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The Great Divide: Women's Experiences with Mentoring

Whitney H. Sherman, Ava J. Muñoz and Anita Pankake

Aware of the gender disparities that exist in the most coveted school district leadership positions, the researchers undertook the project reported here to uncover themes related to factors that contribute to the low numbers of women in the superintendency and assistant superintendency. Having knowledge and understanding of the factors that contribute to the dearth of women’s voices and viewing this knowledge from a feminist framework helped us to understand how gender has played into assumptions and practices related to the superintendency and assistant superintendency. Readers can learn from the stories and experiences of the women reported here and understand practices that serve to block women from becoming educational leaders while also learning how to make the paths to leadership taken by a future generation of women leaders less problematic through suggested actions and strategies.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Ella Flagg Young, first woman superintendent of Chicago Schools, was quoted in the *Western Journal of Education* (1909), as stating the following in regard to the future of women superintendents,

Women are destined to rule the schools of every city. I look for a large majority of the big cities to follow the lead of Chicago in choosing a woman for superintendent. In the near future we will have more women than men in executive charge of the vast educational system. It is woman’s natural field, and she is no longer satisfied to do the greatest part of the work and yet be denied leadership. As the first woman to be placed in control of the schools of a big city, it will be my aim to prove that no mistake has been made and to show cities and friends alike that a woman is better qualified for this work than a man. (“The Highest Salaried Woman in the World,” p. 515)

The field of education, encompassing more than four million professionals, is dominated by women; however, fewer than 2000 women assume administrative leadership capacity roles in American educational institutions (Blount, 1998). According to Mountford and Brunner (2005),

... research revealing the low numbers of women serving at the highest level of leadership in school districts—whether it be women on school boards or women
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In the superintendency—is alarming, particularly when considering the abundance of women who historically and currently serve as paraprofessionals, teachers, and principals in the school system. (p. 2)

In the Study of the American School Superintendency predictable disparity in the number of men to women superintendents was found to be overwhelmingly one-sided in favor of male superintendents (Glass, Björk and Brunner, 2000). Furthermore, Tallerico and O’Connell (2001) contributed that, fundamental “information about demography and context of the superintendency” (p. 75) remained elusive; assisting the superintendency in its efforts in stalling the incorporation of women and minorities within its walls. Aware of the gender disparities that exist in the most coveted school district leadership positions, the researchers undertook the project reported
here to uncover themes related to factors that contribute to the low numbers of women in the superintendency and assistant superintendency.

### Office of the Superintendency

At the early inception of the public school system, the office of the superintendency was nonexistent. It was not created until the late-nineteenth century. According to Blount (1998),

... the superintendency was initially created to address several education-related concerns of the nineteenth century. First the existence of county superintendencies allowed state governments to extend their controlling reach to local schools. Second, district and city superintendents eased the workloads of school boards, who had increasingly taken on routine administrative and clerical work. Third, male educators appreciated the existence of the superintendency to the extent that it offered them a new route for promotion within a profession that otherwise held diminished appeal. Superintendents received substantially higher salaries than teachers; they assumed more masculine-identified supervisory duties; they maintained their offices in central locations near local male power structures; and the title offered incumbents some stature in their communities. (p. 46–47)

According to Brunner (2000), since its inception in the late 19th century by school boards, the position of the superintendency was made up predominantly of white males. “First the superintendency remained a primarily male occupation during the entire 20th century. More specifically, men occupied from 85% to 96% of all superintendencies during this time period” (Tallerico & Blount, 2004, p. 640). Men continue to hold the majority of superintendent positions (Blount, 1998; Glass et al., 2000; Grogan, 1996; Shakeshaft, 1989). *The Study of the American School Superintendency* 2000 reported that the preponderance of superintendents employed throughout the country were white (94.9%), male (86.6%), middle aged, of rural background, held degrees in educational administration and possessed a similar line of thought (Glass et al., 2000).

