Superintendent Leadership Style: A Gendered Discourse Analysis

Dawn C. Wallin  
*University of Manitoba*, wallind@ms.umanitoba.ca

Carolyn Crippen  
*University of Manitoba*, ccrippen@uvic.ca

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Using a blend of social constructionism, critical feminism, and dialogue theory, the discourse of nine Manitoba superintendents is examined to determine if it illustrates particular gendered assumptions regarding superintendents’ leadership style. Qualitative inquiry and analysis methods were utilized to identify emerging themes, or topics of talk. Six topics of talk emerged in the discourse regarding leadership style. Since “talk is a form of social action worthy of study in itself” (Chase, 1995, p. 25), each of these topics was analyzed to illustrate how men and women in the superintendency in Manitoba negotiate a gendered social action when they talk about leadership.

Introduction

Discussions regarding gender and the superintendency inevitably begin by recognizing the persistence of the disproportionately low representation of women in the superintendency (Brunner, 2004; Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Grogan, 2000; Reynolds, 2002; Skrla, 2003; Wallin, 2005). This finding is reflected noticeably in Manitoba, Canada where, during the 2004–2005 school year, only 5 of the 37 public school division chief superintendents were women. Bryant (2004) illustrated this situation by making three points regarding the Manitoba context: (a) since 2001 at the University of Manitoba alone, 66% of the graduates with a Masters in Educational Administration were women; (b) 65% of the teaching staff in Manitoba are women; and (c) 45% of inschool administrators are women. There is no lack of qualified females in the profession to warrant a low representation in the superintendency.

So what contributes to this glaring inequity? Studies of female superintendents suggest that females do not experience the same level of encouragement, mentorship or sponsorship as do males, and that they continue to face gender bias and gender discrimination (Bell, 1995; Blount, 1998; Brunner, 1999, 2000b, 2003; Grogan, 1996; Kamler & Shakeshaft, 1999; Ortiz & Marshall, 1988; Shakeshaft, 1989, 1999; Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich, 2000; Tallerico, 2000). Although some researchers have argued that there are significant differences in the ways in which men and women lead that may impact on the perceptions of their effectiveness (Bjork, 2000; Brunner, 2000a; Chase, 1995; Gilligan, 1982; Marshall, Patterson, Rogers,
About the Authors

Dr. Dawn Wallin is an Assistant Professor of Educational Administration in the Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba. She is the president of the Canadian Association for the Study of Women in Education. She is a former teacher and administrator. Dawn’s research interests include women in leadership, rural education, educational administration, and leadership. Email: wallind@ms.umanitoba.ca.

Dr. Carolyn Crippen is the Assistant Dean of the Post Baccalaureate Program and Assistant Professor of Educational Administration in the Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba. She holds a Ph.D. (Educational Leadership-University of North Dakota). She is a former teacher, administrator, and superintendent. Carolyn’s research interests include servant-leadership, senior administration, organizational learning, and teacher education. Carolyn has presented at the Universities of Oxford and Iceland. She has recently published in the Canadian Journal for Educational Administration & Policy (2005) and the International Journal of Servant Leadership (2006). Email:crippen@cc.umanitoba.ca.

& Steele, 1996; Pounder, 1990; Shakeshaft, 1989, 1999), others have argued that leadership style has little to do with gender and/or more to do with accommodations to socially constructed leadership norms (Astin & Leland, 1991; Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Eagly, Karau & Johnson, 1992).

Women who do attain superintendencies and attempt to conform to its social constructions find themselves in a no-win situation. If they are perceived as caring and collaborative, they are deemed not tough enough for the job; if they “act tough,” they are perceived to have betrayed their socially constructed gender roles and are, therefore, unheeded or labeled as “bitches” (Bell, 1995; Brunner, 2000b; Grogan, 1996; Kamler & Shakeshaft, 1999; Tallerico, 1999). In fact, the “silencing” of women in the position and their socialization into the bureaucratic, male-defined culture of schools and leadership, has become a topic of major research interest in the United States (Bjork, 2000; Blount, 1999; Brunner, 2002; Chase & Bell, 1990; Enomoto, Gardiner & Grogan, 2000; Grogan, 2000; Grogan & Smith, 1998; Murtadha-Watts, 2000; Skrla et al., 2000; Tallerico, 2000). Added to this is the understanding that the nature of the position of superintendent has changed dramatically in the past decade (Grogan, 2000), which has implications for both men and women in the position. There are few Canadian studies that examine the role of the superintendent (Crippen & Wallin, in press), and even fewer comparative studies of males and females to help determine whether findings are in fact shaped by gender or the role of superintendent itself (Pounder, 2000).
The purposes of the study were: (a) to determine whether the experiences of female superintendents in Manitoba are comparable to the findings in other studies on women and the superintendency; (b) to provide opportunities for both male and female superintendents to offer their understandings of superintendent leadership style in Manitoba; and (c) to compare the discourse of male and female superintendents to determine whether their talk illustrates particular gendered assumptions regarding the leadership styles of men and women.

