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Their Work, Identity, and Entry to the Profession

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Their Work, Identity, and Entry to the Profession
Youlanda C. Washington, Stephen K. Miller and Jeanne R. Fiene

This qualitative multi-site case study examines Kentucky’s female superintendents: their professional work, identity, and entry to the role. Data sources were extensive interviews from twelve districts—superintendents, central office administrators, and school board members, plus questionnaires and district documents. Results revealed a web-like organizational structure with collegial, caring empowerment from the center. A child-centered vision of increasing achievement for all students guided their instructional leadership. Generalizability regarding feminine leadership theory is extended to Kentucky, a rural traditional state with comprehensive reform and high-stakes accountability. The feminine style of these superintendents parallels studies of effective district-level instructional leadership.

Women in Superintendency

The superintendency has been and remains one of the bastions of male dominance. Although teaching has traditionally been a feminized profession (cf. Lortie, 1975), leadership at both the district (superintendents) and secondary school (principals) has been reserved for men. Women in either position have been and continue to be exceptions (Glass, 2000; Restine, 1993). The proper order of things has been presumed to be a hierarchical organization in which women’s place is taking care of the children (teaching) while men are in charge (administration). The parallel to the traditional family where the woman is the homemaker and the man is the breadwinner reflects deeply-seated mores (Ortiz & Marshall, 1988) which continue to have a powerful influence on conservative values (cf. Tucker, 2004).

Shakeshaft (1989) contended that studying leadership from the perspective of women and their experiences is an initial step in bringing about a transformation of theory and practice (for a more comprehensive review, see Miller, Washington, & Fiene, 2006b). Although there is growing consensus on the findings on women’s leadership, the field is still limited in generalizability. While previous studies suggest the overlap of the feminist style and district instructional leadership models (cf. Miller, Washington, & Fiene, 2006a), research which examines women’s leadership in unique or different settings is still sorely needed. Because the advent of the femi-
nine model of leadership coincides with the current era of school reform, it is worth examining the concordance between these two perspectives. A closer examination of women superintendents’ experiences could shed insight on changes that are occurring in the traditional male world of school administration.
Purpose and Research Questions

Kentucky represents an ideal setting to investigate the convergence of women's school administration and evolving leadership by superintendents under conditions of comprehensive reform. This study combines the following contextual features: (a) Kentucky is a largely rural state where traditional values and male leadership still predominate; (b) there are no previous studies of Kentucky's female superintendents; (c) the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) represents extensive reforms, arguably among the most comprehensive of all states; (d) the instructional milieu is shaped by a high stakes, value-added accountability model in which achievement is expected to increase over time; and (e) membership on Site Based Decision Making Councils, with legislated hiring powers for local schools, is predominantly female whereas school boards are still dominated by males.

Thus the purpose of this study is to provide insight into the experiences of women superintendents in the state of Kentucky. Given the unique conditions that exist in Kentucky (rural context, extensive reform), this research extends generalizability concerning women in the role of the superintendency. Studying leadership through their eyes and experiences may help alter societal and cultural perceptions about female administrators. Concomitantly, this study provides needed data on women as pivotal actors in comprehensive school reform.

Over the past several decades, scholars have created an important body of feminocentric literature on organizational behavior and educational administration: how women fit into educational organizations, their leadership style, and biases against female school administrators (Bjork & Rogers, 1999). The following research questions address these issues regarding women superintendents in the context of Kentucky reform:

1. What patterns, themes, or trends characterize the professional work of female superintendents?
2. What strategies do female superintendents use in establishing their professional identity?
3. What are the keys to successful entry into the role of the superintendent?

Women’s Leadership and the Instructional Imperative

Women are interpersonal experts who network well when given the opportunity (Aburdene & Naisbitt, 1992). Their socialization helps them balance demands and utilize multi-dimensional tools for organizational success. Helgesen (1990) reported that women have succeeded by employing feminine strengths such as supporting, encouraging, teaching, opening communication, soliciting input, and creating a positive, collegial work
environment. These skills and traits are essential to succeed in the feminist model, in which leadership is centered in a web-like organizational structure as opposed to a more isolated, top down model (Fennell, 1999). For example, women urban superintendents used a collegial-collaborative approach in these highly bureaucratic, urban organizations (Wesson & Grady, 1994). These women had been hired to be change agents and consensus builders; they saw their strengths in terms of connectedness and utilized their holistic, visionary ability to create a power base that was caring and nurturing to the organization.

