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Victoria L. Robinson

University of Northern Iowa, victoria.robinson@uni.edu

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Jagged Edges of the Glass Ceiling

Victoria L. Robinson

Although many aspiring, young women might believe the glass ceiling was shattered a decade ago, they still need to understand how that glass ceiling impacted an older generation of women in educational leadership. They also must be aware that some segments of the glass ceiling might still exist. This article provides a historical overview of the external barriers faced by women in educational leadership and presents mentoring recommendations to both generations.

Introduction

A recent opportunity to advise a presidential scholar's thesis, "The Glass Ceiling for Women in Business" opened my eyes to a possible hurdle facing young, aspiring women. At the beginning of Amy's thesis research, she believed that the glass ceiling was an outdated concept and old news, no longer in the public eye because it no longer existed. Amy thought the only limitations to her success would be those limits she placed on herself. Her research led her to think otherwise. Amy, with her self-confidence and belief she could do anything, learned about external barriers.

If Amy is typical of the new, aspiring woman with few internal barriers but unaware of possible external barriers, how will she cope with potential impediments to her advancement? Will she and others be so blind-sided in their lack of awareness and preparation to be unable to counter roadblocks and thus lose their self-confidence? Has my generation focused on the development of female efficacy yet neglected to inform young women about the reality discovered by Amy? Have we forgotten to share a historical description of the external barriers labeled in 1991 as the glass ceiling?

As a former history teacher, I am reminded of my classroom's yearly bulletin board's question to high school students, "How will you know where you are going if you don't know where you have been?" As an assistant professor of educational leadership, I interact with aspiring female school leaders who have limited knowledge of the glass ceiling effect. Perhaps the glass ceiling has been shattered. I doubt that this shattering has been a clean break. Jagged edges in the glass framework can still cut the aspirations of a new generation. Females who aspire to educational leadership positions must

About the Author

Victoria L. Robinson has served Iowa as an educator since 1971. A former secondary teacher and principal, she is currently an associate professor of educational leadership at the University of Northern Iowa.

acknowledge the existence of potential external barriers and develop strategies to overcome them. The purpose of this article is to provide a historical overview of the glass ceiling represented as external barriers and offer mentoring advice to a new generation of educational leaders.

Historical Perspective on Identification of Barriers

An emergence of research on barriers to females in educational leadership has occurred. A variety of barriers ranging from overt discriminatory hiring practices to the female's belief that teaching is her natural role in the educational system were identified. Although the Women's Liberation Movement, beginning in the 1960s, drew attention to the under-representation of women in school leadership positions, very little impact from the movement occurred in the 1960s and 1970s. Despite the enactment of equal opportunity legislation of the 1960s and the Women's Liberation Movement, females continued to be under-represented in school leadership positions. Although women comprised almost three-fourths of America's public school teachers in 1990, they held only 35% of the elementary principalships, 12% of the secondary principalships, and 5% of the superintendentcies (Jones & Montenegro, 1990).

The Department of Labor's "Glass Ceiling Initiative," which began in 1989, released a report that coined the phrase "glass ceiling" and showed it existing in lower levels than first thought (Morrison, White, & Van Velsor, 1992). The Glass Ceiling Initiative identified barriers that included recruitment networking, lack of opportunities for women to take advanced education programs and career enhancing assignments, and lack of accountability for equal opportunity within the leadership ranks. Based on these findings, a 1991 report by the Feminist Majority Foundation predicted that it will take 475 years for females to reach equality with males in the executive suite (Garland, 1991). Hill and Ragland (1995) concluded that women had to work harder than men to succeed and to overcome biases.

An astute male mentor stated in his introduction to Hick's (1996) autobiography of her four-year experience as a female high school principal:

As a society, we really haven't progressed very far during the past century in regard to our attitudes about women in leadership roles. Apparently, a substantial majority of men, and sadly, even women, still believe that ladies should be content to be the "fairer" sex, to nurture and support, to look pretty, smell nice, speak softly, and most importantly, follow rather than lead. (p. viii)

This belief that women should follow, not lead, may partially explain why females move into educational leadership later in their lives. The average female principal spends 15 years as a teacher before seeking a principalship, whereas the average male spends 5 years as a teacher (Shakeshaft, 1989, p. 150). Five external barriers are briefly explained in the following section.

Devaluation of Females

Devaluation of females was reflected in discriminatory actions when females sought leadership positions. Timpano and Knight (1976) identified discriminatory practices such as using word of mouth to recruit males only; asking biased interview questions of women, especially about family responsibilities; offering females lower salaries than males and refusing to negotiate salaries with females; or allowing males to skip steps on the career ladder but requiring females to have completed all steps. A number of researchers concluded that sex discrimination was the number one barrier to females in educational leadership (Driver, 1990; Gerver & Hart, 1990; Shakeshaft, 1989).

