advantage of professional development workshops about budgeting and finance. As one participant noted, "With the state's budget cuts, it's going to be more important."

Barriers

Socio-cultural barriers discourage women's entry into the superintendency (Gardiner, Enomoto & Grogan, 2000; Shakeshaft, 1987; Young & McLeod, 2001). Socially constructed norms for women's behavior have remained incompatible with the male-dominated construct of the superintendency, causing women to delay entry into administration and leaving women superintendents searching for ways to redefine their roles and identities (Glass et al., 2000; Gupton & Slick, 1996; Shakeshaft, 1987; Skrla, 2000; Young & McLeod, 2001). Sex-role stereotyping, gender bias, and discrimination have contributed to women's self-questioning, lack of self-confidence, and lack of aspirations (Skrla, 2000). Eighteen (58.1%) respondents reported personal level of confidence and 16 (51.6%) personal level of assertiveness as limiting.

Participants identified barriers that discourage women's entry to the superintendency. They thought family concerns were the greatest barrier to career advancement, a finding supported by other research (Glass et al., 2000; Gupton & Slick, 1996). Twenty-six (83.9%) survey respondents acknowledged personal anxieties about possible effects of their careers on their families. Fourteen (45.2%) reported a lack of family support. Twenty-five (80.6%) also reported inability to relocate which may be a family issue. All six interviewees were concerned about effect of career on family. They frequently had to put family after work, spending long days on the job "being the superintendent 24/7." One participant was "on duty" even when she was "off duty." These women missed or rearranged their

children's birthday parties or other significant family events to attend school events and meetings. One participant felt guilty about putting her children before "important breakfast meetings with community players." District administrators had criticized another participant for sitting with her children at athletic events instead of "standing the wall looking administrative." Family issues included extended family. One interviewee needed to support her elderly parents. She was concerned about being unable to get away for more than a day or two if they should become seriously ill or have an emergency. Two participants were considering leaving the superintendency at the end of the year. Taking early retirement would give one woman more time to spend with her family. Accepting a central office position would give another woman fewer night responsibilities.

The "old boy network" excludes women from access to information, educational opportunities, networking, mentoring, positive role models, and sponsorship (Bleekley, 1999; Gardiner et al., 2000; Gupton & Slick, 1996). Networks of prominent male leaders continue to dominate school boards, professional organizations, and universities (Gardiner et al., 2000). Successful male leaders mentor younger white men to maintain leadership styles and cultural mores (Gupton & Slick, 1996). Aspiring women candidates are influenced in decisions to enter administration by positive and negative role models and the endorsement and support they receive (Young & McLeod, 2001). Twenty-seven (87.1%) survey respondents agreed with previous research that the "old boy" network promotes selection of men over women.

Interviewees had personal experiences with sex-role stereotyping, gender bias, and discrimination. Their experiences showed that board members, particularly in rural districts, support the myth that women are not capable of doing the job and "be males' bosses." One woman who had been an unsuccessful candidate in another district commented,

I knew something was up. I was better qualified. I had more education. I had the type of personality they were looking for. I just didn't get it. I knew one of the female administrators in the district and she later told me the male administrators lobbied against me with the board.

These women had experienced discrimination or sexism, particularly during their first year of employment. In one district, the operations and grounds supervisor quit two weeks after the participant was hired, telling people he "couldn't work with a woman." Another superintendent's high school principal told his staff, "She shouldn't be the superintendent in this district. A woman shouldn't have that job." One superintendent with an all male administrative team commented, "I knew my board wondered whether I could handle these guys." Two insubordinate male administrators who were internal candidates for the superintendent's position were terminated. One defied procedures and policies, saying, "I don't have to listen to her."

Four participants thought the male conception, or “image,” of the superintendent is a barrier for women. One reported, “The paradigms have got to change and we need a more family friendly job, not just for females but for all superintendents.” One participant commented that women superintendents “look different” than male superintendents. They have not typically been coaches, do not want to put in 60 hours attending basketball games and wrestling events, and do not worry more about buses than instruction.

Conclusions and Implications

Possible explanations for inequitable numbers of women in the superintendency include historical trends (Blount, 1998), institutionalization of the superintendency as men’s work (Tallerico & Blount, 2004), market constraints that advantage men (Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006), and content of recruitment announcements that deter women applicants (Newton, 2006). This study supports inequalities noted in other research (Blount, 1989; Glass et al., 2000; Shakeshaft, 1987). Women superintendents were more likely to be hired in smaller districts and districts with financial difficulties, community unrest, and declining enrollment. Regarding these positions as opportunities, participants acknowledged that men were less likely to accept them. Subjected to discriminatory treatment, they coped by ignoring inappropriate comments, changing their management and leadership styles, and providing awareness training for leadership teams to deal with discrimination based on gender. Women superintendents deny, remain silent, or leave the district when faced with discriminatory treatment (Bjork, 2000; Brunner, 1999; Skrla, 2000). Three interview participants whispered and two repeatedly glanced toward the door to see if anyone would enter while they shared stories of discriminatory treatment.

Viewing results from the perspective of social network theory helps to explain the barriers women face in securing superintendencies on an equitable basis with men. Women in this study were sadly lacking in the key components of networking (Babcock & Laschever, 2003). Two principal types of networks, instrumental and friendship, were admittedly missing for participants. Instrumental networks through district, regional, and state organizations gave male superintendents access to advice and information, but women were tolerated at best and denied access to meetings at worst. Men also enjoyed the friendship afforded them through the “old boys” network, but women reported isolation from men and women superintendents. Successful women who were hired from within the district or had a positive reputation, labeling themselves as “known commodities,” had weak ties, a characteristic of social networks. Weak ties are based on positive impressions of others. Unfortunately, women superintendents do not have weak ties in the male-dominated educational organizations in this state. These women also lack the powerful position of “structural holes” in social networks. A person occupying a structural hole has many connections to people in his or her organization who are not personally connected to one

another. Babcock and Laschever (2003) suggest that women who do not occupy structural holes are well served by strong advocates on their behalf. Women spoke about the importance of male mentors who supported and promoted them.

Consistent with Babcock and Laschever's theory, women in this study did not view themselves as negotiators. While they accepted positions that men would not consider, they saw the availability of less desirable districts as providing opportunities for women. These positions involved assuming dual positions and extra duties that commonly are building administrators' responsibilities. Denying their own personal power, these women settled for challenging positions and performed their duties with competence, integrity, and the respect of their boards of education. Babcock and Laschever suggest women who will accept positions under these circumstances think they deserve less and do not negotiate for better positions.

Participants' experiences, viewed from the perspective of social network theory, have implications for training and professional development of women aspiring to the superintendency. University training programs, professional organizations, school districts, and education agencies may support women through "succession planning" (Bjork & Keedy, 2003; Tallerico & Blount, 2004). Women with potential as leaders would be identified and supported throughout their careers. Structured training (particularly about negotiating), professional development opportunities, and mentors would replace the missing network ties that prohibit many women from accessing the superintendency, a position for which they are well qualified and, upon arrival, are highly successful.

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