

WOMEN SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS: PERCEPTIONS OF LEADERSHIP AND POWER

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INTRODUCTION

Since the creation of the public school superintendency in the United States in the mid 1800s, few women have held this public leadership position. In 1909 when Ella Flagg Young became the first woman superintendent of the Chicago public schools, she declared: "Women are destined to rule the schools of every city" (cited in Blount, 1998, p.1). In 1928, 1.6% of all superintendents in the U.S. were women (Shakeshaft, 1989). The gains of women in the superintendency in the next seventy years have been minimal. Most studies before 1998 report that males constitute more than 90 percent of all superintendent positions. In 1998, 12 percent of public school superintendents in the U.S. were women (Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999).

The position of teacher is the first position held in the traditional path to the superintendency. The path is exemplified when people move from positions of teacher to principal to central office administrator to superintendent. Another traditional path is the movement of teacher to principal to superintendent. Since women comprise 70 percent of all teachers (Bell & Chase, 1993), we would expect women to hold more of the leadership positions in schools than they currently do.

While men have dominated the field of educational administration, there has been an increase in female enrollment in graduate programs in educational administration. In school administration programs, the percentage of female students now outnumbers males. A 1997 survey of member institutions in the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) showed that 74 percent of certification programs in institutions responding to the survey had from 51 percent to 72 percent women (Logan, 1998). Results from this survey correspond to other research that shows women entering educational programs in increasing numbers since the 1970s (Grogan, 1996). Bell and Chase (1993) reported that women have made up at least half of educational administration program enrollments since the middle 1980s. Women have also begun to move into more central office positions and school principalships. Hodgkinson and Montenegro (1999) found that women occupied 33 percent of the positions of assistant, associate, deputy, or area superintendents. Representation of women in central office administration such as curriculum directors and supervisors of special programs surpassed that of men at 57 percent. In the principalship, women represent 20 percent at the secondary school level, and 53 percent of elementary school principals. Overall representation of women in the principalship based on these numbers was 41 percent. Although the number of women in graduate preparation programs for educational administrative positions has increased, and more women are in the “pipeline” for the superintendency, women still make up less than 20 percent of superintendents across the country. This translates to few female role models in the superintendency. Lack of role models for women is cited in the literature as part of the reason more women do not get into the superintendency (Brunner, 1998b).

Researchers have agreed that previous studies have looked at leadership from a male perspective (Brunner, 1998a; Shakeshaft, 1989; Wesson & Grady, 1994a). Since there have been limited numbers of women attaining the position, there has been limited research focusing on understanding the position from a woman's perspective. Shakeshaft (1989) explains that educational theories developed from a male centered or andocentric framework are a result of imbalanced and inaccurate research and are not representative of the female paradigm. Campbell (1996) believes that "narrow definitions of leadership based on male models or theories need to be expanded to include women's values, beliefs, and experiences" (p. 9).

Studies have differed in their results as to how men and women lead and if differences do exist. Some researchers contend that women approach leadership in different ways than men. Others argue that socialization into gender roles, not a person's sex, is the primary determinant of leadership styles and priorities" (Black & Rothman, 1998, p. 108). Shakeshaft (1989) believes that what is not investigated "are the activities that women undertake and the motives for doing so that are in addition to and different from those that men perform" (p.167).

Purpose of the Study

An investigation concerning the leadership practices of women school superintendents is important as it increases the amount of research particularly looking at qualities of female leaders. "As more such studies accumulate, researchers and practitioners should move toward a better understanding of women's work lives as superintendents" (Skrla, 1998, p. 5).

Brunner (1998a) has outlined several reasons why research about women in the superintendency is of benefit. Among these reasons is the premise that any research on women in the superintendency is evidence that “women can be superintendents, are superintendents, and are able to perform the tasks required of anyone in the role” (p. 2). Brunner (1998a) believes that without such research the prevalent practice of hiring men rather than women has the “tendency to create or continue the belief that women must somehow be inferior to men and unable to succeed in that position” (p. 3). The evidence that women can succeed in the position of superintendent may help to provide important role models for any woman aspiring to the position (Brunner, 1998a).

McCabe and Jamison (1998) see value in studying the experiences of women superintendents. “Determining the qualities of leadership, the similarities and differences of women’s experiences, and the strategies these women have used to overcome any constraints encountered in their career paths can assist the many women who are looking for direction in their administrative careers” (p. 4).

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of women public school superintendents regarding their leadership practices and uses of power in leading their school districts.