**Conceptual Framework**

Vygotsky’s (1978) social constructivist theory is grounded on four central ideas that are helpful for achieving the purposes of this study: (a) knowledge is socially constructed; (b) learning can lead development; (c) development cannot be separated from social context; and (d) language plays a central role in development. In Vygotsky’s (1978) estimation, “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being; on the contrary, it is their social being that determines their consciousness” (p. 19). Critical theorists, actively engaged in the pursuit of social justice, extend Vygotsky’s understanding and center it directly on social action. They focus on how the reproduction of socially constructed oppressive norms create structures that constrain individual and group opportunity (Lees, 1995). These theorists also analyze how it is that the routinization of social structures often cause those oppressed to engage in and perpetuate their own victimization, either unconsciously or through the silencing of voice. In extension, the cause of oppression does not situate itself within the individual, but rather within the structural problems inherent in a society underpinned by discriminatory social norms (Tierney, 1989). Fay (1987) suggested:

> It is the job of critical theory to provide a historical narrative which reveals how it is that the relevant social actors came to be what they are, namely, actors playing a role in a drama about which they are ignorant but which gives their activities the point and meaning they have, and which defines the possibility for radical change open to, and even demanded of them. (p. 71)

As “relevant social actors” in the drama of education, superintendents obviously shape and are shaped by the social norms that produce the socializing influences and the structures within which they work. It becomes necessary to examine, therefore, how the role of the superintendent as it is currently socially constructed might work to perpetuate gendered norms regardless of the sex of the person in the role.

In his later work, Vygotsky (1986) stressed the importance of language to the nature of human consciousness:

> Thought and language, which reflect reality in a way different from that of perception, are the keys to the nature of human consciousness. Words play a central
part not only in the development of thought but in the historical growth of human consciousness as a whole. A word is a microcosm of human consciousness. (p. 94)

Other theorists concur. For example, Bakhtin (1986) suggested that “language and the word are almost everything in human life” (p. 118). Foucault (1980) stated that dialogue was central to the understanding of ontology, the very nature of how we perceive social reality. Bohm (1996) recommended that dialogue be examined for its ability to mirror the assumptions of the larger society:

Dialogue is a multi-faceted process, looking well beyond typical notions of conversational parlance and exchange. It is a process which explores an unusually wide range of human experience: our closely-held values; the nature and intensity of emotions; the patterns of our thought processes. (p. vii)

Shields and Edwards (2005) linked these ideas to educational administration and suggested that “dialogue is central to being, to relationships, and to understanding” (p. 17). By extension, then, the words used by school superintendents as they come into social contact with others become important cultural artifacts that not only reflect particular values and assumptions, but also have the potential to perpetuate or change the values and assumptions of others. However, superintendents may at different times vary in the degree of awareness of the assumptions that are inherently embedded in the language that they use to describe their activities and beliefs. It is for this reason that a discourse analysis that “focuses on attempting to explore some of the ways in which the use of language itself structures our assumptions” (Cukier & Thomlinson, 2005) can be invaluable for making sense of gender inequalities or gender differences within superintendents’ experiences of leadership.

Methodology

We report on the gender-based findings of a study on superintendent leadership in Manitoba. Four female superintendents and five male superintendents were interviewed to obtain data related to their leadership practice and experience. All who consented to participate were aware that gender was a topic under study. Both researchers in this study were female academics from the University of Manitoba. One of the researchers had experience as a Manitoba superintendent.