Grogan (1996) stated that several paths lead to the superintendency:

Candidates for the superintendency are initially expected to be prepared for the position in two different ways: (1) to have a high level of formal training, including at least eligibility for, if not completion of, state superintendent certification and a university degree beyond the bachelor’s, and (2) to have credible prior experience on the job as an administrator capable of handling a superintendency, if not actual experience as a superintendent. Additionally, an indirect kind of preparation strongly advised is the molding of a candidate by influential sponsors. (p. 79)

The age of men and women superintendents, during their first superin-
tendency, varies significantly. Women superintendents assume the superintendency at an older age than men. According to Brunner (2000), women hesitate to enter the superintendency until their children are older and less dependent on them. Grogan and Brunner (2005) stated that the thought of familial obligations interfering with career promotions has grown throughout the years. It is believed that women do not become superintendents because they choose to raise their children first before assuming a central office administrative position which is ripe with time consuming responsibilities. Additionally, according to Brunner (2000), in relation to marital status, it is more common for female superintendents to be single in comparison to their male counterparts. Women superintendents are also more likely (56.8 percent) to hold a doctoral degree in education or philosophy, while only 43.7 percent of their male counterparts are equally educated.

The job of the superintendency has become crucial in determining the fate of a school district (Brunner & Björk, 2001). The superintendent initiates, implements and promotes the district’s vision toward achieving academic success of all of its students, evaluates student achievement, takes a crucial part in selecting principals and serves as liaison between the school board and school community. According to Kowalski (1999) “... superintendents must be the primary catalyst for change” (p. 50). A superintendent should assist in educating the school community and be knowledgeable in regard to all of the educational mandates prescribed by the educational governing boards (Sherman & Grogan, 2003).

Quinn (2005) stated that “with nearly one-half of the nation’s superintendents nearing retirement age, this leadership vacuum looms as a critical issue for schoolboards—especially those in big city districts, where superintendents often serve for less than three years” (p. 46). School districts throughout the nation are seeking capable leaders to head their school systems (Manuel & Slate, 2003). A study conducted by Keane and Moore (2001) focused on uncovering the reasons for the steady decline of superintendent applicants throughout the state of Michigan. Seven criteria were identified that positively impact individuals when considering whether to apply for a superintendency position: increase in monetary compensation; encouraging school board relationship with superintendent; acknowledgment of commitment/proficiency; increase in staff support; peaceful working environment; necessity to move; and leadership prospect. Conversely, the following reasons were identified explaining why administrators are not applying for the superintendency: insignificant pay increase; decrease in family time; disharmony with board; occupational politics; and moving undesirability. Having knowledge and understanding of the factors that contribute to satisfaction/dissatisfaction in the superintendency will help identify current trends in the highest district leadership office. Viewing this knowledge from a feminist framework will help researchers and practitioners understand how gender has played into assumptions and practices related to the superintendency.
Women Superintendents

According to the U.S. Labor Department, women in the business world are more readily promoted to positions of executive leadership than are women in the field of education. Thomas (1991) added that “the increasing diversity of the work force is a fact” (p.9). In 2000, fifty percent of the corporate work force was composed of women and forty percent of their top executive positions were filled by women (Walter, 2000). Betz and Fitzgerald (1987) stated that regardless of their occupation “not only are women paid less than men, but they are also less likely to achieve organizational success, as exemplified by promotions, positions of power and autonomy, leadership roles, and so forth” (p.178). According to Wales (2003), some men truly believe that organizational structures such as educational institutions were originally created by men, for their use alone. Curry (2000) added that “The obvious assumption here is that good leadership is essentially masculine. To be a good leader one must be male and born to greatness” (p. 10).

According to Miller, Washington and Fiene (2006), “a patriarchal system prevails in educational administration. Dominant male administrative models create attitudinal and institutional barriers for women seeking leadership positions” (p. 221). Phelps (2002) revealed that as a superintendent she had never experienced blatant sexism from her colleagues. However, she realized that the school board’s sexism often kept her from being selected to interview for other superintendency positions. She stated, “when they see a woman’s name on a résumé, they put that résumé aside” (p. 150). Women must possess the fortitude to endure when seeking a superintendency. Reed and Patterson (2007) maintained that, “Successful female superintendents must be able to persist and resist. They must be able to face adversity and overcome it” (p. 92). In summary, successful female superintendents must be resilient.