Research Questions

In seeking to understand women superintendents’ perceptions of their leadership practices this study asked the following questions:

1. Are there differences in the perceptions of women superintendents regarding

their leadership practices based on age, years of administrative experience, and size and structure of their districts?

2. Are there differences in the perceptions of women superintendents regarding their uses of power based on age, years of administrative experience, and size and structure of their districts?

3. Is there a relationship between perceived leadership practices and perceived uses of power?

Conceptual framework

The framework for this study is based on the leadership theory conceptually defined by Kouzes and Posner (1995) in *The Leadership Challenge* and subsequently in the survey instrument they developed and used in this study, *The Leadership Practices Inventory-Self* (1997). As Kouzes and Posner studied the process of leadership, they defined five practices with associated behaviors that “enable leaders to get extraordinary things done” (1995, p. 9). At their best, leaders were able to **challenge the process** by searching for opportunities and experimenting and taking risks; **inspire a shared vision** through envisioning the future and enlisting others; **enable others to act** by fostering collaboration and strengthening others; **model the way** by setting the example and planning small wins; and **encourage the heart** by recognizing contributions and celebrating accomplishments. The Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI-Self) measures the extent leaders perceive themselves as having adopted these five leadership practices and ten behaviors. The instrument consists of thirty items, each a sentence designed to measure the types of behaviors that Kouzes and Posner associated with the five leadership practices. The respondent is asked to use the following ten-point Likert scale

to report his or her beliefs about how frequently he or she engages in the behavior described: 1 = Almost Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Seldom, 4 = Once in a while, 5 = Occasionally, 6 = Sometimes, 7 = Fairly Often, 8 = Usually, 9 = Very Frequently, 10 = Almost Always.

The leadership practices parallel the profile of transformational leadership presented in the literature (Bass, 1995a; Leithwood, 1995). Kouzes and Posner refer to transformational leadership as a style of commitment. Burns (1978) said that transformational leadership “raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both the leader and the led, and thus it has a transforming effect on both” (p. 20).

Yukl (1989) views transformational leadership as a process of influence between individuals and as a process of mobilizing power to change social systems and reform institutions. Yukl sees transformational leaders as those who “formulate a vision, develop commitment to it among internal and external stakeholders, implement strategies to accomplish the vision, and embed the new values and assumptions in the culture of the organization” (1989, pp. 230-231). Bass defines transformational leadership in terms of the leader’s effect on the followers. Leaders transform followers by making them more aware of the value of outcomes, inducing them to transcend their own self interest for the sake of the organization, and activating their higher order needs (Bass as cited in Yukl, 1989).

Transformational leadership has been identified as an exemplary leadership model for the school superintendency (Konnert & Augenstein, 1990; Leithwood, 1995). Researchers in education and other fields have successfully used the LPI-Self to

investigate a variety of issues related to leadership (Golden, 1999; Riley, 1992; Ross, 1995; Wesson & Grady, 1994).

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

This study was conducted during the academic years of 1999-2001 in a four state area of the Midwest. All women public schools superintendents whose names appeared on superintendent lists in the states of Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Michigan were contacted and asked to complete a survey of perceived leadership practices, a survey of sources of influence (perceived uses of power) and a demographic questionnaire. Of the 210 surveys that were mailed, 14 women superintendents had left their positions, which reduced the population for the study to 196 women superintendents among the four states. From that population, 76 percent (n = 148) returned usable surveys.

Of the 148 surveys used in the data analysis, 65 percent of the participants were between the ages of 50 and 56. The mean age of the participants was 52 years with a range in age of 38 to 65 years. Sixty-six percent of the participants held earned doctorates. In response to a question regarding length of time taken to achieve a superintendency, almost 50% of the participants indicated that it took less than one year after gaining certification. Almost 95% of the participants indicated that they were Caucasian. Regarding marital status, 85.1 percent reported they were married.

Further analysis of the demographic data allowed the conception of a profile of a woman superintendent practicing in the Midwest. She is fifty-two years of age, has taught eleven years, has held three administrative positions before attaining a superintendency, and has applied for one superintendency prior to gaining her present

position. She has spent five years in her present position, has six school buildings with ten building administrators and five central office staff in the district. The structure of her school district is represented by the ratio of 1.17. The table below displays the data concerning this profile.

