Women In Educational Administration: 
Nine Case Studies

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ABSTRACT

This article documents nine female administrators’ stories of their world, qualities of leadership they felt important, and their perceptions of differences in male and female leadership styles. Participants were interviewed using a protocol designed specifically for this study. Implications based on the findings of the study are presented as they affect women in school administration, administrator training programs, college textbooks,
Only in the past decade or so have studies of leadership included women or looked at gender differences in leadership styles and characteristics (Brown & Irby, 1993; Bruegman, 1995; Heller, 1982; Papalewis, 1995; Russell, 1988; Schaefer, 1985; Shakeshaft, 1986; 1987; 1995). According to Shakeshaft (1986), although literature documents no differences in leadership style between the genders, the research does not extend itself beyond the world of Caucasian males. Shakeshaft wrote that characteristics of women in leadership were absent in the literature.

This study documented nine female administrators’ stories of their worlds, qualities of leadership they felt important, and their perceptions of differences in male and female leadership styles. The research was supported by Shakeshaft’s (1987) Stage Four, in which she called on researchers to study women on their own terms. Shakeshaft detailed six hierarchical stages, questions, approaches, and outcomes regarding research on women in education. The stages were (a) absence of women documented, (b) search for women who have been or are administrators, (c) women as disadvantaged or subordinate, (d) women studied on their own terms, (e) women as challenge to theory, (f) transformation of theory. "At Stage Four, women are finally examined on their own terms and the female world is documented. The data gathered from the female perspective in Stage Four leads to a Stage Five challenge of existing theories in educational administration" (p. 6). The question Shakeshaft suggested for Stage Four was "How do women describe their experiences and lives?" The approach she recommended was surveys, interviews, or observational studies of women. The resulting outcome was "a view of the world from a female perspective" (p. 6). Thus, we chose to interview female educational administrators in order to present a view of educational leadership from a female perspective, expressed in their own words as they described their educational leadership stories. This article is a summary of our findings.

Both Heller (1982) and Shakeshaft (1987, 1995) addressed the fact that the inclusion of women in leadership studies might challenge and redefine behaviors of those in leadership positions. Shakeshaft (1987) referred to the need for women administrators to be able to tell their own stories, because their problems and life experiences are different than those of men.

Shakeshaft (1986) explained that there are the worlds of Caucasian males and the world of women and minority groups–worlds that Caucasian men seldom realize exist. Shakeshaft (1986) stated:

Thus for women to be able to negotiate the world of white males is to be expected. They wouldn’t have been selected for school administrators if they didn’t comprehend and master the culture. In addition, however, they have knowledge of a female culture and socialization that they bring to the job. It is this world that researchers have failed to investigate when they have studied male and female differences, and their absence of knowledge of the female world has led them to assume that differences don’t exist.

(p.167)

According to Shakeshaft (1986), the female world must be examined if we are to understand gender-based differences in leadership in organizations. Other authors (Brown & Irby, 1993; Bruegman, 1995; Gray, 1987; Marienau, 1995; Papalewis, 1995; Shakeshaft, 1986; 1987; 1995) wrote of the over-valuing of the masculine, especially in the context of leadership.

According to Heller (1982) "Considering the plight of men and women as leaders involves two separate and often confused issues, behaviors and values" (p. 164). She contended that although there may be a shift toward a more positive valuing of stereotypically feminine leadership styles, this does not necessarily mean an endorsement of women in leadership positions.
Haslett, Geis, and Carter (1992) reasoned that organizational reality differs for women and men. They argued that men’s communication and leadership styles are highly valued in organizations, and that male communication and leadership style are the standard against which all leaders are measured.

