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Influencing Others: Women Superintendents Speak (Reluctantly) About Power

Susan J. Katz

The public school superintendency is the most powerful position in U.S. schools. Yet research has shown that women who hold the position have difficulty talking about power (Brunner, 2000). I designed a mixed methods study to investigate how women school superintendents viewed their uses of power. A survey was sent to all women superintendents practicing in four Midwestern states during the 2000-2001 school year and nine women in the sample participated in interviews. Results of quantitative data analysis revealed that there were significant differences in participants' age and years of experience in the superintendency and how they perceived their uses of power. The interviews revealed that women spoke of how their power increased when they shared or gave power away. Consistent with previous research, this study also found that women had some difficulty defining and conceptualizing power in their roles as superintendents.

Women must outperform men for others to consider them equally competent since the standard for what constitutes competence in men is lower than the standard for what constitutes competence in women (Foschi, 1996, cited in Carli, 1999). Brunner (cited in Rader, 2001) speaking of women's opposition to land a school superintendency, especially in a large urban district: "To step into a role that is so heavily masculinized is a real challenge; to make it into a superintendency at all a woman has to be very, very good."

What do these "very, very good" women have to say about leading school districts? Do they feel powerful in the most powerful position in public schools? How do they conceptualize power and use it to influence others? This research conducted in the Midwest during the academic year 2000-2001, investigated how women perceived their uses of power, and how they defined and generally talked about power.

About the Author

Susan J. Katz is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at Roosevelt University in Chicago, IL where she teaches courses in social foundations, qualitative research, special education, and school culture. Her areas of interest for research juxtapose her work with women school superintendents and developing pedagogy in teaching for social justice.

Conceptual Framework—Power as Influence

The conceptual framework is based on a model of influence by French and Raven (1959), based on the concept that power refers to the ability or potential of an agent to influence a target. It is grounded on the supposition that the leader use of influence or power mobilizes people within the organization to go beyond their individual interests in working toward the common good.

French and Raven (1959) defined power “in terms of influence, and influence in terms of psychological change [in the target person(s)] . . . which includes changes in behavior, opinions, attitudes, goals, needs, values, and all other aspects of the person’s psychological field” (French & Raven cited in Nesler, Aguinis, Quigley, Lee, & Tedeschi, 1999, p. 751). They identified five sources—reward, coercive, expert, legitimate, and referent—that can be divided among three categories—position, mixed, and personal. Boje (2004) identified the following divisions and power bases.

Position Power Types

- **Legitimate Power**—based on the follower’s perception that a source has the right to influence followers and that the followers ought to comply. The leader must stress the legitimacy of her position and set role expectations.
- **Reward Power**—The ability to control resources and rewards. “The higher a person’s position in the authority hierarchy of the organization, the more control over scarce resources the person is likely to have.” (Yukl, 1989, p. 17)

Mixed Type

- **Referent power**—the desire of others to please a person toward whom they feel strong affection (French & Raven cited in Yukl, 1989). The referent power of a leader over subordinates depends

upon feelings of friendship and loyalty developed over time. The referent power of a leader is increased by the leader's acting friendly and considerate, showing concern for the needs and feelings of others, demonstrating trust and respect, and treating people fairly. (Yukl, 1989)

Personal Power Types

- **Expert Power**—a major source of personal power in organizations is used in solving and performing important tasks (Yukl, 1989). The leader possesses special expertise that is in short supply and high demand but is only a source of power if others are dependent on the person for the advice or assistance they need.
- **Coercive Power**—Power derived from control over punishments and the capacity to prevent someone from obtaining desired rewards.

Study Design

Questions that framed the research asked how women defined power, how they perceived their uses of power, and how did they generally talk about power in their positions as superintendents. In-depth interviews were conducted with a small sample of women superintendents who participated in the leadership survey.

Avolio, Bass, and Jung (1999) stated that “there has been very little effort to confirm survey evaluations of leaders with alternative methodologies such as observation and/or interviews” (p. 459). This qualitative methodology was appropriate to explore the interpretation women superintendents give to perceived uses of power, and to encourage them to define and talk about power, and to describe the ways in which they influenced others within their school contexts.

An interactive-relational interview approach as described by Chirban (1996), was chosen because it purposively created a relationship between the interviewer and the participants through establishment of a relationship. This approach to interviewing supposes that a successful interview is more likely to happen when collaboration, personal attributes, values, and feelings are brought and made available by both participants and promises to deliver a clearer, deeper portrait of the person being interviewed. At the beginning of each interview, I took time to talk about my background and varied experiences in education, why I chose to study women school superintendents, and what I hoped to accomplish through the research. I followed an interview guide that listed the questions. The superintendents had access to the guide before the interviews began. At times I deviated from

the guide during the interview, when I commented and asked questions in response to what I was hearing.

Findings

Interviews were conducted with nine women among the four states.