Profile of Participants

Variables	<u>N</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	Minimum	Maximum
Age	148	51.99	4.62	38	65
Age at first superintendency	148	45.70	5.67	30	59
# years in present position	148	5.40	3.76	1	20
# years teaching prior to administration	147	10.58	4.97	0	29
# administrative positions before superintendency	148	2.90	2.43	0	8
# superintendent jobs applied for before 1 st job	148	1.47	2.48	0	15
# school buildings	148	6.26	8.71	1	78
# building administrators	148	9.65	12.11	1	78
# central office staff	148	5.23	5.68	1	50
structure of district – ratio of # central office staff / # buildings	148	1.17	.75	.22	4.00

In addition to the LPI-Self, participants were asked to assess the degree to which each of a collection of thirty-one items was a source of their ability to influence others. The scale was a 5 point Likert scale of 1 (disagree) to 5 (agree). Research has shown the interrelatedness of leadership and power (Hollander, 1985) as well as the reality of gender differences in the use of power (Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989). In her study of

women in organizations (members from the International Women's Forum), Judy Rosener (1990a) focused on the relationship of power and gender. At the time her study was conducted, Rosener had not found an acceptable instrument to measure power bases. She created an instrument (and used in this study) to measure alternative power bases (31 items) based on a typology articulated by French and Raven in 1959 (cited in Rosener, 1990a). Rosener believed her measure distinguished between tangible and intangible referent power and has the following characteristics: (1) it measures how a subject perceives her/his power to influence others in general, not in relationship to one specific individual (most measures are dyad specific); (2) it is simple and direct; (3) it is psychometrically sound; and (4) it assumes the ability of respondents to self-report power sources accurately (Rosener, 1990). The questions were designed to tap the extent to which an individual saw herself as having each of the following six sources of power: legitimate power – having a position or title that carries with it authority; expert power – possessing special expertise that is in short supply and high demand; reward power – the ability to reward and punish; referent power – having charisma or some personal attribute that others wish to emulate; and coercive power – the ability to coerce. In Rosener's study referent power was divided into two different power bases: referent power I, concerning a person's use of status to influence others and referent power II, a measure of a person's approachability or personality to influence others. In this study as in Rosener's, referent power was also divided into the two power bases of referent power I and II.

Reliability. Reliability measures were computed for the Leadership Practices Inventory-Self (LPI-Self) and the power measure. Reliability coefficients on the LPI-Self

ranged from .65 and .87. Kouzes and Posner (1995) reported reliabilities for the LPI-Self ranged from .71 and .85. Reliability coefficients obtained on the power measure ranged from .56 and .80. Any subscale with a reliability coefficient of below .65 was considered as having too low a reliability and was not used for further analysis.

Definition of variables. The independent variables in the research questions were operationally defined to correspond with the survey questions and to assist with the data analysis. For example, years of administrative experience was defined as years of experience as a superintendent. Size of school district referred to student population. All 148 cases had student populations that fell within three categories: large districts of 10,000 to 29,999 students, mid-size districts of 2,500 to 9,999 students, and small district of less than 2,500 students. Structure of the district was defined as the ratio of the number of central office staff to the number of school buildings in the district. Whenever possible, groups within the variables were empirically divided so there approximated an equal number of participants in each group, i.e., age, years of experience, structure of district.

There were ten dependent variables. Each of the five subscales of the Leadership Practices Inventory-Self were dependent variables. They were challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modeling the way, and encouraging the heart. Five subscales of the power measure were dependent variables. They were expert power, referent power I, referent power II, legitimate power, and coercive power. Reward power was not used in analysis due to a low reliability coefficient.

Data analysis. Descriptive statistics was utilized to explore the data. For each of the ten dependent variables there were four independent variables of age, years of

administrative experience, size of school district, and structure of school district. One-way analyses of variance were used to compare the difference of means across groups and to test for significance. Tamhane's T2 post hoc test was used to control for unequal variances. A correlation matrix was computed to determine if there was a relationship between perceived leadership practices and perceived uses of power.

Survey Findings

Perceived Leadership Practices and Power

Kouzes and Posner (1995) reported that of the five leadership practices on the Leadership Practices Inventory, inspiring a shared vision is the practice frequently applied the least and the one most people find uncomfortable to implement. In this study, women superintendents perceived themselves to be using the five leadership practices in the following order: enabling others to act, modeling the way, challenging the process, encouraging the heart, and inspiring a shared vision.

Regarding perceived power, women superintendents perceived themselves to be using power in the following order (reward power was not used for analysis): referent power II, expert power, coercive power, referent power I, and legitimate power.

Statistical Analysis

There were ten dependent variables. For each of the five dependent variables of leadership practices and the five dependent variables of uses of power, there were four independent variables of age, years of administrative experience, size of school district, and structure of school district. For each of the independent variables a one-way analysis of variance was conducted to determine significance. The level of significance was established at .05.