Owen (1986) studied rhetorical themes of emergent female leaders in three leaderless groups as part of an upper-division small-group communication course in a private university. During the first week of the first semester, students were requested to form groups of their choosing that were about equal in number of males and females. No other criterion was used. Of the 21 students, three groups were formed. Each group was charged with solution of a campus life problem, meeting in and out of class weekly during the 12-week semester. Owen (1986) found: (a) females emerged as leaders when they maintained a subtle, yet hardworking ethic; (b) females outworked others by accepting more responsibility and tasks than men; (c) females consciously strived to emerge as organizers and were reluctant to be called leaders; and (d) females led by hard work with considerable attention given to creating themes of cohesion, egalitarian practices, and togetherness.

Papalewis and Brown (1989) examined gender characteristics of communication on student evaluation measures of instruction. Their 1989 study offered evidence that male/female differences are observed by students and that such differentiating characteristics are related to student evaluation of instruction. According to Papalewis and Brown, the interdependence of research and practice in the schooling process has generally failed in the past to integrate female experiences, values, and styles of communicating by not recognizing gender characteristics in evaluation measures. Papalewis (1995) noted that the literature on women in educational administration has tended to focus on either the barriers that potential female educational leaders face or on "the inadequacies of women when measured against male-based norms of effective leader behavior" (p. 199).

**Methodology**

Nine female administrators were interviewed during Spring 1989, using an interview protocol designed specifically for this study. Each of the subjects agreed to a one to two-hour interview, with five of the nine agreeing to be audio-taped. Interviewees consisted of rural district-level and school-site administrators in the San Joaquin Valley of California. These district superintendents (n = 2), special education principals (n = 2), a high school vice principal, a curriculum coordinator, and elementary principals (n = 3) represented the total (n = 9) female administrative pool available in one rural county.

Derived from the literature (Heller, 1982; Schaef, 1985; Shakeshaft, 1986, 1987), 10 open-ended questions were developed to gather information about female administrator’s thoughts, feelings, and perceptions as related to: (a) requisite qualities of effective female educational leaders; (b) difficulties experienced; (c) differences in ways men and women work; and (d) significant life experiences. This article represents a summary of the analysis of the interviewees’ answers to these questions.

1. What do you feel are some of your really strong qualities as a leader (administrator)?
2. What do you feel are some of important qualities for women leaders in education?
3. What do you feel is your one strong personal quality that has helped you in your leadership position?
4. Please describe some of the difficulties you have experienced as a woman administrator.
5. Please describe some of the differences you have observed in the ways men and women work.
6. What do you feel are some of the important personal qualities, values, and behaviors necessary for:

a) leadership and instructional improvement  
b) teacher evaluation  
c) staff professional development  
d) community relations  
e) relations with students  

7. How do you feel that women become identified with being in charge, without being identified with negative or unfeminine ways?

8. Do you feel the issues surrounding authority are the same for a male administrator and a female administrator?

9. Please describe some of the approaches you used in problem solving and decision making.

10. What are some of the important life experiences you have had that facilitated your choice to become an administrator?

The analysis of the data was qualitative and descriptive. The data consisted of the information gathered during one to two-hour interviews of each of the nine female educational leaders. The answers given to 10 interview questions were sorted into categories. Two of the major areas will be discussed here: leadership qualities, and perceived differences between the way men and women lead. Categorical analysis served as a manageable tool for analyzing and describing the many pages of interview material (Strauss, 1987; Constas, 1992). Owens (1992), explained that naturalistic inquiry is based on the premise that one cannot understand human behavior without understanding the framework within which the individuals under study interpret their own environments.

**Requisite Leadership Qualities**

The nine female administrators stressed the following qualities when asked what they considered to be their one strong personal quality: integrity, positive thinking, patience (2), hard work (2), enthusiasm, listening (2), and organization. Other qualities viewed as important for leadership in education by the interviewees included: listening, caring, nurturing, inclusiveness, intuition, and openness. All of these qualities were identified in the literature as being feminine (Funk, 1993; Heller, 1982; Jacobson & Moore, 1995; Nicksick, Willower, & Warner, 1994; Owen, 1986; Rosener, 1990; Schaef, 1985; Shakeshaft, 1986, 1987). All nine respondents specified listening as an essential leadership quality. As an example of the emphasis on listening, one administrator said:

I feel you need to be a good listener . . . I think that it can be detrimental to your program if you don’t take time to listen. When you’re dealing with a lot of people, everybody has something that they’re concerned about, and if you don’t give them time to voice what their concerns are, you turn people off.