Informants were asked questions related to two areas that have been found in the research to be affected by gender: (a) leadership style and (b) mentorship experiences. The culminating question of the interviews, which is the focus of this paper, asked respondents whether they believed men and women exhibited different leadership styles, and if so, to characterize those leadership styles. Respondents were asked to provide exam-
ple from practice that would corroborate their responses in an attempt to address the limitation of self-response; however, it must be acknowledged that the study remains exploratory and perceptual in nature because of this limitation.

The data from the interviews were transcribed and analyzed according to qualitative research guidelines (Moustakas, 1988; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Tageson, 1982). Reductive analysis (the identifying, coding and categorizing of data into meaningful units) was used to identify themes and patterns in the data. Since, as Vygotsky (1986) stated, “the relation between thought and word is a living process” (p. 94) observed in social dialogue, each narrative was analyzed to determine whether the dialogue of Manitoba superintendents illustrated particular gendered assumptions regarding the leadership styles of superintendents. Commonalities and/or anomalies were determined through careful comparisons of the informants’ discourse.

Findings

Superintendents were asked to reflect on whether they believed there were differences in male and female leadership styles. The subsequent narrative responses are organized below.

Male Superintendent Responses

First, the five male superintendents (100%) exhibited discomfort when the question was phrased in relation to gender. Even though they were aware that gender would be part of the discussion, one of the superintendents responded, “Oh God, I don’t know if I want to touch that.” The question was not avoided by anyone, but the comfort level was certainly not as high when males responded, perhaps because they were responding to two female researchers, one of whom had been a superintendent in Manitoba. All of the male respondents spoke to perceptions regarding differences in male and female leadership styles. One of the superintendents clarified these perceptions by suggesting that

There’s this belief that men as leaders are more concrete-sequential, into power, I’m the boss. I’m going to do it whether you like it or not, and that they’re more business-oriented and that women tend to be more feelings oriented, and let’s get along.

Another of the superintendents suggested, “I think it’s perception. I don’t for a minute think it’s because ladies would not have the ability. . . . But there’s a shift happening, but it is that slow, because we still have only five ladies today.” Interestingly, this man suggested that women “are allowed to be superintendent assistants” and he put the responsibility of inequitable hiring onto school boards “because of a lot of ingrained stuff that from a leadership style is perceived to be better.” A third superintendent suggested,
I have female, I mean we have female administrators, and they’re some of the best people I’ve ever worked with. My ladies that we have in those principalships are certainly very compassionate. . . . I’m having a hard time catching a pattern here. They really have their own approach to things.”

Another participant responded:

I think good leadership is pretty much the same. Having said that, you can’t separate the leader from their gender. I mean, if you’re a man, you’re a man, if you’re a woman, you’re a woman. Those who are effective operate with similar styles. I think women—to become leaders in today’s world—have probably had to adopt some of the styles that men have used that have been successful. I don’t think a leader today can be weak or weepy or sucky; they aren’t going to get along. Therefore, I think women in leadership have had to be tougher than what I have seen in the past, but by the same token, men, to succeed today, have had to become more feminine, if feminine means listening more, arguing less, being more empathetic and more collaborative, and the net result is probably a much closer style and therefore less difference by far than anything I’ve seen in the past.

The language used by these superintendents nudges open underlying gendered assumptions, even though on the surface the message is meant to suggest that women are good administrators and the leadership styles of men and women have begun to meld. The use of the possessive pronoun (“my ladies” or “I have female administrators”) promotes an objectification of women as possessions, and the term “lady” often perpetuates particular notions of what is considered to be appropriate behavior and deportment. The suggestion that “leaders today can no longer be weak or weepy or sucky” implies that women once were that way, and that it has been to their benefit that women have “had to adopt some of the styles that men have used.” Of course, when women are patronizingly “allowed” to be assistant superintendents, but not superintendents, the blame can be placed on to the shoulders of those who do the hiring. In fact, those who are currently in the role may help to socially construct through their own language the stereotypes of women as weak leaders; or the perception that there may be a danger in hiring them because they might be “weak or weepy or sucky;” or at the very least, unlike the men who have been successful in the past.