Discrimination is often difficult to prove in societies in which people are prejudged based on their gender or color. The prejudged beliefs do not need to be spoken to be shared (French, 1992). Discriminatory practices are subtle and often not coded by the receiver or the giver as biased. "The pressure to internalize societal bias as well as the lack of understanding about what sex discrimination looks like, means females don't recognize what happened to them" (Shakeshaft, 1989, p. 150).

Home and Family Responsibilities

With roots in the traditional expectation for women to care for children, many women leave or defer their school careers to attend to homemaking and childrearing. Hansot and Tyack (1981) explained this as part of the Woman's Place Model. Shakeshaft (1989) contended that family and home responsibilities provide obstacles for females in two ways. First, females perceive that they must juggle all of their tasks as superwomen. Second, they must interact with people who believe they are unable to balance all responsibilities and that it is inappropriate for them to even try. As Gloria

Steinem once quipped, "I have yet to hear a man ask for advice on how to combine marriage, kids, and career."

Externally, marriage is not an issue when it comes to males aspiring to school leadership, but for females, marital status was viewed as a powerful barrier (Pigford & Tonnsen, 1993). Females find themselves in a no-win situation. If females are married, school boards may wonder if they have time to manage the family and job; if not married, females may be perceived as not family-oriented. If divorced, females may be regarded as having no sense of family or permanency (Waddell, 1994). Some married females opt to delay their career advancements to avoid problems inherent in trying to raise a family while serving as a school leader. During this delay, females are out of the network for career advancement.

Role Models, Mentors, Sponsors, and Networks

Females traditionally had little encouragement to pursue educational leadership from family, peers, or representatives of educational institutions (Baughman, 1977; Schmuck, 1986). Waddell (1994) confirmed that even with an increase in encouragement that occurred in the 1980s, the small number of female role models in higher levels of educational leadership sent a message to females. Females might assume that only the extremely talented and skilled females become administrators. This message possibly deterred even highly confident women from choosing to climb the career ladder.

A scarcity of supportive mentors and sponsors has existed for females in educational leadership as well as executive positions across all professions (Johnson, 1991; Restine, 1993; Rist, 1991). Females did not benefit from the encouragement and wisdom of sponsors and mentors in support of their career advancement. Sponsors and mentors assist the aspirant through the screening system according to Pigford and Tonnsen (1993). The screening system can deny or grant critical job vacancy information, networking, and major professional decisions (Waddell, 1994). By sharing information that often bypasses the formal hierarchy and by providing reflected power or backing, mentors are invaluable resources (Kanter, 1977). Even as late as 1995, Hill and Ragland indicated that females in educational leadership positions often perceived that they were the only ones in their particular leadership positions.

Paradoxically, even when there were women in similar positions to provide mentoring and support, they often failed to mentor and support aspiring females. Researchers attributed this sad state of affairs to jealousy, female preference to work with males, an attitude that I made it on my own - you can too, and unspoken competition (Caplan, 1981; Edson, 1988; Funk, 1994). A kinder explanation suggested the struggles, time pressures, and

focus on their own success of would-be mentors and sponsors as reasons for a lack of guidance to aspiring females (Shakeshaft, 1989). Without support and mentors, the establishment of networks is very difficult.

Pervasive Bias in the Patriarchal Education System

Although females represented 75% of teachers employed in 1990, the proportion diminished rapidly as they progressed up the hierarchical administrative structure. This same disproportion was also present in the corporate structure. Whereas nearly a third of all entry-level management positions were held by females in 1990, only 3% of the Chief Executive Officers in the corporate world were females (Saltzman, 1991).

Females were often held back, not by a lack of aspiration, but by faulty assumptions subconsciously or consciously ascribed to them. The system fostered selection of new administrators who resembled the old in attitude, philosophy, deed, experiences, appearance, hobbies, and club memberships (Hill & Ragland, 1995). The preferred gender bias for a high school principal was stated in Brown's (1909) *The American High School*:

Generally speaking, men make better principals than women, especially in high schools. They are stronger physically; they possess more executive ability, they are more likely to command the confidence of male citizens; they are more judicial in mind; they are more sure to seize upon the merits of questions; they are less likely to look at things from a personal point of view; they are likely to be better supported by subordinates; and simply because they are men, they are more likely to command the respect and confidence of boys. (pp. 241-242)

The system's internal bias of "white males managing adults" perceived as superior to "women taking care of children and curricular issues" is a firmly entrenched educational tradition (Yeakey, Johnson, & Adkison, 1986, p. 35).

Gender-Biased Administrator Preparation Programs

Faculty members in educational leadership preparation programs traditionally have been male (Schmuck, 1979). This dominance influences career paths and choices for females in many ways. First, university faculty members initially encourage or discourage graduate students about pursuing a degree. Male faculty members choose to sponsor females who conformed to their stereotypes according to Adkison (1981). In addition to possible lack of encouragement from faculty members, females experience a number of conditions discouraging graduate school participation and success (Shakeshaft, 1989). Lack of child care, informal networks consisting of male students and male faculty, inadequate number of female role models, and a

lack of focus on female students were cited by Shakeshaft as examples of gender-biased conditions faced by females in educational leadership programs.

