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# Women in Educational Leadership: Finding Common Ground

Kathleen Murphey

*Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne*

Glenda Moss

*Pacific University*

Susan Hannah

*Indiana University - Purdue University Indianapolis*

Roberta Weiner

*Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne*

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# Women in Educational Leadership: Finding Common Ground

## **Description**

The purpose of this research project was to engage in self-reflective analysis of leadership development as an ongoing process of social action towards democratizing education. Four White women connected by their work as educational leaders, teachers and administrators, engaged this topic by conducting a dialogical analysis of their experiences in leadership. They dialogued from what were technically different positions in the hierarchy at their University and implemented a research process to speak across or marginalize those technical differences to produce a text that explored the rich terrain of leading in which they shared experiences of growth, the conceptual frameworks that guide their leading, and their differing interpretations of gender's role in the leadership process.

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# Women in Educational Leadership: Finding Common Ground

Kathleen Murphey, Glenda Moss, Susan Hannah and  
Roberta Wiener

The purpose of this research project was to engage in self-reflective analysis of leadership development as an ongoing process of social action towards democratizing education. Four White women connected by their work as educational leaders, teachers and administrators, engaged this topic by conducting a dialogical analysis of their experiences in leadership. They dialogued from what were technically different positions in the hierarchy at their University and implemented a research process to speak across or marginalize those technical differences to produce a text that explored the rich terrain of leading in which they shared experiences of growth, the conceptual frameworks that guide their leading, and their differing interpretations of gender's role in the leadership process.

The purpose of this research was to engage in self-reflective analysis of leadership development as an ongoing process of social action towards democratizing education. We, four white women connected by our work as educational leaders, teachers and administrators, engaged this topic as we conducted a dialogical analysis of our experiences in leadership. The following questions were central to the dialogical study of women in educational leadership: (a) How do we understand leadership? (b) How has our perception of leadership been influenced by our position? (c) What are the complexities of being a woman in leadership roles?

We were looking at our conceptualizations of leadership, the importance and influence of position in our ideas about leadership, and how gender has played a role in our ideas and the realities of our praxis of leadership. We were hoping that these self-reflective analyses would be a step toward democratizing education. We were dialoguing from what were technically different positions in the hierarchy at the university and implementing a research process (a) to speak across or marginalize those technical differences, and (b) to produce a text that explored the rich terrain of leading in which we shared experiences of growth, the conceptual frameworks that guided our leading, and our differing interpretations of gender's role in the leadership process.

### About the Authors

*Kathleen Murphey*, Associate Dean of the School of Education at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne, taught German and English in a high school setting, has her Ed.D. in Education and Social Policy with an emphasis on history of education, and has taught Social Foundations of Education in schools of education in Germany, the People's Republic of China, and the U.S. She writes in the area of history of education, particularly the history of teachers. She is currently researching leadership issues in the history of desegregation in Fort Wayne through the narratives of teachers, students, and others who participated in that process during the past forty years. *murphey@ipfw.edu*

*Glenda Moss*, Assistant Professor of Secondary Education and Co-Site Director of the Appleseed Writing Project, is in her fifth year in the School of Education at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne, after completing a doctorate in Educational Leadership at Stephen F. Austin University in Nacogdoches, Texas. Her doctoral work followed thirteen years of teaching at the middle school level. She does research in the area of narrative inquiry and actively seeks to use critical pedagogy in her teaching, which is framed by the Scholar-Practitioner model. She teaches pre-service teachers and practicing teachers to research their practice. *moss@ipfw.edu*

*Susan Hannah*, Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs (VCAA) at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW), was originally trained to be a secondary social studies teacher. She, however, went on to do her doctorate in Political Science at Michigan State University, taught Political Science and served in various administrative capacities at Western Michigan University, and, after several interim Vice Chancellor positions including one at IPFW, began serving as VCAA in 1995. She does research on leadership in higher education and in local government administration. *hannahs@ipfw.edu*