Three of the male respondents (60%) discussed what they saw as differences in the leadership styles of the men and women administrators with whom they have worked. One of the respondents indicated, “females, I think, are more process oriented as opposed to males, more open to discussion.” This respondent also said, “female administrators used to dress in power suits, but people are now dressing like people, not like objects.” It is difficult to know whether or not this comment reflects the notion that women no longer feel that they have to dress according to masculinized
constructions of power, but this respondent viewed the change positively. At any rate, there is a recognition of the fact that women, at least in the past, had made accommodations to a masculinized role by wearing “power suits.” A second male respondent suggested, “women today tend to be more articulate and, I think, perhaps better educated [than men].” A third offered the following perception:

In general men and women often view problems and issues differently and analyze things differently. I found the females that I worked with in leadership roles [to be] far more analytical than the men are. I don’t know if that’s related to gender or just the people that I worked with. My experience is that women seem to have a greater capacity for attention to detail. . . . The female principals that I’ve worked with have probably been stronger in coaching of teachers and understanding of the teaching-learning environment. I’m not sure why that is.

The same superintendent also suggested that women administrators are often challenged more:

There is an expectation among staff and parents that the most important role of the administrator is usually the managerial aspect. I think that’s probably been one of the reasons that men have been dominant in numbers in administration. And partly, because for whatever they may be perceived as, because they’re male, more managerial. . . . In the principals that I’ve worked with as their supervisor and dealing with contentious issues, it has definitely been more difficult for women . . . they get challenged more than they need to be.

What is interesting in these comments from men is that they reflect the findings in other research that has most often elicited the views of women only. Some of the comments suggest that women do have a more feminine style of leading (process oriented, attention to detail, understanding of the teaching and learning environment); another indicates women are more analytical (usually a masculine trait); a third suggests that they focus on developing appropriate qualifications; and a fourth comment validates the notion that women face obstacles in their role because of their gender.

Female Superintendent Responses

Only one of the four female superintendents (25%) questioned whether or not there were differences between male and female leadership styles. In her estimation, there were so few female superintendents in the province that she had too few examples with which to compare, and she was leery of essentializing the leadership styles of women and men:

I don’t have a lot of examples of women to compare with, and I probably can find a woman that had the same kind of demeanour as some of the men. . . . I can tell you what people are compared to me, I don’t know if I can tell you what they’re like for all women.
The remaining three women were adamant that there was a difference in the leadership styles of men and women. Perhaps one of the most significant perceptions was outlined in the following comment:

Males are about posturing and image and all about how many years you’ve been on the role, committee work, salaries, number of assistants—there is no talk about education, and when there is, it’s dismissed as a topic that’s getting in the way.

However, two of the superintendents suggested that the leadership styles of men and women are gradually melding, and that “the old regime at the table is changing, and I’ve noticed the dialogue over the last few years has changed, too.”

Some of the women respondents spoke of the impact their gender had on the working relationships between them and other administrators. One female superintendent found that male administrators acted awkwardly in her presence:

There was no joshing with me, you couldn’t talk to me about golfing because I didn’t golf, you couldn’t talk to me about the hockey game because you weren’t sure if I watched hockey. So there was never any of that kibitzing before you actually started in on that dialogue . . . maybe I was perceived then as being too professional to be engaged in that . . . but I didn’t want to be perceived as a threat.

One of the superintendents alluded to the lack of mentorship, “I noticed in my first years with the men I never phoned them and they never phoned me. I mean, heaven forbid that I might have a question to ask that they would laugh at.” This comment reinforces the sense of isolation and insecurity that manifests itself at the outset of the career as superintendent. The same superintendent also alluded to the idea that women have to ameliorate their own personal style of leadership with masculine characteristics to succeed in the role:

You almost have to have male mannerisms. That kind of strength to be able to wield it. You have to be able to command with a sense of presence and to say with authority that I know that here’s the data, here’s my recommendation. You have to be able to pull that off.

Comments such as these suggest that some women perceive that they have to take on masculine characteristics, perhaps at the expense of their own personal style, in order to “pull off” what others will perceive to be “good” leadership, which is still very much a masculinized social construct (strength, command, presence, authority).