Results

Research question 1. Analyses of variance were conducted to determine if there were differences in the perceptions of women superintendents regarding their leadership practices based on age, years of administrative experience, and size and structure of their districts.

There was a statistically significant difference in the size of the district and perceived leadership practices (Table 4.2). There were three categories of district size: large districts with a student population of 10,000 to 29,999 students; mid-size districts of 2,500 to 9,999 students; and small districts with a student population of less than 2,500 students. A post hoc analysis using Tamhane's T2 for unequal variances was conducted which revealed that women superintendents in the largest school districts perceived themselves to be using Challenging the Process and Inspiring a Shared Vision more than women in mid-size and small school districts. Women superintendents in mid-size school districts perceived themselves to be using Modeling the Way more than women superintendents in the other two groups. No other significant differences were found.

Research question 2. Analyses of variance were conducted to determine if there were differences in the perceptions of women superintendents regarding their uses of power based on age, years of administrative experience, and size and structure of their districts.

There was a statistically significant difference in age and perceived use of power. There were four groups of age categories: 38 – 49, 50 – 52, 53 – 54, and 55 – 56. A post hoc analysis using Tamhane's T2 for unequal variances was conducted which revealed that women superintendents in the youngest age group (38 – 49) perceived themselves to

be using referent power II (approachability) as a source of influence (power) more than women in the other groups for age.

There was a statistically significant difference in years of administrative experience (experience as a superintendent) and perceived use of power. There were four groups for years of experience: 0 – 2 years, 3 – 5 years, 6 – 9 years, and 10 – 20 years of experience. A post hoc analysis using Tamhane's T2 for unequal variances was conducted which revealed that women superintendents who had from three to five years of administrative experience (experience as a superintendent) perceived themselves to be using expert power as a source of influence more than women in the other groups of years of experience. No other significant differences were found.

Research question 3. To answer the third research question, a correlation matrix was computed to determine if there was a relationship between perceived leadership practices and perceived uses of power.

There was a significant positive correlation between Referent power II and four of the five leadership practices and the LPI-Self total. There was a significant positive correlation between Expert power and one of the leadership practices and the LPI-Self total.

Discussion

Leadership and Demographics

Sixty-six percent of the women in this study held earned doctorates and averaged three administrative positions before attaining a superintendency. Fifty-five percent of the women had held positions as principals, 36 percent had been assistant

superintendents and 28 percent had been curriculum directors. Glass (1992) found that a typical pathway for women to the superintendency is from the position of teacher, to principal, to central office position, to superintendent.

In this study 41 percent of the women first attained a superintendency between the ages of 44 and 48 and 45 percent taught school for 10 to 16 years before achieving an administrative position. At time of reporting almost 50 percent of the women were between the ages of 53 and 65 years of age.

Leadership and Context

Significant findings of this study point to the size of the school district as a difference in how the women superintendents perceived their leadership practices. Tallerico and Burstyn (1996) cite studies that show a hierarchy of districts arranged according to their desirability with women occupying those superintendencies lowest in the hierarchy. Size is one of the key indicators that would influence hierarchical status. In the approximately 15,500 school districts in the United States, small, rural districts are more numerous than are districts in metropolitan areas. In their study of why women exit the superintendency, Tallerico and Burstyn (1996) asked questions about what is known of the superintendency in small districts and what are the implications of small, rural contexts for women's prospects in educational leadership. The realities of too few resources for programs and staff and too many administrative tasks restrict women leading small school districts. Women superintendents in small, rural districts were dissatisfied with certain tasks not because they were "inappropriate to their positions but because they were inappropriate to their training and their interests" (p. 647). These women were disenchanted not only from fatigue caused by long work hours, but also by

the need to do everything with little assistance. The women in their study exited the superintendency for those reasons and others. Glass' 1992 study of the superintendency showed a much higher proportion of women superintendents (28%) than men superintendents (14%) in the smallest school districts. Sixty-eight percent of the women superintendents in this study lead very small districts with populations of less than 2,500 enrolled students.

The data in this study showed that women in larger districts perceive themselves to be leading differently than women in the smallest districts. Women leaders in large and mid-size districts more often see themselves as challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, and modeling the way than women in small districts.

The two behaviors that a leader engages in to inspire a shared vision are envisioning the future and enlisting others. Konnert and Augenstein (1990) believe that the articulation of a vision may be "the cornerstone of empowerment for the superintendent and the entire school community" (p. 106). Kouzes and Posner (1995) reported that of the five leadership practices, inspiring a shared vision is the least practice frequently applied and the one reported to be the most uncomfortable for people to implement. Data analysis of the 148 surveys revealed that inspiring a shared vision was the last practice of the five leadership practices that women in this study perceived themselves to be using.