Regarding listening and consistency, elementary school principal C said:
I deal with students like I do everyone else. Everyone gets to tell their story. I try to deal with them fairly. Kids react to unfairness more than anything else. They need to know that you have listened. My policy is listening, and then being very open.

Again emphasizing listening, the High School Vice Principal stated:

I think the key thing is: You need to listen. You need to listen to what they’re saying because a lot of times (especially if you’ve been in education awhile) you tend to think that you know what they’re going to say before they say it. But they are each individual and you need to listen carefully.

Elementary principal B felt that her one strong personal quality that has helped her in her leadership position was an ability to "hear" the feelings behind what is being said. The same principal listed her three strong qualities as: (a) being problem oriented; (b) being a good listener; and, (c) possessing the ability to bring factors together. Elementary principal A emphasized listening in the following way: "One of the things that I demand at this school—and this is not a consensus item, this is not something that I negotiate—this is a demand that I have, that we take the time to listen to the children. If a child has something to say to you and you're walking down the hall to get your lunch, you stop, and you listen."

Caring and nurturing were identified in the need to listen (Haslett et al., 1992; Marshall, 1986; Shakeshaft, 1987). Elementary principal A described this caring in community relations: "I find that the best community relations is for us to be good to their children." She stated further:

I think that with a lot of parents that we have in my community here, they just need someone to listen to them, and sometimes they need somebody to come and yell at because they trust schools. Schools are places where people help you.

Special education principal B described the importance of caring among employees at the school site. She said:

I like to think that primarily I care very personally about my employees and have a work environment that is cheerful. A cohesive work environment gives you more mileage than anything I can think of. You have slashed budgets and a whole lot of other things, and have some things that are not perfect, but if the staff cares about each other, and on their own find ways to share, it’s fun to come to work.

The importance of vision (Haslett et al., 1992; Manasse, 1986) was woven in with responses to other questions in the interview: "I’m a visionary type of person. I have an ability to look beyond. I get a picture, and I strive for this." (District superintendent B) "Sometimes my vision needs to be shared with people; at other times we need to have collective vision." (Elementary principal A). The same principal shared:

I began teaching because I believed in the power of education, and from that profession, I went into administration because I wanted to support that. So I really believe that the power of education lies with the teachers. And I think that brings about an environment where all teachers participate in leadership of the school. It means that it’s a shared kind of thing.

Perceived Differences in the Way Men and Women Lead

According to Rosener (1990), women are more likely to employ a collaborative approach to decision making, resulting in a sharing of power, as compared to men. From speech patterns to decision-making styles, women more often than men exhibit a democratic, participatory style that encourages inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness in schools (Bruegman, 1995; Nicksick, Willower, & Warner, 1994; Shakeshaft,
Women involve themselves with staff and students, ask for and get participation, and maintain more closely-knit organizations. Staffs of female administrators have higher job satisfaction, and are more engaged in their work than those of male administrators (Shakeshaft, 1987). The nine female interviewees in our study described the differences in the ways men and women work as: women have to be more skillful, while men rely on image, power brokerage, and associations; men are more task-oriented, women are more idealistic; men are detail-oriented; women are more nurturing and caring; men are authoritarian and women are participatory. One respondent stated that personal attributes are more important than being male or female. Elementary school principal B stated:

I really believe that we have all the other perspectives that the men have, but in addition we have nurturing and caring, and we're raised in the culture with that. This makes us more understanding.

Principal C spoke positively regarding the differences, "There are differences. Some have to do with personality traits, rather than with the male/female thing. It’s good if you can have a little bit of both. [The students] need models of both male and female."