Public education in the United States is experiencing a leadership crisis (Quinn, 2005; Grogan & Brunner, 2005). The traditionally male dominated superintendency is experiencing retirements at a faster pace than prospective candidates can assume vacant positions. While the number of women in leadership preparation programs is increasing, “only a fraction of superintendency positions have been filled by women compared to the greater number of women in central office positions” (Brunner & Grogan, 2005, p. 4). The path to the superintendency for 50% of the women is consistent with their male colleagues’ career paths, teacher to principal, principal to central office administrator, central office administrator to superintendent. Grogan and Brunner (2005) added that “many of the participants reported that the boards hired them to be educational leaders rather than managers, and many women superintendents believe the most important reason they were hired was their ability to be instructional leaders” (p. 2). Decision-making and leadership decisions are approached differently by women school administrators (Brunner, 1999, 2000; Grogan, 1996, 1999).
A collaborative style of decision-making is favored by women administrators while an autocratic decision-making style was used infrequently, if at all (Brunner, 2000; Grogan, 1996; Shakeshaft, 1989; Tallerico & O’Connell, 2001).

In order to achieve equitable representation in the office, Grogan (1996) wrote that increasing the number of women in the superintendency requires cooperation and insight regarding how they arrive at and function in the office of superintendent from the women that are currently seated superintendents and those who have retired from the superintendency. In 1996, the New York State Association for Women in Administration (NYSAWA) created a “Task Force” to investigate the creation of a “database” to track the standing, across the state, of women and minority superintendents. Shorter contracts and lower salaries were two factors discovered to contribute to dissatisfaction of women superintendents (Tallerico & O’Connell, 2001, p. 78–79). In addition, as vacancies in the superintendency increase at the same time that women are advancing in numbers in leadership preparation programs, it is apparent that a disconnect exists that leads to questions such as: Where are the women superintendents?; and What are the factors that contribute to the lack of women present in the superintendency and those positions that often lead to the superintendency (i.e., assistant superintendency, secondary principalship)?—research questions that formed the premise for the study reported here.

**Mentoring for Leadership**

“Closely allied with networking as an important part of building support systems for women aspiring to and those in positions of administration is mentoring” (Gupton & Slick, 1996, p. 90). A mentor is one who teaches, coaches, advises, trains, directs, protects, sponsors, guides and leads another individual or individuals (Grogan, 1996; Brunner, 2000; Kochan 2003; Shakeshaft, 1989). Gardiner, Enomoto and Grogan (2000) stated that the term mentor may be used interchangeably with teacher, coach, advisor, trainer, director, protector, sponsor, guide and leader. According to Zhao and Reed (2003) “mentoring is a personal relationship that we experience in many areas of our lives” (p. 399).

Mentors provide their expertise to less experienced individuals in order to help the novices advance their careers, enhance their education, and build their networks. Hargreaves and Fullan (2000) added that mentorship, therefore, involves more than guiding protégés through learning standards and skill sets and extends to providing strong and continuous emotional support (p. 53). “Mentors, then, are those special people in our lives who, through their deeds and work, help us to move toward fulfilling our potential” (Kochan, 2002, p. 283).

According to Glass (2000), “the use of carefully chosen mentors might well be influential in attracting superintendent interns into the profession” (p. 5). Furthermore, “it has been determined that mentors are very success-
ful in influencing superintendents’ careers from beginning to end. Retired superintendents are often eager to mentor aspiring administrators on the topic of the superintendency” (Bjork, 2001, p. 45). Unfortunately, “it is often common practice for women administrators to experience no mentoring throughout their career trajectory” (Gardiner, Enomoto & Grogan 2000, p. 6).

Women and men do not share similar levels of mentoring support (Wales, 2003). Glass (2000) asserted that:

Women also seem to have a less developed mentoring system compared to men. This is important since mentors many times act as go betweens among superintendent candidates and school boards. Mentors also provide in district mobility opportunities for women aspiring to the superintendency. (p. 4)

According to Gardiner, Enomoto and Grogan (2000), “good mentors deliberately mentor women into leadership positions, and are passionately committed to equity and social justice” (p. 62). Once the pendulum swings in favor of employing an equitable number of women administrators, then women will truly be able to identify with their mentors. “As women move into educational leadership, the support of others who share similar principles or experiences can be invaluable in helping women to be supported and believe in themselves” (Gardiner, Enomoto & Grogan, 2000, p. 62).