The shift in leadership style associated with women parallels the larger changes in school administration (Murphy, 1993). Restructuring schools involves understanding the social, political, and legal context within which schools operate and then redefining school programs and practices in ways that optimize student learning. Wesson and Grady (1994) indicated that the complexity of schools creates a need for a systemic approach to problems: “educational leaders . . . [must] move away from the traditional, hierarchical, control-and-command environment that is pervasive in many schools today” (p. 413).

In a qualitative study, Ortiz (1991) indicated that the strength of the women superintendents lay in their ability to (a) create a vision, (b) monitor instruction and assessment, and (c) work and communicate effectively with their school boards. Ortiz also reported that they built their districts on the concepts of consensus and collaboration. Gupton and Slick (1996) stated that with trends toward participatory leadership and decentralization of power on the upswing, women’s tendency toward a more integrative leadership style may actually be coming into vogue. The premium on increased achievement in the current era of accountability reinforces this conclusion. For example, Murphy’s (1994) study of superintendents whose districts were improving under the KERA reforms suggests that the practices of these instructional leaders were similar to the style of female superintendents.

The Kentucky Context
Ann Fennell (personal communication, January 30, 2000) indicated that Kentucky’s history of women in the superintendency is sketchy. The first female superintendent was Nannie Catlett in 1897. Other women have served as superintendents in the Commonwealth, but locating their numbers and percentages for a particular year or geographic location is problematic since data were not compiled by gender. This difficulty in tracing the history and statistics on female leaders is referred to by Shakeshaft (1989, p. 21) as a “conspiracy of silence” about women’s representation in school administration.

Kentucky is a rural state in which traditional rural values remain highly influential. Little (1998) found that these rural values clearly influence the hiring process; perceived “fit” with local norms is used as a filter to ensure that candidates match the characteristics of the district. These traditions,
honoring old boy networks, have resulted in few women superintendents being given the opportunity to lead.

The reforms embedded within the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 may be changing this (cf. Steffy, 1993). One provision legislated formation of school councils for all public schools, and 67% of council members are now women (Scollay & Logan, 1999). This is almost double the 34% of school board members that national statistics show to be women (Gupton & Slick, 1996). This change in the percentage of women in positions of power constitutes an important context since school councils select principals and are involved in other hiring decisions. In the past, the choice of principals and other personnel was strictly a task of the superintendent. The expectations of reform for ever increasing levels of accountability and student achievement gains have caused teacher-led councils to think about what makes a good principal. Many councils have concluded that instructional expertise should be a major requirement for administrative jobs (Scollay & Logan, 1999). Such changes potentially represent new “keepers of the gate” for entry into all leadership levels. But entering the field of administration does not guarantee that those who are admitted are able to buck the pressures that have produced the traditional managerial style. Old boy networks and rural values that encourage “fitting in” (Little, 1998) have not gone away.

The Kentucky Education Reform Act produced a shift in the public education system, changing the role of the superintendent and assistant superintendent. Generally considered one of the most comprehensive packages of state school reform, the centerpiece of KERA is a value-added standards-based accountability model. The statewide curriculum was developed with input from stakeholder groups throughout the Commonwealth (Council on Performance Standards, 1989; Steffy, 1993). The Division of Instructional Leadership developed clear guidelines that govern all leaders in the Commonwealth, especially new superintendents. The goal was high performing leaders who develop a vision for increasing student performance, facilitate shared decision making, and empower the skills and competencies of others.

With Kentucky reforms shifting from management to instructional leadership, Murphy (1994) examined the role of successful superintendents under KERA. The forty-eight participants articulated change in terms of leading by consensus rather than by command, facilitating rather than controlling. The superintendents viewed restructuring as a process that had caused them to rethink their roles. Murphy concluded that the superintendent in tomorrow’s schools would (a) orchestrate from the background, (b) enhance participation in the decision-making process, and (c) lead reform efforts, thus empowering through consensus and collaboration instead of traditional hierarchical management.

