Race, Gender, & Leadership: Perspectives of Female Secondary Leaders

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Abstract: Female secondary principals not only have to deal with internal and external pressures to lead successfully but are scrutinized because of their gender (Shakeshaft, 1993; Skrla & Young, 2003; Thurman, 2004). The purpose of this study was to investigate how female secondary principals from one southwestern state teased out complex views of leadership, gender, and race.

Schools operate in an increasingly complex and dynamic environment (Dimmock & Walker, 2005). Secondary principals, for instance, have to make sense of and approach difficult situations to increase student achievement. This sometimes is further complicated for female secondary principals who not only have to deal with internal and external pressures to lead successfully but are also scrutinized because of their gender (Thurman, 2004). As women leaders, they face contradictory expectations that they appear female or feminine and male or masterful, depending on the context (Brunner, 1999; Fiore & Joseph, 2005; Grogan, 1994; Gronn, 2003; Shakeshaft, 1993). Despite the scrutiny, female principals are able to work with their school communities to create successful schools (Lyman, Ashby, & Tripses, 2005; Smulyan, 2000; Young & McLeod, 2001).

To investigate how female secondary principals tease out complex views of leadership, gender, and race, this study was based on the experiences of eleven female leaders in one southwestern state. The research questions were: What challenges do female secondary administrators confront today? What do they recommend to eliminate these challenges?

Literature Review

The demand for school leaders in the United States has been growing with a forecasted 10 to 20% increase through 2005 due to retirement, turnover, and a lack of interested and qualified applicants (Logan, 1998). Despite this fact, little consideration has been given to the underutilization of women in educational leadership to help solve the crisis. More recent research (e. g., Blackman & Fenwick, 2000; Boris-Schacter & Lager, 2006) indicate that the number of women taking leadership positions in elementary schools has risen over the past ten years. However, like the superintendency, the presence of female secondary school leaders continues to remain disproportionately low (Alston, 1999; Brunner, 1999; Thurman, 2004; Young & McLeod, 2001; Young & Skrla, 2003). Furthermore, few studies of female educational leaders have considered the impact of more than one source of difference, such as race, class, gender, language, ability, sexual orientation, and level of experience (Mendez-Morse, 2003). Such a line of inquiry could inform and expand the current construction of educational leadership.

Women and Educational Leadership

To meet the challenges of under-representation of women in secondary school leadership roles, new efforts to recruit women and people of color are essential (Boris-Schacter & Langer, 2006). School districts would tap into an underutilized resource and more likely cultivate a leadership pool that would more closely reflect the current and future demographics of American schools. Women constitute 52% of elementary principals but only 26% of secondary school principals (Thurman, 2004). This under-representation may be due to stereotypes attached to women, more specifically, their lack of capacity to hold leadership positions (Helterbran & Rieg,

2004; Murphey, Moss, Hannah, & Wiener, 2005; Young & McLeod, 2001). This may be due to the social perception of women as teachers but not as leaders. Teaching and leading are often treated as separate worlds, characterized by different activities and senses, employing different languages, guided by different purposes, and carried out by distinct types of people (Donaldson, 2006; Moller & Pankake, 2006). The consequential explanation, though unrealistic and commonplace, of the scarcity of female leaders in education is their lack of aspiration to occupy leadership roles. Contrary to this belief, the number of women currently enrolled and already graduated from educational administration programs since 1980 is increasing (Logan, 1998; Oakley, 2000; Valverde, 2003; Young & McLeod, 2001).

Assessing the Landscape: Getting into the Principalship

Females at the highest levels of leadership in education usually run a solo act but with many spectators and critics (Ah Nee-Benham & Cooper, 1998; Shakeshaft, 1993; Smulyan, 2000). For those who persevere and do become principals, marginalization and extra scrutiny due to race and gender can follow (Boris-Schacter & Langer, 2006; Mendez-Morse, 2003). Females have difficulty being accepted by colleagues in cross-racial, ethnic, or class communities and can face systemic community prejudices (Boris-Schacter & Langer, 2006). This can be a double-edged sword because once the principal is hired, she is expected to appear in charge but behave as a recognizable woman (Shakeshaft, 1993; Skrla & Young, 2003). Perhaps ironically, another study indicates that women will only accentuate female values in their leadership styles up to the level of natural acceptance in an organization's culture (Hofstede, 1980). Appearing feminine and utilizing female caring values to lead can be perceived as two different things. Not all research agrees. Evans (2001) suggests that being in a formerly male position such as the principalship can free females from gendered expectations. We can only conclude that much more in-depth information is needed to examine this complicated issue.