In educational administration, mentorship has traditionally been cast as an “old boy network.” Gupton and Slick (1996) defined the “old boy network” as consisting of “older male executives and male professors who typically prefer protégés who are junior versions of themselves. Typically, older white males mentored younger white males, with similar ideology, to receive career promotions, which have been facilitated by the mentor’s network connections” (Gardiner, Enomoto & Grogan, 2000, p. 4). “The AASA study of the American superintendent found that two thirds of superintendents had been mentored by other superintendents during their careers and 78% of them had mentored a colleague regardless of district size, age, race or gender” (Brunner & Bjork, 2001, pg. 45). Orr (2006) added that “Generally, most superintendents found networking with current superintendents and former colleagues to be invaluable for support, information, problem solving, and camaraderie” (p. 1394). Mentoring was viewed as a critical element in attaining and maintaining a successful superintendency.

Gardiner, Enomoto and Grogan (2000) wrote that “if the top management is held primarily by men and a few women who may have been inculturated into white, male-administrative norms, women, white and of color, may be at a disadvantage in not only finding a mentor, but in also identifying with and internalizing any mentoring that is given” (p. 6). Pankake, Schroth and Funk (2002) added that “it appears that the sometimes stereotypical women’s ways of nurturing, collaborating, and caring for others are not female, but are, in fact, critical components of successful leadership” (p. 77). Iselt, Brown and Irby (2001) added that women super-
intendents held the availability and use of mentors as a highly important point of emphasis in regard to their career success; however superintendency preparation programs were neglectful in emphasizing its usefulness.

**Methodology**

In an effort to add to the existing body of work on women in leadership, we undertook a secondary analysis of data gained from two research projects with women superintendents and assistant superintendents; both of which were based upon a purposeful sample of women who held the top leadership positions in districts in a southern state. The dearth of women’s voices in the literature on educational leadership, specifically due to lack of mentoring as indicated in the literature, drove us to conduct a secondary analysis of personal narratives of lived leadership experience upon which qualitative inquiry is founded (Denzin, & Lincoln, 1994). Validating gender as a way of looking at leadership and leadership practices (Grogan, 2000), we grounded our study in feminist literature (Harding, 1991; Grogan, 1996, 2000; Lather, 1992; Tallerico, 2000), specifically, feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 1991) with the intent of drawing upon and understanding how women superintendents and assistant superintendents have experienced mentoring. We analyzed data with the specific intent to highlight themes central to mentoring or lack of mentoring.

According to Harding (1991), the point of standpoint epistemology is to:

> ... suggest a way of knowing from the meanings women give to their labors. The search for dailiness is a method of work that allows us to take the patterns women create and the meanings women invent and learn from them. If we map what we learn, connecting one meaning or invention to another, we begin to lay out a different way of seeing reality. (p. 129)

Standpoint theory acknowledges the relationship between experience and knowledge and purports that because there is no objective “truth,” the only valid way to construct knowledge is by connecting it with experience. The intent is to include the voices of those who have been marginalized by society in the process of creating knowledge, that differences will become apparent, and that all knowledge will be valued.

Four women assistant superintendents and six superintendents were interviewed in individual sessions lasting approximately 60–90 minutes in a standardized, open-ended manner (see Appendix A for interview protocol) to allow for freedom in response (Patton, 1990) and to curtail bias through the reduction of variation (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). Seven of the women are Caucasian and three are Hispanic. Their ages ranged from late 30’s to early 70’s, with their average years of experience in education being approximately 25 years. Their district populations ranged from 2,500 students to more than 45,000 and surrounding communities were a mix of rural, urban, suburban.
Interviews were transcribed and analytic memos (Maxwell, 1996) written throughout the research process as a method for making sense of the data and establishing patterns. As is the nature of all qualitative inquiry, findings are not representative of all women. However, information gained is useful to gaining a more complete understanding of women’s lived experiences with mentoring as assistant superintendents and superintendents through truths that were constructed from their own unique voices.

Findings

For the purpose of this report, our analysis focused on those data related to mentoring. The following themes were developed: identified mentors—those individuals deemed by participants as mentors; the lack of women role models (and explanations for why); passive mentoring—descriptions of the mentoring process by participants; confidence boosters; and networking as a form of mentoring.