Given the fact that many of these women indicated that they had not had the kinds of access to socialization or mentorship as males, what was very interesting about this group was that the women interviewed had no more than cursory relationships with each other. One would suppose that be-
because there were so few female superintendents in the province, these five women would naturally connect with each other for support and mentorship. This, however, was not the case. In fact, one of the superintendents suggested, “I don’t have any kind of relationships with the women superintendents.” Although the women lamented this fact, they also seemed to accept it; some indicated that personality differences mattered more than gender, and two spoke of the idea that “lots of women don’t like powerful women,” or that (and here the superintendent also included assistant superintendents in her estimation), “females are stooping to the same mannerisms and putdowns of their colleagues as some of the men.” These kinds of comments suggest that, rather than creating a network that could offer mentorship and support not only for themselves, but also for aspiring superintendents, these women worked primarily in isolation from each other. Underlying these comments may be an individualistic determination to succeed, and (dare it be suggested) a determination not to acknowledge a gender tie with others because of a perception that it might weaken their position in this very limited club. It may also reflect the fact that the superintendent is by its nature an individualistic role, and those who are attracted to it are those who work independently from others. Such a supposition, however, would be supported more strongly, if both females and males had not spoken of the many colleagues they phoned when dealing with critical issues. Very seldom did these women phone each other for advice.

Some of the superintendents noted that women need to “know more” than men in order to be perceived as adequate: “women are hard on themselves because they do expect that they are going to need to know. Men say they don’t know or they fake it.” Yet, another woman uttered a somewhat contradictory statement:

Women tend to be more willing to say that somebody else might have a better idea, and they’re willing to use the expertise of all these people and not feel threatened by that—not feel that it’s an indictment against them that they didn’t know.

There is some discrepancy for those women who feel that they need to be “experts” and those who are comfortable enough to designate without feeling that it is a poor reflection on their knowledge base. These comments may reflect personality differences or length in the role. Men are depicted either as being more upfront about their knowledge (or lack thereof), or decidedly more dishonest about not knowing (though it appears as though they succeed in hiding it).

Only one superintendent spoke directly about the role of power when she suggested that some of the men with whom she works

perceive power in that everybody obeys them and they sit on the pedestal and everybody bows to them. If I’m powerful, it’s because the people around me . . . I’ve given power to them, and they are doing a good job, so I look good.
Underlying this idea, however, lies an assumption that power exists in the hands of the person in the role, who can then “give” that power to others for an individualistic purpose (I look good). Another superintendent spoke more broadly of the differences between men and women as visionaries:

Women pay more attention to detail. They may have a vision and think more deeply about how they are going to achieve that vision and what needs to be put in place to support that vision. Men have a vision and leave the details to others. They are more action-oriented; they want to get there, get there fast, and they don’t necessarily think about the fall-out.

Embedded within this comment is a view that suggests that although both men and women can be visionaries, it is the particular way of putting that vision into place that differs between men and women. Women are viewed as more thoughtful about how to achieve the vision and the potential unintended consequences of its application. Men are viewed as being aggressive, quick, and often thoughtless in the process of implementing their vision.

In terms of working style, one superintendent suggested, “females are more conciliatory or more apt to look for consensus, more apt to consult, more apt to be attuned to and aware of impact and ramification.” Along with this went the idea that

females try to provide support for people to be successful. Males tend to expect perfection without giving it the support it needs. Females are more apt to help people build on their strengths to avoid repeating a mistake, or helping them understand the nature of their mistakes, whereas males are a little more unforgiving.

Yet another superintendent suggested the following:

Men have tended to be very black and white on issues. They are pushed more easily into an authoritarian style if they feel somewhat threatened by somebody—they switch very quickly. Now women tend to be more involved in shared decision-making, tend to have a greater level of trust in people, tend to be willing to give up some ownership of things and delegate.

All of these comments are embedded with notions of women as the thoughtful supporter and the pacifier. Men are presented in these comments as having unrealistically high expectations (since they do not provide support to go along with their expectations), inflexible, intolerant of other views, individualistic, and aggressive when threatened.

Interestingly, one of the superintendents stated that males were more emotional when dealing with teacher incompetence:

Women are still better at calling a spade a spade. A woman is far more likely to take on a teacher in difficulty and work with her. Men are more willing to put up
with things... Men, if they're pushed to having to do it, usually try to find a reason out of it. Men are much more likely to get emotionally involved with the teacher, feeling badly for her... almost a reversal of what you would think. Women are known to be caring and nurturing, but when it comes to these kinds of things, I've noticed that the men find it very difficult to pull the trigger... The women tend to see it as part of their responsibility... men find it difficult in their heart to look at a person in the face and say you are not cutting it. And they will use every method possible to figure out a way around having to deal with it.