*Roberta Wiener*, Dean Emeritus of the School of Education (SOE) at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW), has background teaching in the elementary school classroom. After receiving her Ed.D., she taught at Adelphi University as a Professor of Reading and Literacy for much of her career and served in many leadership capacities, as well, before becoming Dean of the SOE at IPFW from 1999–2003, when she retired. Her areas of research are in literacy studies and portfolio development in K–12 education. She is also a certified psychotherapist who has worked with children, adolescents, and adults, and done related research. Currently she is completing a memoir of her parents' journey from Poland to the U.S. as immigrants. *robertaw Wiener@att.net*

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## Women in Educational Leadership and Pedagogical Theories

Researchers have approached the study of educational leadership, and, especially, women in educational leadership, from many perspectives. Recent research includes new research methods that are implicitly or explicitly critical of more traditional methods. Research coming from feminist, critical theorist, cultural studies, and post modernist perspectives challenges old paradigms and methods, which, the researchers argue are incapable, for a variety of reasons, of finding the answers they seek (Dillard, 2000; Marshall, 2000; Morley, 2000; Strachan, 1999). Some researchers argue, the methods themselves, as well as the questions they ask, perpetuate the problem the research is seeking to understand. Taken together the researchers attempt to name and examine the experiences of women in leadership positions and/or of women taking or defining leadership roles. They inadvertently bring up the question of how one defines leadership (Carli & Eagly, 2001; Muller, 1994). Most, but not all, define it in terms of position, not as a way of approaching any work, or a possibility in any work situation, as we did. We examined leadership through dialogue as a way to go beyond or rise above positionality.

For all of the research reviewed, as for us, the method and its challenges to the *status quo* are central to the conclusions. The process and product, or the method and theory, are wedded, as they are for us. Some researchers used different conceptual lenses than ours, causing us to question and stretch our own. We were, for example, intrigued by work on the role of emotionality in educational leadership (Beatty, 2000; Hargreaves, 1998; Sachs & Blackmore, 1998), a concept we did approach directly. We keep these various views in mind, as we analyze our dialoguing.

We also keep in mind our own roots in pedagogy. All of us were originally prepared to be K-12 teachers: two of us as secondary school teachers, one as a middle school teacher, and one as an elementary school teacher. Although there are research literatures on various aspects of leadership and management, we, as teachers/educators have all been schooled in educational philosophies and pedagogies that still guide our actions. We are grounded in the Progressive tradition as articulated by John Dewey. Such well known mantras as "learning by doing" and "education is of, by, and for experience" are indelibly written in our educational souls (Dewey, 1915, 1916, 1938). Dewey stressed process over product, method over content. He tied the active participation of students in their own learning to the learning of roles necessary for citizenship in a democracy. Dewey's ideas on learning from experience and relating those experiences to democratic, participatory goals guide us.

We also find Critical Theory especially challenging in thinking through issues of leadership. Giroux, in his seminal work on "Teachers as Transformative Intellectuals," puts forward the idea of making the peda-

gogical political and the political pedagogical (Giroux, 1985, 1988). He appeals to classroom teachers to go beyond the role of technician, to become intellectual leaders, or "transformative intellectuals." He also asks that educators build on their Progressive base by addressing issues of power in the classroom. Teachers, according to Giroux, are working within a political framework in the classroom, and they, as teachers, thus, are acting politically as they teach. They are making the "pedagogical political." Leaders, too, are teachers, and in this sense we ask how this perspective on the pedagogical, the political, and their symbiotic relationship to one another can inform our dialoguing.

### **Dialogue as Narrative Method in Research**

During two 120-minute audio-taped dialogue sessions, we agreed to suspend our opinions and judgments in order to understand all perspectives and reflect on our own perspective. The dialogical methodology for data collection was framed by the work of Burbules (1993), Jenlink and Carr (1996), and Systems Thinking (Isaacs, 1993). Our analysis of the data was framed by narrative methods (Polkinghorne, 1995). We analyzed our narrative texts, which resulted from transcribing the two 120-minute audio-taped dialogue sessions, to determine the responses that best represented insightful information to contribute to leadership theory.