Identified Mentors

All of the women interviewed were able to identify influences in their early and current lives in the form of family members or close friends that served as sources of inspiration or supporters of their success. And, when asked specifically about mentors who had played significant roles in their career advancement, almost all of the women responded affirmatively that, indeed, certain individuals had been mentors. However, when probed further about these identified mentors, women struggled to describe them in more concrete, action-oriented ways indicating that women have less developed mentoring systems (Glass, 2000) and rarely have the same level of support as men (Wales, 2003). In some cases, the women actually labored to identify names of individuals (i.e., “I know I had mentors... now, let’s see, who were they?”). In other words, women jumped right into discussions about mentoring, but had difficulty sustaining the conversation, indicating, perhaps, some confusion or misunderstanding of the true meaning of mentoring. And, according to Gardiner, Enomoto, and Grogan (2000), it is not uncommon for women to lack mentors. For example, the following comments best represent common descriptions from the women of those they deemed to have been their mentors:

... He was my principal and he would say... you know... I want you to go into administration... I need somebody that can really help me... But, the ironic thing about it is that... once I had completed my, you know I got my certification for administration, when I went to him... his response to me was... well, I know you’re a good classroom teacher, how do I know you’ll be a good administrator?

I had strong mentors. People that believed in me at every level. So it’s interesting and I don’t know if it were my personality or if it were my abilities but somewhere along the line I made a connection with someone who valued me for what I could do and supported me emotionally and professionally I think.
Many of the women talked about principals who had encouraged them to seek leadership roles, but often, as indicated by one of the comments above, individuals identified as mentors served as “voices” of inspiration to go further for, in some cases, selfish reasons (i.e., to help them do their jobs more efficiently). Unfortunately, the “voicing” approach to mentoring was seldom followed by actions. And, current definitions of mentoring indicate that mentoring is active rather than passive and deliberate rather than happenstance including descriptors of the process such as teaching, coaching, advising, promoting, directing, protecting, and guiding (Gardiner, Enomoto & Grogan, 2000; Grogan, 1996; Brunner, 2000; Kochan 2003; Shakeshaft, 1989). And, in the case above, once the woman had attained leadership certification, the principal, whom she still deems as a mentor, questioned her abilities. Furthermore, while the woman who made the second comment above believed she had strong mentors, it was difficult for her to identify these people by name and actually attribute mentoring actions to them.

As conversations around mentoring developed, gendered language emerged and it became evident that most of the women participants identified men rather than women mentors and role models most likely due to the fact that men dominate the position (Glass et. al, 2000) making fewer women available to serve as mentors. For instance, one woman, when asked to identify mentors, had the following to say,

I’ve had very few. Most of [my] mentors have been men. Some by choice, many not by choice. . . . I would say that in my career, because of when I started in the latter 70’s, well middle 70’s, that my mentors for the most part became men. . . . I’d say that I had, maybe one exception . . .

Another had similar comments:

I have to be grateful for my male counterparts who did take the time to teach me. There were few . . . few and far between but they did exist and I’m grateful for them . . . for having taught me what I learned through the years because for me it’s been predominantly male mentors. Very few . . . very few . . . there’s not enough of us.

After verbalizing, and, in some cases, realizing for the first time, that those they deemed as mentors were men, the women took it upon themselves to come up with explanations for why this might be. Women talked about competitiveness between themselves and described it as due to the knowledge that few positions were available to women. One woman put it this way:

. . . It can be kind of competitive too. Women want to prove themselves, so you know, it can pretty tough . . . I think most of all the competition comes when you’re going out for jobs, you know, uh, it’s harder for women, I think, to move up in the superintendency field than it is for men.
In short, while women were eager to identify mentors, they did so in "loose" terms, identified a majority of male mentors, and recognized that they sometimes have higher expectations for themselves and that competition can become fierce among women as positions have, traditionally, been less forthcoming for women.

**Lack of Women Role Models**

During the analysis of the data, the lack of women mentors and role models available to women aspiring to leadership advancement in education (particularly for the secondary principalship and superintendency) became evident. In fact, women spoke not only about the lack of women role models, but the lack of other women to rely on as supportive networks once in leadership positions and perceived reasons as to why women were absent. The following comments best capture their experiences in regard to the lack of women role models:

I think there were only 2 or 3 women at that time... when I started 32 years ago. There were very, very, few women in the administrative roles... it was usually men that were given the position. In fact I was very surprised, when I became an assistant principal because I believe we had one only in secondary... and if I'm not mistaken I may have been the first female in elementary as an assistant to be hired.