Method

Since this study examined participants' leadership experiences, phenomenology was chosen as the method (Creswell, 1998). From a generated list of female secondary principals obtained from the directory of education within one southwestern state, a purposive sample (Patton, 1990) of 15 female secondary school leaders (7 White American, 2 African American, 1 Native American, and 1 Portuguese American) were chosen but 11 agreed to participate. The principals were representative of six school districts that comprised these characteristics: two city contexts (i.e., urban and suburban), leaders (i.e., secondary, female, novice, and experienced), and secondary school context (i.e., two or more high schools located in each district). Open-ended semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Participants were asked questions concerning leadership orientation and socialization experiences and practices, issues of diversity, race and gender, and challenges they faced as female secondary school leaders. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed according to phenomenological steps (Giorgi, Fischer, & Murray, 1975).

Findings and Discussion

This study provides an understanding of how race and gender impact women's accession to, and work at, the secondary school level. Three major themes emerged: gender, race, and improvement of the recruitment and retention processes.

Issues of Gender Pertaining to Female Leaders

Gender was a factor embedded in the leadership experiences of the principals. Several women discussed the ineffectiveness of being mentored by other women while in their

leadership roles. According to the novice Lebanese American suburban principal who was the first female secondary leader in that district, "Women are vicious and backstabbing. . .Unless women are on your side, they'll turn on you real quick. I'm under a microscope as the first woman to take on a leadership role. Everybody is watching me at every moment." Other comments on gender were articulated by an experienced White suburban principal "I find sometimes that females don't help each other along the way like men do. It's amazing how the men have such a network of connections, and they get jobs and do things from that…When I became principal, They thought it was a short lived thing. The perception was, As a single mother, there would be no way that I could balance my professional and personal life because of the demands and expectations."

To be successful, women need to be assertive and exhibit more male-like qualities (Helterbran & Rieg, 2004). One experienced White urban principal asserted:

> They like high school principals to be men. Big strong men. Big strong black men or women who are Black or Hispanic. I'm a White bred, White headed female. I've heard all the blond jokes that I ever want to hear in my life. But I'm intelligent and I can run a school. . . I've never been discriminated against. There are times, I've thought if I were Black or Hispanic, I'd had better luck at that. I sometimes think that people look at me and say, 'She's White. She's a blond, what does she know?' Has it ever affected me, honestly? No, I cannot say that it has.

The novice Native American principal talked about the issues she confronted on a daily basis as a female leader:

> I still think that anytime women assert themselves, there are people who will see them as either on a power trip or they're referred to in a derrogatory manner. I think that's common among other females. For example, a female leader has to be able to play to the 'choir' who's observing her for weaknesses because she's a female versus 'Oh, you're acting like you're all that.' That's a stereotype of a woman who's in a leadership role and be 'all that'. I don't know that men have that challenge.
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> . . .A man can walk into a room and doesn't need to open his mouth to prove himself. A female sometimes has to absolutely jump through hoops and say, 'I'm just as tough and I can do just as well as any male.' The tragedy is that you have to prove yourself to be the best. In order to do that, we have to dismantle all of these perceptions of the female versus the male gender in school administration.

In contrast, two White urban principals talked about how their gender was valuable to their leadership roles. The expereinces one explained:

> Being a female is the best thing in the world. I can put my arms around people. I can sit with them. I can cry with them. I can be angry with them because I don't have to play that macho role. I've been told that women couldn't do high school. I can whip a school board into shape. But, that isn't how a school really runs. I believe women have the edge. I have so much more freedom as a female.

The novice said, "Women tend to be more welcoming to the concerns and problems of the school than most male administrators that I know."