Murphy (1994) confirmed that successful Kentucky superintendents were responding to the mandates of KERA, shifting from a management focus to instructional leadership. But Murphy’s sample was purposefully
selected, based on pre-identified increases in district level student outcomes. It would clearly be invalid to conclude that all Kentucky superintendents were behaving in ways similar to these exemplars. As Sarason (1990) notes, old structures continue to exert influence and traditions inure, consistent with the fact that not all Kentucky districts have been able to improve their achievement levels (Poggio, 2000).

Methods

Qualitative methods (Merriam, 1988) provide in-depth understanding of complex factors such as the development of a professional identity or strategies that facilitate attaining the superintendency successfully. In this qualitative multi-site case study of female superintendents, both emic and etic perspectives were examined (Harris, 1999). Interviews with these women capture their emic experience; triangulation with other role groups and district documents provides the etic cross-cultural scientific perspective. Both are needed when the topic is fraught with long standing practice, steeped in unquestioned ideological and theoretical frameworks. Because the subjects themselves have been immersed in this hegemonic power structure, individuals often accept the status quo at an unexamined, taken-for-granted level (cf. Schutz, 1970). This is likely when discussing women in leadership, long a bastion of male dominance.

Sources of Data and Procedures

The primary source of evidence is a set of in-depth semi-structured interviews. Although women superintendents are the focal point of this investigation, supplemental interviews were conducted with two other role groups—central office administrators and board members—to provide distinct but overlapping insight as to the professional behavior and leadership style of these women. Background information (Superintendent’s Questionnaire) and documents from four categories—Letters and Memorandums, Policy Implementation, Minutes, and News Articles—were collected during the interview.

Thus five separate sources of data were utilized. For each, an instrument was constructed based on previous research in the field and issues specific to the current study. These instruments—Interview Guides for the Superintendent, Administrative Personnel, and School Board Member; Superintendent’s Questionnaire; and Document Analysis Protocol—can be seen in Washington (2002, Appendices D, L, M, C, and O, respectively). A pilot study guided feedback on the interview schedules and Superintendent’s Questionnaire. Ten different superintendents, central office administrators, and board members were purposefully selected based on knowledge, experience, and availability. Input was solicited regarding communication (clarity, length, possible effects on motivation) and substance (content, areas omitted, duplication). Revisions were based on feedback.
At the time of the research there were 16 female superintendents in Kentucky. All were approached, a census of this limited population. Twelve agreed to the study. (Ongoing personnel issues or other extenuating circumstances precluded participation by the others.) Nine of these were from small rural districts, one from a large urban district, and two from suburban communities. Twelve central office personnel and 10 board members (two were unable to coordinate interview schedules) completed the study’s subjects (34 interviews in all).

Following approval by the university’s human studies committee, a list of female superintendents was obtained from the Kentucky Department of Education. Several contacts with the superintendents were required for entry, mailing the Superintendent’s Questionnaire, arranging for pick up of documents, and scheduling interviews. Consent forms were signed at the beginning of the interview. After obtaining permission from the superintendents, a similar process was followed for administrative personnel and school board members. Whenever possible, the board members had served during the superintendent’s hiring.

The interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed. Superintendent sessions lasted approximately two hours while the other groups took 1–2 hours. The second author conducted these interviews, taking notes during the process. Some follow-up sessions were required, done by phone if possible. All raw data have been secured, to be stored for a period of five years.

Data Analysis
The research questions (RQ) guided the data analysis. All items on the different instruments were mapped to the research questions. Following Anfara, Brown, and Mangione (2002), five separate matrices were created, one for each instrument, each divided by the three research questions, further subdivided by the items/questions under each RQ. For example, the Interview Guide for Superintendents had four questions which referred to Research Question 1.

Once the matrices were completed, the data were analyzed one instrument at a time. The research questions provided a priori categories for examining patterns. However, the researchers searched for additional themes and events that may not have been anticipated in the research questions. In the actual analysis, items from each instrument were examined separately, these responses were grouped across the research questions, and these in turn were aggregated across the different instruments. Throughout, care was taken to balance the emic perceptions of the superintendents themselves with the etic data from the other two role groups, the questionnaire, and the supplementary documents. Consideration of these differing perspectives was crucial in instances where there appeared to be inconsistencies in the responses of the women superintendents versus the central office administrators and board members.
Results and Discussion

This analysis of women superintendents presents the findings in some detail. At the end of each research question, the discussion provides a summary of the overall database, aggregated across specific questions and the five different sources of data. This links relevant prior research and policy-relevant issues to the current data, an approach consistent with both qualitative analysis and limitations of space.