... When I became an assistant superintendent at the age of 33 there were very few women if any and I found myself predominantly surrounded by male mentors but I believe wholeheartedly that my presence in human resources allowed for me to bring a certain perspective to the table... I believe I contributed to... to bringing diversity [into] consideration...

When you go to these superintendency conferences and you see the list of superintendents who are retiring... its mainly all men who have held the position for years and I think its slowly turning, you know, but its going to take a while before women are seen as a majority in the superintendency.

The fact that men have had and continue to hold the majority of top positions places women at a disadvantage for finding, identifying, and internalizing mentors and mentoring processes (Gardiner, Enomoto, & Grogan, 2000).

More interesting were the women’s explanations for the lack of women role models and mentors. While society, in general, prides itself for advancements made toward women, without a doubt, the balance of work and family continues to serve as a barrier to women who wish to advance in educational leadership. One woman put it this way,

... When a woman... whenever you become a superintendent you better be able to move. Because back then when I went into administration... they said that you lasted in any position from 3 to 5 years... now, its from 2 to 4... if even 4. And you’d better be able to be mobile... as a woman, you better have a very understanding husband that’s going to be willing to move that often and I think that...
the only ones that perhaps are successful are the ones that are perhaps single and have made it a career because . . . and it’s very hard for a woman because . . . it’s very hard being, you know, having this type of job . . . being a wife . . . being a mother . . . because, you know, you’ve got to be able to give equally or you are not going to be successful.

Another reiterated much of the same and had this to say:

I don’t think we’re ever going to catch up. I think it’s very difficult, especially if you’re married and you have children . . . women sacrifice a lot. They put their own goals aside so that other things can happen in the family and um, and it’s hard to balance and if you don’t do it right . . . you’re never going to get there.

And yet another described feelings this way:

I’ve been an assistant to many male superintendents and they don’t have to worry about a lot of things at home that we have to . . . for example, I’m having to move into a brand new house . . . well I have to do all the little details and I’m searching for a home at the same time that our new superintendent is searching for a home and his wife is taking care of all of that and so . . .

Women are still combating the fact that the notion of an administrator was built around the outdated assumption that men are leaders with wives at home taking care of the family (Brunner, 2000; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Shakeshaft, 1989). For some women, gender was complicated by cultural expectations in regard to what is expected of women when it comes to family obligations:

I think culture has a lot to do with it. I think the Hispanic culture, of course, you know, it’s always been the mothers to take care of the family, you know have dinner on the table and um, I think, for instance my family has . . . it’s been an adjustment, for my mom especially, you know because for my family we eat out a lot compared to when she brought us up, just one generation back, when we had a meal on the table for breakfast, lunch and dinner and she still does that . . . and when she hears . . . well we’re going out to eat . . . she cringes, you know . . . ’cause I don’t cook as often as she does. If my kids get a breakfast at home once a week . . . it’s like wow, mom’s cooking (laughs) compared to what we were brought up with . . . so, ya culture has a lot to do with it. Women are expected to do certain things, in certain cultures and uh to be a leader of a school district is just not one of them. I mean, why would you want that . . . when you have your family?

For this woman, and several other participants, the struggle was not only to balance work and family but to overcome an even larger cultural and generational boundary that had been placed around them. Some of the women deeply reflected on the lack of women mentors and took a critical perspec-
tive when making sense of their realities by identifying gatekeeping mechanisms; specifically, the power of information and experience (or the lack of power when denied information and/or experience). One, in an attempt to come up with a rational explanation, had this to say:

But I think little by little we are finding a few women who do have that capacity to mentor. I think another thing is that we’ve never seen ourselves in those roles because we’ve never had the experience . . . because how can you mentor if you do not have the experience [because you can’t get a leadership position]? So now, when I find myself with 33 years of experience, surely I should have something to offer. But do you have to wait to get all this experience [before you can mentor]?