Our analysis of the interview data supported Shakeshaft’s (1987) argument that methods of establishing authority that men use successfully do not consistently work for women. Women often find that they have to push more; to show more strength (Haslett et al., 1992; Marshall, 1986). Ways of establishing authority used successfully as identified by the female interviewees included fairness, listening, and belief in personal strength.

One theme expressed in the interviews indicated an awareness of the need for the pursuit of strength and determination by female administrators (Mandeville, 1994; Marshall, 1986). As an example of this theme, one district superintendent stated:

I think tenacity is really important. I think it’s getting a little easier now because there are more and more women occupying leadership roles, but I know when I first started in this, one had to be extremely tenacious. And, I also think having a thick skin, and that goes with any leadership position, because you’re not going to make everybody happy all the time.

A special education principal shared:

I think number one is probably determination. Generally, it takes women longer to get into a leadership role. They tend to start out as teacher and work up through the grapevine. I think you need to be extremely organized, and you know where you’re going at all times even though it may appear not. And you need to be knowledgeable about your field. (Special education principal B)

District superintendent A stated:

We do not give the powerful, in-control image that men, simply by virtue of their size and the fact that they are male, will project. And that is something that is very hard to deal with. . . . I think sometimes it’s very difficult for people to actually realize that a woman is actually accomplishing a lot of very powerful things, because they just don’t see it. They look at you, and that’s not what they see. They don’t see the typical, "in charge" image of a man.

Conclusions
The female administrators’ interviews revealed variations on the theme of leadership qualities, and of perceptions regarding male/female leadership differences and similarities. Each of the nine female administrators shared that she was able to become an educational leader because of her own hard work, persistence, determination, ability to organize, and willingness to accept responsibility and difficult tasks. These findings support Owen’s (1986) findings that women emerge as leaders when they outwork others, accept more responsibility, and consciously strive to emerge as organizers. Our respondents described male leaders as more task-oriented than female leaders. However, in telling their stories, our respondents repeatedly emphasized their own hard work and organizational skills. It appears that the reality of the female world is as Owen (1986) found, that women tend to become leaders by outworking others and by accepting more responsibilities and tasks than anyone else.

As the district superintendents shared their perceptions of leadership qualities, it was evident that these women saw themselves as leaders. These female superintendents spoke in terms of vision, motivation, power, and the fact that they were leading. The elementary principals and the special education principals spoke of participation, consensus building, and sharing. They were concerned with inclusiveness, cohesiveness, and egalitarian practices.

This study of women in educational administration provided documentation of the female world, and the study of women on their own terms, Stage Four, as recommended by Shakeshaft (1986, 1987). Further, this study gave support to Shakeshaft’s suggestion that the best method of documenting the female world is through interviews of women.

The leadership qualities identified as important by female administrators responding to this study corresponded to qualities identified in the literature such as listening, caring, nurturing, inclusiveness, intuition, and openness (Bruegman, 1995; Haslett et al., 1992; Papalewis, 1995). If the female world exemplifies patterns for effective schooling practices, then female beliefs, knowledge, thoughts, and values must be researched, discussed, and shared. Research and practice must integrate female life experiences, values and perceptions; and gender characteristics should be recognized in the preparation of all school administrators, male and female.

In presenting evidence gathered from the stories of nine women administrators, this study has implications for continued research on life experiences of women in school administration and for administrator training programs, college textbooks, hiring practices, and promotional decisions in education. The implications for women who presently participate in leadership positions in schools are clear. As much needed role models and mentors of other potential female leaders in educational administration (Bizzari, 1995; Haslett et al., 1992), it is important that these women continue to recognize and value their knowledge, skills, perceptions, and beliefs. By modeling and expressing their female qualities, women in administration are able to add new life-giving dimensions to education. Female qualities are needed in education to provide richness, authenticity, and wholeness. As one elementary principal stated: “Our femaleness is an asset.”

References