The language illustrates a number of assumptions regarding gender and leadership. First, the idea that women are more attuned to teaching and learning is supported, even if that means dealing with, supporting, and/or dismissing incompetent teachers. Second, some very strong, assertive language was co-opted by the superintendent to illustrate the “tough” nature of dealing with incompetence: “calling a spade a spade,” “pulling the trigger,” and “you are not cutting it.” It would be interesting to undertake a discourse analysis to see whether or not the use of language by men and women changes by virtue of the topic under discussion. The third assumption suggests that men are nonconfrontational, or that they remain afraid of facing an emotional situation, even, perhaps, a woman’s tears (since in this case the pronouns used to describe the incompetent teachers were female).

**Discussion**

Six topics of talk settled out of the discourse on leadership style: (a) stereotyping language; (b) mixed messages; (c) a blending of styles; (d) isolation; (e) women as dynamic leaders; and (f) males as aggressors.

**Stereotyping Language**

The first topic of talk based on leadership style was illustrated by the stereotyping, paternal and possessive language used when male superintendents spoke about women in leadership roles. The use of possessive pronouns was utilized by three of the male superintendents when they referred to “my female administrators” or “my ladies.” Such language, although it may be subconscious, implies a possessive, paternal, and dominant role of male superintendent over female administrator, and harkens back to the times when women were the property of males. In all fairness, however, given the focus of the question on gender, none of the men spoke of other male administrators, so it is unclear if those same superintendents would also have used the terms “my male administrators.” Regardless, however, the use of the possessive language by the superintendents connotes a particular type of leadership—an individualistic leader who holds power over others and who views those people as belonging to him because they work for “his” organization. As well, the use of terms such as “ladies” connotes particular images of femininity within the organization. This idea is reinforced in the findings on mentorship which
suggested that males tended to value most highly female personal mentors who could be characterized as the loving, quiet and unassuming Madonna, and female professional mentors who could be characterized as the committed and caring school marm. The fact that one superintendent recognized that women were “allowed” to become assistant superintendents tends to reinforce a paternalistic, and gate-keeping attitude that may still keep women out of the superintendency. Finally, when speaking about the blending of leadership styles, one superintendent spoke first about women leaders and then moved in to a discussion about how leaders could no longer be “weak or weepy or sucky,” which implies that women were apt to behave that way . . . at least in the past. This same superintendent suggested that male and female leadership styles have blended, and that as females have become “tougher” males have become more “feminine.” The superintendent elaborated on what he meant by “feminine” but did not elaborate on what he meant by “tougher.” Presumably, the latter term explains itself, and perhaps the superintendent felt that the first term needed to be elaborated upon so that males were not associated with being “weak or weepy or sucky.”

Mixed Messages
A second topic of talk from male superintendents occurred over the mixed messages regarding the question of whether or not males and females had different leadership styles. Male superintendents spoke to “perceptions” regarding the differences in male and female leadership styles, which in effect generalized the question. Three of the five men responded that they did see some differences in the leadership styles of men and women. Traits mentioned supported the idea that women have a more feminine style of leadership, although one of the men suggested that the women with whom he has worked are often more analytical, which is more often attributed to a masculinized ethic of justice than the femininized ethic of care (Noddings, 1984). One of the superintendents had noticed that women tend to have appropriate qualifications, which is supported in the Manitoba data available regarding the graduation rates of women with masters degrees in educational administration. Another of the five male superintendents indicated that women faced obstacles in their roles because of their gender; another acknowledged that women are “allowed” to be assistant superintendents, which implies that women are not “allowed” to be superintendents. Although such findings have been documented in other studies that have examined women in leadership, the data here represent awareness by male superintendents who have not generally been included as participants in many of the studies on women in leadership.