From a traditional perspective on leadership as hierarchical positions, the teacher educator researcher's role in this project may have been questioned, as she serves in a position of assistant professor, while the other researcher participants served in administrative roles in the university: Department Chair, Dean, and Vice-Chancellor of Academic Affairs. It was the teacher educator researcher among us who provided the methodology leadership for our research project. Her relatively recent doctoral studies in a Scholar-Practitioner model of educational leadership influenced her to connect inquiry and practice as a way of approaching all her endeavors in her positional role as assistant professor and researcher. She had completed her dissertation work using narrative methods. She exercised leadership when she defined dialogue as we would use it as a method of self-reflective narrative inquiry:

My perspective on dialogue is that people suspend their judgment of other people's positions or comments and that we seek to understand each other's perspectives. In that sense, when each person is responding to the question, it will be important to the rest of us to try to listen, to understand, not to be thinking about how our position may be different, but to understand.

The other three of us had completed our doctoral work years before and had built our research on other methods and academic traditions. At the time of this project we shared an identity as women working in the same university, all involved in different positions of educational leadership, and

all originally trained to be K–12 classroom teachers. Thus, the leadership on methods and theoretical research perspective for this project challenges positional expectations, as do the methods themselves.

### **Dialoguing, Capturing Conceptual Frameworks**

Dialoguing allows educational leaders to capture conceptual frameworks of leadership and raise new questions. Through our dialoguing we discovered our varied and nuanced perspectives to several questions. We began our narrative analysis of women in educational leadership by reflecting on how we understand leadership.

Dean Roberta Wiener:

“I understand it through experience. Of course, there’s another way of understanding it, and that’s through studying leadership. Susan studies leadership from her own discipline, as well as being a leader, but the understanding of leadership is experiential.”

Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Susan Hannah:

I agree with Roberta . . . I have spent some time studying leadership as a historian and a political scientist . . . A lot of my understanding of leadership is from doing it, and matching my own experience against others whom I watch, and the research I’ve read. That’s how I understand it. I experience it, I do it, I watch other people, and I read about it. I think we lead who we are. And if we are not true to who we are, I think who we are comes out in whatever we do. But that’s more of a style issue, and that’s why I don’t think there is one style of leadership . . . I think it’s very different for different people, different times, different groups, and different situations. It varies dramatically.

Assistant Professor Glenda Moss:

I think of leadership as a force in an organization. And it’s active, it’s relationship, it’s the way people relate to one another and influence. Basically it’s a force that results in decision-making, which moves the organization in one direction or another.

Chair Kathleen Murphey:

Leaders are people who take responsibility for creating a community, for looking at the whole of the group in relationships. They take responsibility either because they have been chosen to do it, or because they choose themselves to do it; but they see the whole, and they want it to work for one reason or another . . . I would also associate leadership with having a vision, of seeing the broader goals . . . It is dealing with the political, or dealing with the power relationships of what we do . . . I think that there are power relationships everywhere, and I see leaders as people who read those and work with them for some kind of end, which we hope is positive.

Hannah:

Your word “responsibility” is very important. If we’re going to talk about leadership as a definition, then I have to throw out here my favorite, Peter Senge’s (1990) work on *The Fifth Discipline*, responsibilities and tasks of leadership. He talks about leaders as “stewards, teachers, and architects,” and he articulates for me as full a definition of leadership as I know anything about. The steward part is what you, Kathleen, were really getting at; a leader is a steward of the group.

Moss:

Everyone has to take up leadership. Everyone has to be conscious of the political. Everyone has to become conscious of who is impacted positively and negatively by every decision we make. Classroom teachers need to be conscious of the impact of the lesson plans they make and how they carry them out. They need to have a sense of leadership in the kinds of communities they build in the classroom.

