

Women Superintendents: Challenges, Barriers and Experiences as Senior Level Leaders

LaForrest Lane-Washington, EdD
Cumberland County Schools

Linda Wilson-Jones, PhD
Fayetteville State University

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand and discover the experiences, challenges, and barriers women encounter while aspiring, seeking, and serving in senior level leadership positions in American public schools. This research explored Northern and Southern women superintendents' perceived barriers through a qualitative approach. The qualitative approach allowed the researcher to obtain narrative information on specific barriers, challenges and experiences of women superintendents. Open-ended response questions allowed participants the opportunity to clarify barriers, challenges and experiences and gave a personal input on how these variables affected or enhanced their careers.

Mentors were seen as a tool for overcoming barriers and for advice on career advancement. Mentors and role models of these women superintendents' ranged from (a) parents, (b) teachers, (c) college professors, (d) administrators, (e) other superintendents and (f) political figures. Both men and women superintendents were strongly mentioned as valuable peer supporters and several stated they were encouraged to enroll in leadership courses and apply for specific positions.

As we advance into the 21st century, many superintendents are retiring, opening the doors for women who seek this upper level administrative position. Shakeshaft referred to this hiring opportunity as the "golden age for women in school administration" (Shakeshaft, 1989, p. 34). The number of women in all workforces has increased over the last decade because of affirmative action programs, self-fulfillment and accessibility. Although there is a significant growth of women in the educational profession, the growth is not indicated in the increase of women in senior level leadership positions. Regardless to the growth, women still must learn to function in a male dominated leadership culture, and it becomes difficult for many women to break through

and succeed against the glass ceiling. There are a number of programs and workshops established to assist women in gaining the confidence and skills to succeed in leadership. One such organization is the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) who sponsors conferences and workshops specifically designed for those women seeking or currently holding leadership positions. The association identified networking and mentoring as the gateway for women in senior level leadership positions. Therefore, women seeking leadership positions are encouraged to align themselves with mentors who are experienced in their careers and with those who possess qualities for achieving successful outcomes. Although, mentoring is a common practice for the advancement of men, it was not shown to be a factor in the career development of women. As a result, fewer women are in senior level leadership positions, and those who are were found to possess feelings of isolation in the workplace. Research further supported that men and women both preferred to have mentors from their own gender (Allen & Lomotey, 1995). However as seen in this research, many women identified their most influential mentor relationships with males serving in similar leadership roles.

Many women leaders identify their families and communities as agents influencing them to pursue and seek their fullest career potentials. Maienza (1986) reported that a large percentage of women superintendents were class officers in school, which provided their beginning experience in leadership. Gotwalt and Towns' (1986) study on women superintendents revealed that 90% of women leaders held leadership roles in churches, communities, and athletics and most assumed adult responsibilities at early ages. African American women superintendents reported similar experiences of leadership in their years of growing up; stating they were most influenced through their involvement in the "black church". Consequently, the majority of women superintendents had stronger family ties within the community and church than their male counterparts. Extensive research shows that many women superintendents held leadership positions at early ages and were encouraged to pursue their goal and to be adventurous throughout childhood (Glass, 2000; Henning & Jardim, 1977; Jackson, 1999; Maienza, 1986; McDade & Drake, 1982).

Frasher, Frasher and Hardwick's study in 1982 on birth order found that the majority of women superintendents were first born, which yields an independent personality. They seemed to not necessarily need role models for their career success. A more recent study also concluded that women superintendents were most often the oldest children in the family (Pavan, 1999). They described their relationships with family members as close with both parents stressing high education expectations. McDade and Drake (1982) found women superintendents generally attributed their fathers as the greatest influences in their lives. A strong father and daughter relationship, according to research was found to be the leading factor in defining women's inner personal self. Henning and Jardim (1977) also found that fathers encouraged first born children to be independent, self-reliant, and risk-takers. Jackson's (1999) study revealed that many women superintendents' reported having parents with high expectations who promoted their overall success.

Statement of the Problem

Although, more women are entering into senior level leadership positions, there is limited research on the actual experiences, challenges and barriers women encounter while seeking and serving as district leaders. There is also limited knowledge from the voices from women leaders on the factors associated with their decisions to enter the superintendency and the challenges and barriers while serving in a senior level leadership position. An insight into this phenomenal experience will be beneficial to women who aspire to enter any senior level leadership position.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand and discover the experiences, challenges, and barriers women encounter while aspiring, seeking, and serving in senior level leadership positions in American public schools.

Research Question

The following research questions guided this research.

1. What are the experiences, barriers and challenges women superintendents encounter while acquiring, seeking and serving in the superintendency?
2. What are the factors that encouraged women to seek senior level leadership positions in American public schools?