Research Question 1, Professional Work

The responses from the Superintendent’s Questionnaire revealed the centrality of instructional leadership and change agentry to these women’s professional work. Of particular note was the fact that all of these superintendents were hired after the KERA reforms of 1990. Yet 10 of the 12 indicated that KERA had not influenced their leadership style. Of importance was that they had developed their feminine style of leadership prior to KERA.

Interviews reinforced this emphasis, with the additional priority for children. These three traits were typically interwoven. As these women commented on collaboration, it was clear that they were committed to involving their employees and giving them the responsibility to make decisions. But only to a point. Those actions had to be based on the welfare of students. As one woman noted, “I am an enabler [who] removes barriers to help people do their jobs for the sake of children.” Another indicated, “I encourage everyone to have a say, but have no problem with reminding them that the buck stops here!”

Leadership skills were inseparable from priorities. The mandate for instructional leadership was reflected in the reorganization of the central office: focus on curriculum and instruction. Other departments such as personnel or finance, so central to traditional administrative management, were subordinated to the emphasis on student learning. “Children first” was more than a slogan. Data indicated that these women spent 35% of their time visiting schools, participating in school activities, or working directly with personnel who served the schools. This compared to 25% on administrative tasks, 20% on community relations and involvement, 15% on planning, and 5% on self (renewal, reading, professional growth).

The question on change again demonstrated the overlaps between priorities (instruction and children) and the collaborative skills of the change agent.

“I lead and manage based on research. I must keep the vision and mission [increasing achievement for all students] before us and never change just to be changing.”

“I involve people in the change process. . . . It is important to communicate with people. . . . The plan I use is to hold monthly meetings with each stakeholder [group, even] a student advisory board. . . . During these meet-
ings I answer questions and communicate where the district is going and why.”

Interviews with the central office personnel in these districts echoed the superintendents’ voices. The question on leadership style elicited responses on the ability of these women to build capacity, delegate, empower, even as they maintained their proactive stance for children. One comment summed up this trend, “She is knowledgeable, insightful, and able to tell you what is going on in schools because she is in the schools.”

Several of the administrative personnel focused on communication skills. Apparently a criticism of these women in their districts was that they were too solicitous, that they were “pleasers” rather than leaders. But these interviews indicated how false that notion was: “She has the ability to be courteous instead of rude and this is a new twist in the superintendency; therefore people take it [wrongly] as her being a pleaser.” Another said, “People are not used to a superintendent working with you and allowing you to take ownership in the organization, [so] it looks like she is a ‘pleaser,’ but in reality she is a true leader.”

Similarly these central office administrators emphasized the priorities on instruction, children, and compassion for people. “What a change! . . . We have someone who does not belong to a good ol’ boy network and she isn’t afraid to do what is right for students, especially if it means firing a coach!”

The data from the school board member interviews reflected a somewhat different focus. These responses centered around the competence and skills that they required in a superintendent who could lead, not just manage. Foremost was a visionary leader with a strong instructional background, a person who could bring the district and the community together on the importance of increasing student achievement. Specific knowledge of content, KERA (the Kentucky Education Reform Act) and community relations were vital. Beyond the details, the summary comments were striking: “We were impressed with her from the moment she walked into the room. . . . She modeled confidence.” “She was the best candidate.” “She was the top candidate off paper, top person from the heart.” “We selected the candidate that could take us beyond what the previous superintendent had done. It just happened to be a female.”

Finally, the district documents that were reviewed reflected the underlying knowledge of policy and issues and the concomitant business-like atmosphere in which meetings, communication, and the daily rhythms of the district were carried out. The attention to compliance with regulations and the law were obvious, from EEO and anti-discrimination policies to best practice in the instructional milieu. More clearly, all of the minutes, district communications, and media coverage reflected the district’s vision of academic growth and well being for children and the implementation of those priorities in the district’s strategic mission.