The dialogue then turned to considerations of no leadership, described as anarchy, and negative leadership, as in fascist models of leadership, and the difference between authoritarian and authoritative leadership. Hannah emphasized that she is particularly interested in leadership as practiced by people who also are in positions of authority, like she is now. Moss, in turn, stressed that to her leadership “is praxis, it is the way we practice positions of authority we’ve been given, whatever they are.” For example, according to Moss, teachers cannot blame principals for lack of leadership. They, the teachers, need to bring leadership to their work.

Murphey suggested that leadership is contextual; leadership arises when the moment calls for it. Wiener added that good leaders make leadership look easy, effortless, but, in fact, leaders have to work hard to make it work. They also have to make difficult decisions; it goes along with the responsibilities of leadership. Moss reiterated that she sees leadership as a force of energy driven by relationships: “We can’t physically see it, yet we know it. . . We have a momentum going. It’s not really tangible, but you can see a lot of products that are evidence of the productivity.” Hannah added that Mary Parker Follett (1918) talked about this in the 1920s in her work on power in organizations: “Power is defined by what we bring to the task. Leadership is given to us by other people. We can’t really take it. They give it to us.”

Wiener then raised the question of how the authority inherent in leadership can be democratic. Is it democratic, because, as Moss suggested, everyone must exercise leadership in their work? Is it democratic, because, as Hannah suggested, the leader-led relationship is reciprocal? Is it democratic, because, as Murphey suggested, stewardship is the essence of a democratic system, in which leaders take responsibility for the democratic functioning of the whole community?



## Continuing the Dialogue: Questions Leading to Questions

We dialogued next about how our perceptions of leadership had been influenced by our positions. We discovered that all of us referred to leadership experiences at various positions in our careers, including the positions we then held. We had all learned greatly from our experiences and continue to learn as we meet new challenges in leadership. Wiener, for example, learned early on that she needed consensus to lead. She had experience with leaders, when she was a faculty member, who tried to lead without consensus, which caused extreme resentment and divisiveness among the faculty.

Hannah stated that her perception and perspective changed with changing positions: "The questions are very different at different places. The information is different, and the responsibility is very different whether we are an assistant or the person that makes the decision." She explained how, when she moved from Associate Dean in Arts and Sciences to become Assistant Provost at a previous institution, her vision had to change from a school to the whole university. She continued: "I had to change totally the kinds of questions I asked, the kind of data I looked at, the issues with which I needed to be concerned, which parts of the job I needed to do and which parts of the job I needed somebody else to take over." In essence, according to Hannah, we are playing roles, which we have to be informed about to do well. She said about the role, "I don't confuse it with who I am. I don't confuse it, thinking that it's me personally. It's whoever is in this job. It's the job, those set of responsibilities. So I'm very informed about the set of responsibilities I hold at this time."

Moss had a difficult time seeing leadership as only inherent in a role. She gave the example of herself as a middle school teacher who had different opportunities for performing her teaching creatively, depending on the leadership style of the principal. It was not, however, just a matter of her leadership as a teacher, or of the principal's leadership as an administrator. There was an environment of leadership created through their relationships with one another. With one principal, the leadership environment was positive and teacher leadership was allowed to blossom; in another experience, the principal stifled the leadership of the group.

Murphey came to the chair's position when it was a new position: "There wasn't a model or practice to follow." She found herself exercising the general directives for the position, but realizing often afterwards that there were things she could have done, especially in terms of taking the initiative, that she only realized serendipitously or too late to act on. During the time of her chairing, teacher education was undergoing major reforms and the School of Education was facing an accreditation visit from NCATE. Through all the extra pressures at work, she discovered the satisfaction of having a leadership team that worked well together, under Dean Wiener's leadership, and a faculty, including Moss, who rose to the occasion in sup-

port. She came away with a tremendously positive experience of faculty working together and a renewed appreciation of how circumstances, which were considered oppressive by most of the faculty, can help set the parameters for what leadership can achieve. This could be viewed as an environment of leadership created through relationship, as articulated by Moss.