If women leaders in small districts inherit systems with inadequate instructional innovation and weak organizational structures (Tallerico and Burstyn, 1996), it might behoove them to incorporate the practices of challenging the process and inspiring a shared vision to improve their districts. Fields and Herold (1997) described these two

leadership practices as transformational. Baliga and Hunt (cited in Conger, 1999) believe that transformational leadership is most important during the growth and revitalization stages of an organization. Bass and Avolio (1999) have conducted research to show that followers are more “motivated, productive, and satisfied” (p. 552) when their leaders are transformational.

Power

This study saw referent power II as the particular power base perceived to be used most often by the younger women in the study, ages 38-49. Referent power II was the only power base that correlated with four of the five leadership practices, all but challenging the process.

Referent power II is defined as a person’s approachability or personality that is used to influence others. The four items on the power measure that relate to referent power II are: interpersonal skills, personality, communication skills, and charisma. Referent power is based on identification with or the desire to be associated with the leader. Ragins and Sundstrom (1989) believe that referent power is informal power based on expertise, attractiveness, and charisma. It involves influence through “rational persuasion, faith, and personal identification” (p. 52).

Carli (1999) maintained that one of the advantages of the French and Raven model of power is that it acknowledges that power can be based on the desire to maintain relationships and not just on the possession of status or resources. Referent power is highly personal and based on a feeling of identification with others. Individuals who use referent power do not have to have external advantages over others, although they might. “As a result, according to the model, even those who lack access to other forms of power

can employ referent power” (p. 83). Johnson (cited in Carli, 1999) extended French and Raven’s model to gender and stated that because referent power involves maintaining good relationships, it is more congruent with gender role expectations for women than for men. Referent power would be one source of power generally available to women and therefore easily accessed. Gilligan (1982) believed women’s sense of integrity was 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.

Another finding in the data analysis regarding power was that women in one group of years of experience as a superintendent (3-5 years) perceived themselves to be using expert power more than women in the other groups. Yukl (1989) explained that expert power is most commonly applied in the form of reasonable persuasion. The leader presents logical arguments and supporting evidence for a plan or request. Success depends on the leader’s knowledge and ability in addition to persuasive communication skills and credibility.

There are different sources of power in an organization. Personal power depends on the attributes of the interpersonal relationship between the agent and target person and “includes relative task expertise, friendship and loyalty, and a leader’s charismatic qualities” (Yukl, 1989, p. 15). Referent and expert power are related to personal power. Positional power includes legitimate authority (legitimate power) and control over resources, information, and punishments (reward and coercive power). Research on the use of different forms of power by leaders suggests that effective leaders rely more on personal power than on positional power (Yukl, 1989).

In his book on leadership in organizations, Yukl (1989) devoted a chapter to power, influence tactics, and leader effectiveness. Podsakoff and Schriesheim (cited in Yukl, 1989) reviewed 25 years of field research using the French and Raven power taxonomy. Studies regarding leader power over subordinates found that expert and referent power positively correlated with subordinate satisfaction and performance in a majority of the studies. “The results suggest that effective leaders rely more than ineffective leaders on expert and referent power to influence subordinates” (Yukl, 1989, p. 35). In this study the two power bases with significant differences were referent and expert power.

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” for the women in Brunner’s study. “It was not their natural way of thinking or talking about power” (Brunner, 2000 p. 85). Brunner (1999a) found that definitions of power from the superintendents in her study of male and female superintendents fell into the 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. This study found women preferring to use either referent power or expert power, two sources of personal power, similar to the category of power with/to, as opposed to positional power which is similar to power over.

Although this study dealt with perceptions of leadership practices and uses of power, self-perception has been defined as having an awareness of the characteristics that constitute one's self, and one's self-knowledge. The perceived self describes the set of perceptions that individuals hold about their actual traits, competencies, and values. (Leonard, Beauvais & Scholl, 1999).

This study contributes to the small body of literature researching women in the superintendency. More studies exploring how women school superintendents perceive themselves leading their school districts are needed so that women who aspire to the superintendency are able to learn about various leadership practices as well as how women go about influencing others. Women aspiring to the superintendency need to understand what it is like to approach the everyday problems inherent in such a position from a female perspective. Understanding leadership from a feminine view allows us to put into perspective practices of leadership that might be different yet profound enough to change current ideas of what leadership has been based on and how it might change the look of tomorrow's schools.

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