Methodology

The study was limited to the perceptions of 270 women superintendents from selected Northern and Southern states of the United States. This research explored Northern and Southern women superintendents' perceived barriers through a qualitative approach. The qualitative approach allowed the researcher to obtain narrative information on specific barriers, challenges and experiences of women superintendents. Open-ended response questions allowed participants the opportunity to clarify barriers, challenges and experiences and gave a personal input on how these variables affected or enhanced their careers. The researcher looked for words, phrases, and patterns from the narrative data that would answer more comprehensively the how, why, and what women superintendents encountered in their quest to obtaining the superintendency. Participants' narrative data were transcribed into textual data and the researcher looked for reoccurring themes to generate grounded research on this population. This method was beneficial to obtain openness rather than only ranking their responses alone.

The participants for this study were purposefully selected to provide a richer explanation of this population. The selected Northern states were Connecticut, Delaware,

Illinois, Indiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Wisconsin and the selected Southern states were Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia. To eliminate bias in the selection of states, the researcher selected states located east of the Mississippi River and divided by the Mason-Dixon Line indicating the northern and southern states within the United States. The study was conducted during the 2007-2008 academic school year.

Findings

It was evident that the women superintendents varied in their explanations when asked to define their leadership experiences. Their experiences, challenges and barriers ranged from family issues to validation from the profession. The majority of the participants gave credit to the values to family members. These strong values molded and shaped their leadership skills when making decisions. There were those who spoke of personal experiences that illustrated their commitment and perseverance. Statements mentioned were:

1. My son died 4 days after I became a superintendent. This tragedy caused me to keep all else in perspective as superintendent, although the pain has been intense.
2. Timing in my life – waiting until my sons were going to college.
3. My parents telling me there was nothing I could not do.
4. I allowed my gut to guide my decision to move my family across country for an opportunity that took me higher – it worked!
5. Hurricane Katrina and losing everything.
6. A board member felt a divorced woman was a bad role model for students.
7. Being the oldest child in a large family.

Other responses that were notable concerning the things that made a difference in their leadership careers were stated in terms of lessons learned. These women leaders reported the following experiences:

1. Realizing the [Board] did its work outside of the meeting and had a lack of care about policy.
2. Writing up entire faculty and staff for a school wide error only to find that it was the actions of a janitor who created the problem.
3. Watching very poor [ineffective] superintendents sit in their office chairs making a lot of money and knowing nothing about the kids [students] or teachers.
4. Being taken under the wings of my first principal – a woman who saw potential in me to be a leader when I was a beginning teacher.

Possessing a positive attitude aided in building the self-confidence for these women superintendents and they further reported that their mentors provided a resource

for their experiences. Mentors were seen as a tool for overcoming barriers and for advice on career advancement. Mentors and role models of these women superintendents' ranged from (a) parents, (b) teachers, (c) college professors, (d) administrators, (e) other superintendents and (f) political figures. Both men and women superintendents were strongly mentioned as valuable peer supporters and several stated they were encouraged to enroll in leadership courses and apply for specific positions.

One mentioned:

Former superintendents mentored and gave me leadership opportunities; and have mentored me for years about managing change and other leadership issues. Another stated seeing other women in the superintendent position inspired them.

Others participants named political figures as their role models, such as, Hilary Clinton, Condoleezza Rice, and Sandra Day O'Connor who inspired them to seek career growth, goal attainment and self-confidence. Enjoying people, the job and goal setting were given as key components for women's success as a superintendent. When asked to share advice with those women interested in pursuing the superintendency they noted (a) networking, (b) being a risk taker, (c) being competent and (d) persevering as primary keys to success. Several made comments similar to the following in regards to being successful:

1. Know that success is different for women than men. Don't compete with boy banter; speak intelligently.
2. Be a visionary, but be able to implement and monitor a plan that will make your vision a reality.
3. Don't make hasty emotional decisions; be willing to give 110% and Be personally involved in the activities of the schools and district.
4. Do not sell out; do not sell your soul to the devil to get a job. Stand up for what you believe in.
5. Know when it is time to move on.
6. Get your doctorate degree, this build creditability. Always have a variety of experiences to draw from.
7. Be visible, be fair, be consistent and listen.
8. Do not sacrifice family. Keep learning as much as you can – you will never “know it all”.
9. Be honest and have a backbone, let students be the driving factor in all decision making.
10. Nobody likes a female boss, get used to it.

Summary and Conclusion

The barriers and challenges reported were (a) emotional, (b) exasperating, and (c) inspiring. The reoccurring themes and patterns leading to their success were preparation and perseverance. These women superintendents spoke of maintaining composure during the time of heated discussions and being well read and up-to-date on current findings

related to school systems' progression as most significant. They also felt that many of the leadership traits and qualities were instilled in them by encouragement during their childhood, as well as, their inner desire for achievement. They mentioned the importance of earning a doctoral degree and experiencing various facets of their professional growth. Northern and Southern women superintendents expressed those aspiring women superintendents must (a) be global thinkers, (b) create networks, (c) attend national conferences and (d) be risk takers.

The responses given by many indicated that male administrators and superintendents were their most supporting mentors and were the catalyst to their success in the superintendent positions. They provided advice, leadership, and experience on their development, knowledge and skills as district senior level administrators. Family, friends, professional colleagues and political figures were all mentioned as key elements for women in leadership and they further stated that male mentors continued to motivate them to succeed even after they secured the positions.

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