Defining Power

When answering the question of how they defined power, several women did not have an easy definition. When one woman was asked to define power, she hesitated: “Power to me is—hmm, [hesitation] definition of power?” Another participant said, “That’s really interesting because I don’t think of power that much and I know that that is probably a reality.” Another woman when asked the definition said: “Power in what sense?” Some women were able to define power and even go beyond a definition when discussing how they used power. Women talked about building connections with others by sharing power and in one instance by “giving power away.”

I think that power is shared. You gain power by having the trust and confidence of the people with whom you work. [I think] there is a certain amount of power that comes with titles. But the actual power of being able to make transformations to make systemic change to move a school district forward really is only the ability to get others to subscribe to your vision to where you want to go and to use their abilities and resources to help you do that. So power to me is very shared. It doesn’t sit in this office.

One of the women defined power as the ability to help people realize their potential and capability in the organization; she said she modeled the behavior “that I would expect them to portray.” She related that she was quite a task master and was intent on “focusing on the target goals and objectives.” But she also was intent on “showing people that I’m human.” When asked, “Is there anything you would add or ask if conducting this interview?” The superintendent added more of her thoughts and ideas about power.

I think that power is often viewed as a negative term by people, and they use it negatively but, I don’t see it as a negative term; and I think it’s a very positive term, and I believe the strength of any leader is not to have power over people, but to have power with people. And when you have power with people, then you are able to accomplish your goals in a much more effective and rewarding way.

Without being prompted in any way about the concept of “power with” and “power over,” she had used the terms that Brunner (1999) exposed in her study of male and female superintendents—two categories of power over and power with/to. In most cases, those superintendents who defined power as “power with/to” were very collaborative in their decision-making style.

One interviewee defined power as action: “Power is really the ability to make something happen. When you do something with the power and [when] you get action to happen, then you’ve achieved power.” She increases her power through trust, “walk your talk,” and the fact that she demonstrates to her staff that she stands for quality and that she cares about them as people.

One superintendent, in her position for 20 years, based her power on the knowledge she brought to the position and the probable respect for her as someone who had been in the position for a lengthy time.

I guess I try to influence people by becoming as well versed on whatever topic it is that I care to present to them and then give them reasons to believe in why I did not believe in it or do believe in it and allow them to make up their own minds. If it’s something I truly believe in and want, I try to explain to them why I think it is necessary. If that’s power, then that’s fine. A lot of people say I have a different kind of power and I’m hoping at least what they mean is that there is respect. And respect in itself does breed power if people listen to you.

When asked to talk about that “different kind of power,” she said: “I think the position gives you power, but I think how you use that depends upon you as a person. I don’t look at myself as being a powerful person in terms of the position. I’m hoping that I’m a powerful person by my background and my knowledge and my experience.” Another superintendent defined power as expertise and “the buck stops here” as she said: “It’s being the one that ultimately has to say I screwed up or we screwed up and we are sorry or we’re standing firm on that. It’s the person that people can talk to.”

Sharing and Giving Power Away

The superintendents talked about sharing power and giving power away in unique ways. One woman said that she gained more power by giving it away; the more she gives away, the more she has. “There is no job in this organization that I can do by myself. And I have lots of power when I go out and say to my colleagues, my directors, and my assistant superintendents, ‘What do you think we should do about this?’” She believed that her power increases when she taps those appropriate resources. “My power increases ten times by doing that because right there I’ve tapped that wealth of influence and information and we are all more powerful because of that.”

Several women talked about the importance of building relationships and sharing their power, and making things happen through the connection with people. Relationships and connections were themes among the women. One woman said very directly that she used referent power to “. . . move a system forward . . . based on the relationships I build.” She explained that by giving power away others could feel powerful in providing input for decision making.

Sources of Influence

The superintendents were better able to define and talk about their power when asked how they influenced others. The idea of building relationships and respect was evident when a superintendent defined her sources of influence as her ability “to build trust, to build respect, to have common goals to see where our common ground is and then we can move together.” When asked if she felt powerful in her position as superintendent she said:

I do. That’s one of the reasons that I went into administration—because it is a way to effect change. I do think there is power in the superintendency because [it is] where others take their lead from the person who is leading the organization and that sets the tone, it sets the vision, it sets kind of what is accepted here. How do we do things around here? And so I do think that there is power there.

One woman talked about power as having a positive meaning. “I think that power is often viewed as a negative term by people, and they use it negatively, but I see it as a positive term.” She stated that power should be used *with* people rather than *over* people. “I believe that when you have power with people, then you are able to accomplish your goals in a much more effective and rewarding way.” One superintendent reported influencing people in her organization through “modeling behavior that I would expect them to portray and by focusing on the target goals and objectives and attempting to show people that I’m human.” She believed her ability to move a system forward, was based on the relationships she has built. “I think its just part of who I am and who I’ve always been. For some reason, most of my life I’ve been able to influence people.”

Another woman’s use of referent power as a source to influence others was clear as she talked about her connectivity to staff through her approachability; all of her staff knew that she kept an open door policy to her office. “People stop by my office routinely after school.” She talked about her belief in “balance and connections.” She said that “if people see why things need to work together and why I’m headed in that direction, then they will go with me. And people know I’m in their corner. People know I’ll be

there for them and they typically will go with me.” She gave an interesting example of how she might go about exercising power in an “indirect way.”