These women were constantly learning their own values and limits by unconsciously assuming that gender does not matter when it is in fact present in their own and other people's expectations and habits (Murphey et al., 2005). Gender has been regarded as a category of experience that influences women to develop leadership values and engage in a model of

relational leadership (Boris-Schacter & Langer, 2006; Smulyan, 2000). The women in this study synthesize the finer quality of masculinity (i.e., I can be tough too!) and feminist perspective (i.e., warm, nurturing, sensitive, cooperative, and accommodating) (Shakeshaft, 1993; Skrla & Young, 2003). They formed a newer, stronger, and more balanced practice of leadership.

Issues of Race Pertaining to Female Leaders

Although issues of gender permeated the discussion, issues of race were of equal importance. Several participants assumed that race did not matter when it was in fact present in much of their discussion and race (un)consciousness resonated within their perspectives. For example, one of the experienced White urban principals raised issues about being "White bred. . . I can run a school. . . I've never been discriminated against." However, she further explained if she were Black or Hispanic, it would have increased her chances of successfully running a school. She further asserted that she had never been affected by race; yet, she articulated contradictions as they pertained to her experiences. In contrast to this White urban principal, one experienced Black suburban principal expressed similar issues that pertained to differential treatments of White females and males in school leadership:

> Sometimes I find myself in situations where I wonder if I were a White female or male, would things be different. I'm not going to lie to you. Men tend to feel they could say things to me that they probably wouldn't say if I were a White female or male. This happened to me this summer. A man made a comment to me and I said to him, 'Had I been a male or White female, would you have said that?'

She felt that her experiences would differ if she were a White female or male. These women experienced a gender bias that stems from the false premise that males are dominant. The second bias is a racism rooted in the erroneous proposition of white superiority (Ah Nee-Benham & Cooper, 1998; Valverde, 2003). Because of these two historical myths, many unfair practices toward White women and women of color have surfaced and played out on a routine basis.

Women of color, and to a lesser extent White women, are pressured to give up their cultural identities (Valverde, 2003). Professional women over time have come to realize that they have had to display some male-based characteristics in order to become acceptable to be selected for a leadership role such as secondary school principals. However, White and Black women may have found a collective voice. Some women feel less of a need to shape their demeanour to look and sound like men (Skrla & Young, 2003). In short, interpretations pass off as objective practice promote and entrench white privilege and male dominance (Valverde, 2003).

Changing the Landscape: Approaches to Support Women

Digging deeper into the complex views of leadership, race and gender, the participants discussed recommendations for improving the recruitment and retention of female secondary leaders and changing the male-dominated perspective of the secondary principalship. In the former, the participants agreed that women need to develop the confidence that they can be effective secondary school leaders and should work towards seeking leadership opportunities. They suggested, "Women have to be convinced that they can do it!", "Lead from your heart!", and "You have to be courageous!" While emphasizing confidence in oneself, some of the participants took this a step further by suggesting that women need to be groomed or mentored by other women and men. They believed that seeking and identifying possible leaders and giving them opportunities to lead are ways to mentor more women into the principalship. This contradicts previous research (Logan, 1998; Thurman, 2004; Young & McLeod, 2001) that suggests that women are unlikely to mentor each other once in the field. However, the absence of women in the ranks of senior management is a telling sign that the whole process of selection,

recruitment, and promotion in educational organizations needs an overhaul (Oakley, 2000). The participants suggested diversifying school personnel involved in the hiring process. As one participant articulated, "We need to look at a variety of people responsible for hiring school leaders. It has to broaden – more diversity within the screening panel."

Conclusions

The participants in this article described the ways in which female principals interpreted their leadership experiences in terms of race and gender. An important direction for further research is that it is done simultaneously with secondary females of diverse cultural background, essential to understanding how females lead from these perspectives. Further, in order to fully capture the impact of gender, race, and culture on leadership, research must involve a greater number of organizations at extreme ends of the value dimensions for measuring leadership effectiveness. While it has been common practice for research to define the context in which leadership is studied, using simple classifications such as masculine or feminine contexts, it seems appropriate to begin refining the particular management layer that is studied.

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