A Blending of Styles
The third topic of talk spoken by three male (60%) and three female superintendents (75%) included the perception that the leadership styles of men and women have begun to blend. Whereas men suggested that leadership
was based on personal belief and that effective leadership was not based on gender, the female respondents suggested that there were differences, but they had minimized over time. Terms like, “the old regime is changing” connote the idea of a boys’ club operating at the superintendent level, and men mentioned that “that era was basically a time for the boys to get together and hear stories . . . they’d butter themselves up for a couple of days and vent like hell and then go back to work. But there’s a shift happening.” Although the shift was viewed positively by respondents, two female superintendents intimated that this blend was not always positive, as it sometimes meant that females had to become more like men, or that females indulged in behaviors that were unbecoming to them. This observation suggests that women may have their own socially constructed gendered notions of how women should behave.

Isolation
The fourth topic of talk alluded to a sense of isolation and lack of support experienced in the early stages of the female superintendents’ careers. Discourse revolved around the awkwardness of working with males who did not know how to socialize with female superintendents, fear of asking for support due to worries that they would be laughed at, pressure to take on masculine characteristics to be perceived as being effective, a lack of networking between and isolation from other female superintendents, and feeling like they had to be experts at their positions in order to prove their worth. None of the males in the study alluded to factors such as these, but it would be interesting to find out if males new to their position also had these feelings of insecurity. Some of the women indicated they had to take on masculine characteristics (being tough, not needing help, acting individualistically, having expert knowledge) to succeed. Two points become evident: (a) as long as female superintendents do not maintain relationships with each other, they will not become supports for each other or for new females who may benefit from the mentorship of an organized group of female superintendents; and (b) it would appear that at least some of the female superintendents believe that there is a socially constructed masculinized standard of leadership in Manitoba to which they feel pressure to conform.

Women as Dynamic Leaders
The fifth topic of talk revolved around female superintendents’ views of the leadership styles of women. Only one woman outwardly recognized a danger in essentializing the leadership styles of all women similarly, or in illustrating differences from men. Three female superintendents spoke of the blending of styles between males and females. However, even with these points as qualifiers, the female superintendents suggested that they worked towards shared leadership, one superintendent suggested that sometimes shared leadership was spearheaded for an instrumental purpose (“it makes me look good”). In general, women superintendents viewed women leaders
as visionary and thoughtful, conciliatory and consultative, supportive and collaborative. They were also described as being more responsible in matters of teaching and learning. These findings are evidenced in other studies that have examined the leadership styles of women (Brunner, 2000a; Chase, 1995; Gilligan, 1982; Marshall, Patterson, Rogers, & Steale, 1996; Pounder, 1990; Shakeshaft, 1989, 1999). However, the findings on mentorship offer a more dynamic view of women in leadership. When the female superintendents were asked to describe actual female mentors, they described women who utilized masculine and feminine traits in their leadership style. Perhaps the discrepancy can be explained by the nature of the question itself. By asking men and women to speak to differences in styles by gender, the question may have in fact brought to mind socially constructed images of masculine and feminine leadership traits. In this way, the question itself may have set up the dichotomous standards in the minds of the respondents, and they responded accordingly in their talk, even though their actual experiences with mentors illustrate that “real” human beings tend to exhibit some overlap in masculine and feminine styles in particular situations or overall.

Males as Aggressors
The final topic of talk related to the understandings women had of male leaders. Only one of the superintendents qualified her words by suggesting that she could not essentialize her comments to all men or all women. The comments relayed by women supported the idea that they believed there is a hyper-masculinized leadership style to which most male superintendents conform. Just as male superintendents used language on mentorship that perpetuated socially constructed stereotypes of women, female superintendents used language that perpetuated socially constructed stereotypes of men. Given the fact that women have fought hard against having to conform to stereotypical social constructions, it is unfortunate that the hyper-masculinized social constructions of male leadership still hold such sway. This finding contrasts with the findings on mentorship whereby female superintendents described many male mentors as being caring, compassionate advocates for children. It might be that the question itself once again set up a dichotomy based on social constructions to which these women responded accordingly. If such was the case, however, it begs the question of why male responses to female mentors hinged on stereotypical imagery when gender was not specifically a factor in the mentorship questions.