Moss explained how she had many more leadership opportunities at the University than she did as a classroom teacher, although she bases much of her knowledge on her experiences as a classroom teacher. Wiener reminded her that she was able to exercise those opportunities as a teacher educator because of her, the Dean's, leadership in allowing and encouraging her to be innovative in her university teaching. This, thus, affirmed Moss's own earlier statement that leadership is something in the environment of the organization, when, in essence, everyone contributes to the leadership of the whole in their one way, from whatever position they occupy. Thus, it is not positionality, so much as the leadership process that promotes positive leadership.

In looking at leadership process, we then challenged ourselves to dialogue about the complexities of women becoming leaders. Up to this point in our dialoguing we had spoken with no reference to the gendered dimensions of our positions or of leadership in general. So far, it would seem that gender was not an important prism to us for thinking about leadership.

### **Questions About the Complexities of Women Becoming Leaders**

Hannah immediately charged, "Our sexual roles follow us into any job, everywhere. I think gender does intrude. It's a power, though. We can use it." Murphey thought that as more women moved into leadership positions, more styles of leadership were becoming apparent, i.e., there was coming to be a broader range of styles for women than for men. She and Moss noted how they had learned from Wiener's strong use of counseling skills gained from her background in psychiatry. Wiener's human relations skills were exceptional and contributed to her ability to lead well. Murphey and Moss had witnessed many times the academic skills in political science which Hannah used so effectively in her position. Hannah always brought her own intellectual engagement with the literature on leadership to help her lead. Murphey explained, "I've often been in meetings where she'd say, 'Well, now we're going to do it this way, because so-and-so says in this book that this is the best way to do it . . . She used ideas as a support system, and they were very effective. She leads through ideas.'" Murphey wondered if, perhaps, this meant that women needed "extra strengths" to counterbalance their perceived lack of experience in leadership roles.

Moss indicated that many men recognized their position of privilege, as men, and were working hard to be just. Still others did not see their rela-

tively privileged position. Although Moss said she tried to encourage democratic participation of all students in her classes, so that traditionally marginalized students had a chance to participate, on reflection she was not sure if this practice distinguished her as a women leader, since it might just be the way she personally does things in her classroom.

Hannah said that "women have to find a way to deal with the fact that they are largely in a situation dominated by men in leadership roles. Women in leadership positions have to deal with the fact that they are human. And have to adopt whatever strategies, yours might be this one, some women do it by being dictatorial, using their power, authority, and position like a sledgehammer . . . They, women, play the role very differently."

Murphey noted that because most of the department members were women, she was not as conscious that she was a women leader, as that she was learning a leadership role. She quickly discovered, however, that she assumed that leadership was an academic task, and not a political task, a fact that she now thinks, perhaps, had to do with being a woman. She also learned, through challenging experiences, that aggression, which she does not use, can be used by both women and men, and subordinates and superiors, to challenge her leadership. She has had to learn ways to prepare for it, and counter it, without being aggressive in return. This she now sees as a product of her upbringing and identity as a woman. She concludes that she is constantly learning her own values and limits by unconsciously assuming that gender does not matter, when it is, in fact, always present in her expectations, habits, and gender (un)consciousness and that of all with whom she deals.

Hannah finds that not all women leaders are nurturers, and some men are: "Not all men are walking around like dictators . . . There are plenty of men, who maybe out of the goodness of their hearts, or maybe just because they're very good leaders, understand the importance of nurturing and supporting their folks." Moss notes that her own strengths and weaknesses in relating to both men and women sometimes make it difficult for her to tell if she is being as sensitive as she would like to be with her students on this issue.