In addition to many faculty members' lack of service to female students, many researchers commented on the relationship between the curriculum biased toward males and the dampened career goals of females. These researchers critiqued the textbooks and journals for gender bias and found a large portion of sexist content in the research and writing (Schmuck, Butman, & Pearson, 1982; Shakeshaft & Hanson, 1986; Tietze, Shakeshaft, & Davis, 1981). Thus, as Marshall (1984) concluded, graduate programs in educational leadership developed and supported students in ways that did not promote equal opportunity for females.

Summary Comments on External Barriers

Many could cite specific examples of how each of the five external barriers impacted their career paths. We need to revisit those forgotten experiences and share them with the new generation of aspiring female educational leaders. Those stories create a potentially lost story of how women arrived. This will keep alive the earlier call of feminist researchers to remain focused on the experiences and success strategies of females as leaders in education.

As for the Amys and her generation, filled with confidence, knowledge of affirmative action laws, and perhaps denial that the jagged edges of the glass ceiling exist, the following advice is offered.

Delete Internal Barriers

Negative self-talk, unease in out-of-comfort zone experiences, confusion of feedback for criticism, and fear of negative reactions, lost relationships or rejection requires constant monitoring and managing. Even the most empowered and efficacious person experiences some self-doubt but has learned how to be resilient, positive, and confident. Approach negative self-talk as though you were addressing your best friend's mistake or bad experience. Continue to expand your comfort zone by forcing yourself to engage in two events each week that feel unfamiliar, risky, or challenging. Recognize that receiving constructive criticism is not a sign of inferiority but rather an opportunity to learn and grow. Select carefully the voices you will listen to and remind yourself that you made the best decision at the time with the information and experiences you possessed. Question the strength of the relationship if you feel controlled by that person's opinion or conditions. Work on your efficacy and resiliency by recounting your daily successes rather than your mistakes and revisiting how you overcame obstacles and disappointments.

Collect Mentors

An effective mentor is willing to mentor you beyond his or her own position. Seek out a number of trusted male and female mentors with varying expertise and networks. Mentors will assist you in your journey through the complex system of leadership development, position attainment, and position retention. They will provide you with a safe sounding board, connections, insights into the history of the organization, broader perspectives, feedback, safety nets, and increased self-confidence.

Emulate Role Models

Consider how successful females look, act, speak, and project professionalism. Adopt an eclectic approach to develop your own style informed by observation of what works for others based on the reactions of those they serve. If you are a teacher aspiring to the principalship, start becoming the essence of this new role during the transitional period. Females know that even a detail of how they dress is often perceived as more important than what they do or how they do it (Chapkis, 1986). Possible sponsors may first notice your potential for leadership or a new position projected by the image you create with attire, manners, facial expressions, and voice projection. Concentrate on the professional leadership image but remember the substance of your ability goes beyond the outward appearance.

Connect Feminine Leadership Style to Reality of the Role

Leadership style refers to a complex set of actions manifested in how the leader will: focus on group processes, project personality, induce compliance, exercise influence, exert persuasion, relate power, achieve goals, impact interaction, and initiate structure, change, and consideration (Bass, 1990). Recognize that the female leadership style will differ from the male style. Likewise, those who are led and impacted will also perceive the leader through their gender lenses. Instead of remaking yourself in a male image or oppose the male approach or lens, maintain feminine qualities and seek to understand the male's approach and lens. Pay particular attention to the differences between female and male communication styles. Effective communication will build connections, connections will build trust, trust will build relationships, and those relationships will build whatever you want. Communication is the foundation of all actions associated with your leadership style.

In the past, females received the message that they should emulate male leadership styles to succeed in the tough political environment inherent in schools. They also heard that they needed to capitalize on the effectiveness of their feminine leadership styles that include caring, cooperation, and building

relationships. My suggestion is to attempt to blend the best of both male and female leadership styles into a “stroft” approach. Stroft is a blend of strong and soft leadership characteristics. People skills are often considered to be soft skills. Taking a stand, budget management, discipline, and negotiations are often considered hard skills. Both soft and hard skill dimensions are necessary in today’s school environment. A stroft blend of traditional gender roles and attributes into a synthesis of the best qualities and characteristics places a value on both male and female contributions and attributes. Although no easy task, you are in an excellent position to develop and model a new leadership style—stroft!

Conclusion

Women in educational leadership continue to face varying degrees of barriers. Perhaps they are more discrete than they were in the 1970s. However, equipped with a recognition of the existing barriers, the wisdom of research and mentors, the call for additional qualities in leaders that women can offer, aspiring females can benefit from those who have gone before and pave the way for those yet to come. In essence, this recognition can provide a window to see your world and a mirror to see yourself.

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