I can stop in a classroom and say “Mrs. So and So and I talked about homework this year. What do you guys think about how it’s going?” I suppose some teachers might perceive that as a little in their face, but I have been know to do that. It’s not that I’m trying to be difficult, but it’s just a reminder that I’m here because kids are part of the process. But I try and keep my suggestions to teachers based on student learning so then students should be part of the evaluation. If I have the occasion that the kids say we didn’t talk about that, I would say, “I’m sure Mrs. So and So is going to get to that because she and I had a conversation about it. I was just wondering what she told you guys or what you’ve noticed.” It can be a very indirect way of exercising power, I suppose.

Summary

Consistent with other research, these findings found superintendents somewhat unable to come up with a ready definition of power; rather they needed to be prompted with other questions, such as: “How do you influence others?” The literature in the area of power and gender can shed some light on this interesting phenomenon. Researchers have studied the relationship of power and gender. Gilligan (1982) wrote that power is often threatening to women since a powerful woman is often a contradiction in both personal and social terms. Dunlap and Goldman (1991) maintained that the literature on school administration was dominated by the conventional definition of power as dominance and control. This conception of power while not traditionally feminine created “unsettled discourse” for women in Brunner’s study . . . “It was not their natural way of thinking or talking about power” (Brunner, 2000 p. 85). Carli’s (1999) research on the effect of influence style on social influence provides evidence of gender differences in power. She explained that women are hindered in their career advancement because they lack the sources of power that their male colleagues possess. The dilemma is especially problematic for a highly competent woman, whose very competence may undermine her authority as a leader. For her, and other people who lack legitimacy, mere competence is not enough.

The most dominant theme of power among the majority of the interview participants in my study was a strong orientation toward personal power. Responses to the question about influencing others emphasized expert power that, according to Boje (2004), is a personal type of power. The majority of the women interviewed had the highest score using expert power on the power measure. The women superintendents talked about themselves as

being powerful by “becoming as well versed on whatever topic that I present,” “providing the resources and information,” and “knowing the research.” One woman hoped that she was a powerful person “by my background, knowledge, and my experience.” Another participant believed that the position was powerful in the sense that it could give her the best ability to effect the most change. “That is one of the reasons why I went into administration, to effect change.” One participant stated that the position was not the power but it “gives you an open door, and once you are in, you’re on your own.” This seems consistent with Abbott and Carecheo (cited in Dunlap & Goldman, 1991) who assert that an individual does not have power, but rather exercises power, when certain conditions exist.

Many of the responses to the question about defining power and influencing others also emphasized referent power. Several women mentioned the importance of “making things happen through the connection with people,” “getting people to believe,” and “moving the system forward based on relationships.” One woman mentioned that her approachability was an effective way to influence others. She said that people know she is approachable, and they know she keeps an open door policy. Another participant said she believed that she used referent power to influence others and was told so by one of her assistant superintendents. This idea of caring for others through connection and relationship-building was noted by Gilligan (1982) who believed women’s sense of integrity is involved in an ethic of caring as women see themselves in a relationship of connection and in the activity of caring for others. Thus, women equate power with giving and care.

Several of the participants talked about feeling powerful when they shared power or gave power away, “the more you give away, the more you have.” Two participants talked about tapping the abilities and resources of others to help implement change. “We’re all more powerful because of that.” Another participant used power with people, not over people. “I believe that when you have power with people then you are able to accomplish your goals in a much more effective and rewarding way.” Kouzes and Posner (1987) stated that when leaders give away power, they build for themselves and create power for others. Their research found that leaders can give power away by giving people important work to do on critical issues and others are strengthened when the leader gives visibility to them by providing recognition for their efforts. Several of the interview participants said that they made a special effort to recognize staff members in front of the board or during other events. One participant said that she frequently had staff report to the board on issues that they had worked on or had an interest in, rather than the superintendent always reporting to the board.

An interesting finding in this study and consistent with what has been documented in the literature was the reticence on the part of some participants to define power. They were better able to respond when asked to talk about how they influenced others. Similarly, Brunner (2000) found that women in her study had difficulty defining power, that it seemed unnatural for them. She said that because women did not feel safe to talk about power in most settings, “they did not have the language to talk about it even in the safety of a private interview” (p. 85). Gilligan (1982) wrote that power is often threatening to women since a powerful woman is often a contradiction in both personal and social terms. Dunlap and Goldman (1991) maintained that the literature on school administration was dominated by the conventional definition of power as dominance and control. This conception of power which is not traditionally feminine “created unsettled discourse” (Brunner, 2000, p. 84) for the women in Brunner’s study. “It was not their natural way of thinking or talking about power” (p. 85).

Brunner (2000) reported the superintendents “in their caring practice and heartfelt perceptions” (p. 36) could change the way all people—men and women—perform in the position. These findings suggest that these “very, very good” women are enjoying their positions yet facing those difficult times; and have to rely on men to mentor them into their positions because so few women are in the role.

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