She questioned why she could not legitimately be considered a role model or mentor until having gained 33 years of experience. Furthermore, as indicated by the comment below, some women are denied access to information essential for advancement in the first place:

. . . Information is power and an organization that doesn’t keep people [all people] informed or doesn’t even want them to be informed, that is cruelty in first order. It shows that you don’t trust them, that you don’t respect them. If you really want to keep someone from growing or getting promoted, don’t let them know what is going on. Keep the information away from them.

And, for this woman, inaccessibility to information served as a barrier that she had to overcome in order to attain a leadership position.

Passive Mentoring
Mentoring, by definition, is action-oriented (see Gardiner, Enomoto & Grogan, 2000; Grogan, 1996; Brunner, 2000; Kochan 2003; Shakeshaft, 1989). However, lacking in the majority of the women’s descriptions of mentors and the process of mentoring were actions or highly action-oriented behaviors. Though most of the women believed they had mentors and had been mentored, few were able to describe the actions of their mentors and fewer were able to describe a process that was anything other than passive. The following comments capture the passive mentoring realities for the women:

And, at dinner one night, she (superintendent) didn’t know me from Adam . . . she said, Anita when are you going to start your doctorate? I’d just gotten the principal job and didn’t even know the whole school . . . and you need to go get your doctorate someday and then you need to be a superintendent . . . She chose me! She believed in me. So, that was very impressionable.

The board and the superintendent . . . they were always plotting my career . . . The board kept asking me to apply.

So, while receiving positive feedback and having someone believe in
one’s capabilities are important, they do not necessarily constitute the act of mentoring. For instance, mentoring entails support, but support does not necessarily result in mentoring. Seemingly women found themselves waiting to be deemed as worthy to pursue leadership positions and, many times, waited to be tapped for roles rather than being proactive and pursuing them independent of nudges from others.

In short, the majority of the women participants, though holding the most coveted leadership positions in their districts (positions that require an immense amount of action) at the time, described themselves as passive participants in mentoring relationships that, for the most part, lacked action-oriented behaviors.

**Confidence Boosters**

As we picked up on the importance of positive feedback and the need for many of the women interviewed to “hear” comments about their own worthiness as leaders or potential leaders, we developed a theme related to mentoring in the form of comments that served as confidence boosters that the women themselves deemed as important enough to be considered as “mentoring.” For example, one woman put it this way when talking about someone she identified as a mentor:

... she [mentor] was wanting me interview and learn how to interview and um, I think she really built up my confidence in how to sell myself and how to articulate what I wanted in life ... to the people I interviewed with ...

Along the same lines, another woman spoke about women’s reluctance to pursue leadership positions in general and how important it is for women to lift one another up,

But, I think women are still more reluctant to adamantly pursue the positions. We give up quicker and I believe that if we are to eventually ... we just have to be out there ... we have to apply ... we have to knock on the door of the consultant search firms. I just don’t think we do it, readily.

Not only do women not hear they have the potential to be effective leaders enough, they sometimes fail to believe it themselves. Clearly, there is a need for formal mentoring avenues for women that help them identify leadership potential in themselves and prepare them to actively pursue positions. For example, one woman described her tendency to mentor other women based on what was fundamentally missing for her in a mentor at a crucial time in her rise to leadership:

I’m mentoring two middle school principals ... I am mentoring a central office person who has had no principalship experience ... but the day to day ... I’m telling her ... I know that you need this experience because of your long term goals and so, I’m providing that kind of feedback. It’s been what I purposely feel
will be my legacy. In the event that I will not have an opportunity at being a superintendent . . . I’ve come to the conclusion that if for whatever reason it can not come to fruition for me . . . it will be through women that hopefully I have contributed to.

Networking as Mentoring
While the majority of the women participants readily identified mentors, one in particular was unable to distinguish anyone who had served in this kind of capacity for her. However, she did contribute to the discussion on mentoring by identifying a support network that had been self-created to mimic a mentor or mentoring body:

No, I don’t have anyone that serves as a mentor here at work, um, but I do have colleagues that are in other districts that I keep in close contact with and we kind of bounce ideas off of each other or if we find ourselves in situations where we need feedback from somebody in the same type of field that we’re in. . . . I know that I can call on them.