Conclusion
A discourse analysis of the narratives of male and female superintendents yielded interesting results regarding the gendered nature of superintendent leadership. It appears from the narratives that the experiences of female superintendents in Manitoba are comparable to the findings in other studies
on women and the superintendency (Bell, 1995; Blount, 1998; Brunner, 2000b, 2003; Grogan, 1996; Kamler & Shakeshaft, 1999; Ortiz & Marshall, 1988; Shakeshaft, 1989, 1999; Skrla et al., 2000; Tallerico, 2000). Many of the responses from male and female superintendents recognize that women have faced gender bias, have had to conform to masculinized social constructions of leadership, and have utilized a style of leadership that includes an emphasis on shared leadership, collaborative processes, and a focus on teaching and learning. Although males were more apt to speak about perception rather than their personal views, they did describe many of the characteristics spoken of by females (with a few exceptions), and included the fact that females were often more highly qualified than males, yet tended to face more obstacles because of their gender. It could very well be that their recognition of “perception” is in fact a recognition of the socially constructed nature of leadership. However, by distancing themselves from the perception in their talk, men did not have to directly state whether or not they agreed with those social constructions.

In terms of future implications, Gadamer (2002) advocates that people must communicate with each other for the purposes of sharing and refining meaning. Foucault (1980) suggested that it is in communication with one another that people learn to clarify their ideas and construct a renewed sense of reality. Vygotsky (1978) suggested that social interaction plays a fundamental role in learning, particularly through the use of language. Language, then, can not only perpetuate old social constructions; it can also help to generate new ones. According to Vygotsky (1978), the zone of proximal development can be understood as the zone at the edge of one’s established understandings. This is the place in one’s human consciousness where new knowledge can be extended and/or created. Shields and Edwards (2005) contended that “[d]ialogic understanding holds rich promise for the unique context and goals of educational leaders. This promise arises from the development of new knowledge, new modes of reasoning, and the potential for mutual action” (p. 83). In Bakhtin’s (1986) view, it is through social interaction and dialogue that such learning is piqued.

What this means is that authentic conversations (Clark, 2001) regarding gender assumptions must be generated among superintendents, so that such dialogue can stimulate the learning necessary to change social constructions regarding leadership styles. However, such conversations require trust and develop over time. Fortunately, the seeds of this learning already exist in Manitoba. There are female superintendents across the province who have developed trusting work relationships with male superintendents, primarily because there are only 37 public school divisions in the entire province, and the strong provincial organization, the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents offers conferences as well as regional superintendents’ meetings that bring these professionals together regularly. If authentic conversations regarding gender assumptions could be spurred among female and male superintendents, perhaps the essentializing social constructions of leadership styles mentioned by both
male and female superintendents would lessen. According to Shields and Edwards (2005), four types of knowledge can be constructed during dialogic interaction. These are: (a) knowledge about how others perceive a particular subject; (b) knowledge that the other gains about you and how you perceive a particular subject; (c) knowledge that is generated as the two views are synthesized; and (d) knowledge that one gathers about one’s self in terms of one’s prejudices and situatedness, and the more nuanced (and changed) understanding of the subject as a result of the process. The idea is not without its pitfalls, however, since there are so few women in the superintendency that their views may be as easily ostracized as accepted in an overt (and generally uncomfortable) discussion on gender. Perhaps a better idea would be to spur an authentic conversation on the role requirements of the superintendency, with an attendant discussion on how male and female superintendents have utilized their leadership styles to fulfill those requirements. This idea was supported by one of the male superintendents who suggested that the environment was more inclusive today; there’s more female representation certainly and there’s more cross-group representation so it is opening up. I think there is a kind of opening up of the minds around these types of issues and of the type of leadership we’re looking for.

In a discussion such as this, new understandings of practice may be constructed, and the zone of proximal development could expand as superintendents learn from and about the multiple leadership styles, both feminine and masculine, exhibited by female and male superintendents. For in the end, what is necessary is an avoidance of social constructions of uni-dimensionality in the styles of either sex. Critical theorists suggest that deconstruction is one of the first steps toward reshaping the power structures and knowledge claims of our society (Lees, 1995; Starratt, 2001). Along with the clarity that comes from deconstruction, can come a commitment and a moral obligation to social and cultural transformation (Lees, 1995; Slater, 1994; Starratt, 1993, 2001; Tierney, 1989). However, unless those who, often unknowingly, perpetuate those knowledge claims recognize how their cultural assumptions perpetuate what is unjust and what is worthwhile, little will change. Dialogue becomes the means to spur this recognition, deconstruct past social constructions, and reframe new social transformations.

References


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