Wiener stresses the importance and power of upbringing. Men, she finds, often have expectations for success, good raises, and appointments to positions of power that women do not have. Those expectations help them achieve success. At the same time, Wiener finds that we, as women, have not been experienced in or expected to help other women go up the ladder of success. Competition among women still lurks in the background, pulling at the support women leaders need to progress in leadership roles.

Thus, through our dialogues we see that we share the experience of constantly learning from our work roles. "I think we lead who we are. And if we are not true to who we are, I think who we are comes out in whatever we do," said Hannah, as noted above. We saw throughout our dialoguing that we each "led who we were," and appreciated that in one another. We see four women in different positions of educational leadership who are very con-

scious of and articulate about the process of leadership. They bring different skills, different talents, and different experiences to the table. Confident in their own skills, these women are, nonetheless, very aware of the gender issue in leadership, but, for the most part they acknowledge the reality of their and everyone else's upbringing and try to work with it as they develop their own styles and effectiveness. In the end, however, they see the fact that they have taken leadership roles as (a) a special achievement because they are women, and (b) a step forward in the democratization of leadership. As leaders they define their broadest goals as shaping democratic organizations, as well as democratic practices on both the macro and micro levels.

### **Breaking into Theory, When Process Becomes Product**

We hold up our method and the text that it produced to theories about educational leadership. We discovered that role and position matter, experience matters, ideas about leadership matter, dialogue matters, research matters, and democracy matters. We conclude that democracy is the biggest lens and the broadest conceptual framework that we all share, though we express it differently and it plays different roles in the worlds in which we lead. It trumps gender, position, and individual experiences as the common denominator, our common framework for action. On the importance of positionality to leadership, those of us with the longest experience in positions of authority, and in the positions with the most decision-making power tended to express ideas about leadership from the perspective of positions. Others of us saw leadership inherent in any position, as part of the broader environment. Gender poses special obstacles to us: some, which we recognize, we accept and try to creatively work around or overcome; others, which we can not yet see, we are ever vigilant to discover and confront. Our research leads us to many new questions and inspires us to continue narrative inquiry research in educational settings with educators. We are convinced of the power of narrative inquiry as a democratizing method for revealing us to ourselves and to each other, so that we might all grow more in our own leadership skills.

Our narratives all show that we are approaching our leading pedagogically. We are all learning from our experiences, including this dialoguing, as Dewey would have sanctioned. We also see that leadership is pedagogical and it is political, and each is tightly interwoven with the other, as Giroux's (1985, 1988) work articulates. In many ways our four careers are testaments to our ongoing experiences with the challenge of the pedagogical and the political in our leadership roles. We are all, as these narratives also show, seeking to be transformative of the situations we see ourselves as leaders in, and transformative in a democratic direction. As leaders then, we wear the Progressive mantle, as we are learning from experience, learn-

ing by doing. We also wear the Critical Theorist mantle, as we actively and consciously take on the pedagogical and political challenges that cannot be separated from any work in education. Under both mantles we, as women educational leaders, carry out the democratizing agenda of transformative educational leadership. Our histories, current praxis, and futures are committed to this process.

### Final Reflection

In an educational age of top-down reform in which “women remain dramatically underrepresented in formal leadership positions” (Rhode, 2003, p. 3), is there a place to ask the question: What difference can women in educational leadership make towards a more democratic, participatory process? Although our study did not specifically seek to answer that question, our research methodology models constructivist leadership theory (Lambert et al., 1995) in practice. We offer this study in which we used dialogue methods to achieve authentic participation in the examination of women in educational leadership as a way of finding common ground. It models the way narrative and dialogue (Cooper, 1995) inquiry can create space for participants from diverse positions to contribute to the examination of leadership and grow in knowledge and conceptualization of what it means to be an educational leader in the process. It validates dialogical inquiry as a narrative method that is pedagogical, scholarly, and democratic.

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