So, understanding that support in some form is crucial, this woman created a network of colleagues for herself to act much in the same way an individual mentor might. Furthermore, all of the women were aware of the power inherent in networking and how it serves as a mechanism for advancement for only a few. One woman put it best this way:

And then, starting to try . . . to apply for superintendents’ positions. It’s very difficult to get in the door as a woman. There’s a network and I’m seeing even more and more right now, as far as my applications. You know, a lot of the search teams, they’re male. I think there’s some block, definitely because I’m a female and I don’t have those male networks.

While having a mentor was deemed important by the women, they also knew that mentors without perceived power in the district were not as effective in regard to securing leadership positions as being “networked” with powerful groups and that school boards sometimes screen applicants based on gender so that it is difficult to even get an interview for a superintendent position (Phelps, 2002).

Discussion and Implications
The women participants held powerful positions in school districts as assistant superintendents and superintendents at the time of the study and, regardless of mentoring or the lack thereof, they had proven themselves as effective and capable leaders. But, we can learn from their stories and experiences and understand practices that serve to block other women from becoming educational leaders and make the paths to leadership taken by a future generation of women leaders less problematic. In short, strategies can be enacted to counter the divide in mentoring that currently exists.
First, women need to create networks for themselves that are powerful enough to help them reach critical mass in the most coveted leadership positions. One of the women interviewed stated:

But, I just think for women, we need to continue now . . . what I was saying for example to interim superintendent, we have to not give up. You have to keep on applying over and over and over again. I think women are not used to being rejected as readily.

Formalized networks should be developed by veteran and aspiring women leaders aimed at confidence-building, skill development, and promotion of one another by word-of-mouth. One participant suggested that women should develop their own headhunting group:

Starting a group to be headhunters for women superintendents. . . . Something like that is really important. Maybe all the encouragement you can get. They need to know that you can handle a family and a life.

Second, districts need to develop more formalized ways to recognize potential future leaders. And, if women who are in leadership positions recognize and identify practices that acted as roadblocks for them, they need to actively seek ways to help other women overcome them. Women, and men, should actively seek to identify potential leaders of all types and make it their duty to enhance and promote them.

Third, current leaders, both men and women, should undertake mentoring actions to support aspiring leaders. Mentoring is lackluster without action. Furthermore, it is questionable as to whether mentoring can truly take place without action in the first place. While friendship and collegial support are important, they are not necessarily synonymous with mentoring.

Fourth, prospective women leaders need to be proactive and take charge of their own paths to leadership. Several of the women participants indicated that mentors “discovered” them and made them realize their potential as educational leaders. However, with the number of women in administrative preparation programs growing, these aspiring administrators have the responsibility to be proactive in searching for, securing and utilizing mentors that can assist them in their current positions and sponsor them for higher positions. Women themselves must also be aware about the choices they and their families must make if they are to seek the top positions in educational organizations. Women need to be proactive in seeking the experiences that will lead them to this career goal; that may well mean geographic moves, possible separation from family for extended periods of time, an understanding that all family members will be continuously in the spotlight. It is important that such realities be considered in balance with the desire to achieve the top level position in school districts.

Finally, women must reach critical mass in the top district leadership positions. Women leaders must seek out other women with the potential to be-
come leaders and actively mentor them to take on leadership roles. However, as long as women still believe they cannot hold top leadership positions and successfully have families at the same time, advancement will be stifled, as indicated by the following comment from one of the participants: “You can’t be a superintendent and have small children. Women can’t. I would never advise that.” We must hear from women who successfully balance their home and work lives and we need districts to engage in innovative thinking when it comes to notions of leadership, what leaders look like, and how leadership positions are created. Current women leaders must work with districts and universities alike to promote alternative conceptions of leadership to reform practice and open doors for a large pool of untapped and talented women leaders.

References


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**Appendix A**

**Interview Protocol**

What experiences/people were vital to your development as a leader?
What experiences/people were vital to the attainment of your leadership position (specifically the superintendancy/assistant superintendancy)?

Do you have or have you had someone (mentor) who encourages or supports your career aspirations? Or, was there anyone who particularly influenced you in your career development? Tell me about them and in what ways they have supported you.

How critical was this person (mentor) in helping you attain your current leadership position? What things did they do that were critical in assisting you to secure this position? What was/is the power or networking level of this person?