In sum, four patterns emerged from the data (surveys, interviews, and mined documents) related to the professional work of female superinten-
dents: (a) an instructional focus for the district; (b) professional knowledge and experience; (c) putting children first, and (d) being a change agent. All participants saw the superintendents as instructional leaders who were teachers at heart. These women used their experience as teachers to model effective instructional strategies. These skills were evident as the administrative personnel and board members shared how the superintendent led retreats, workshops, and even taught parent sessions. Throughout the interviews from all three roles there emerged a consistent vision of promoting student achievement and helping all children become successful. The superintendents articulated their success in terms of student achievement instead of building projects.

These women displayed a strong sense of professional knowledge and experience. They were constantly involved in their own teaching-learning process. A wealth of experiences helped them promote instructional change in order to accomplish their vision and goals. The superintendents’ extensive knowledge of the Kentucky Educational Reform Act was revealed in the data. This background helped them develop strategic plans that would support students and district outcomes. The work of the superintendents in this area was consistent with Murphy’s (1994) study on the changing role of the superintendent in Kentucky’s reform movement. These women perceived themselves and were viewed as having the experience to orchestrate from the background, enhance participation, and manage reform.

Each superintendent articulated a “children first” attitude; their desire to serve as superintendent was based on making improvements for children. Ultimately, these women saw themselves as being proactive guardians for children while extinguishing fires that could diminish the probability of success. The administrative personnel and board members confirmed that the superintendent kept the concept of children first at the forefront of decision making, even when it required going against the local culture to dismiss/fire an employee. “What is best for children?” was the driving force for all meetings, policies, and decisions.

The superintendents viewed themselves as change agents with the ability to mold a district through their web-like leadership skills. The women saw themselves as risk takers, facilitating change to insure employee as well as student growth. Their actions dovetail with their instructional leadership. Their new tenure began by reorganizing the central office to align with instruction. Key to their success was the articulation of a powerful vision and mission on the priority of student achievement. Being a change agent reflected relational skills, valuing people, and empowering others to make the best decisions for children. They were sensitive to the people within the organization. The other two role groups described them as being able to delegate, build capacity, collaborate, communicate effectively, and respect people for their decisions and their right to disagree. These superintendents were viewed as individuals who genuinely cared for the people in the organization.
These four patterns are consistent with themes that have emerged from other studies of women’s leadership (Brown & Irby, 1995; Heller, 1982; Shakeshaft, 1995; Wesson & Grady, 1994). The women’s instructional focus carried over from their days as teachers, including seeing themselves as learners. The instructional focus was reflected in their career choices and experiences (curriculum centered). The overlapping of these patterns can be seen in the drive to prioritize children, a hallmark of their professional work. Their knowledge and priorities became the “what” of their “how” change skills.

The instructional priorities and collaborative style displayed by these women provide further confirmation of the feminine model of leadership. But there is another interpretation for these data. The instructional leadership literature (cf. Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Sergiovanni, 1990; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004) has been primarily focused on the actions of principals and school leadership (cf. Cotton, 2003; Hallinger & Murphy, 1986; Ogawa & Hart, 1985), in large part in the context of the school effectiveness research (see Brookover et al., 1982; Levine & Lezotte, 1990; Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993).

But increasingly, instructional leadership has examined the role of the superintendent at the level of the district. Murphy (1994) specifically studied successful superintendents under the KERA accountability model of value-added increases in achievement (cf. Miller, 1992). Murphy’s findings and other more recent work (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2003; Petersen, 1999) suggest that the instructional leadership of successful superintendents essentially mirrors the behaviors of the women in this study. What is striking about this finding is that the women in this study attributed their leadership style not to KERA, but to their background, priorities for children, experience as teachers and with curriculum, and beliefs in involving others (collaboration) in getting things done. In other words, their feminine style preceded KERA but matched the developing profile of research on effective district (superintendent) instructional leadership.

Research Question 2, Professional Identity
The professional identity of these women superintendents involved (a) personal characteristics and (b) leadership traits. From the interviews, the women identified personal factors as deeply embedded values, non-alterable because they are rooted within the inner-self. Their values, beliefs, and principles were articulated as the unseen core of their being. These women believed that character is ingrained and surfaces in their daily walk and dealings with the organization. Much like the writings of Covey (1991) and Maxwell (1999), these female superintendents suggest ideals consistent with a strong internal moral compass. The following characteristics were indicated as important to women’s professional leadership: (a) integrity, (b) honesty, (c) trustworthiness, (d) empathy, (e) work ethic, (f) being level headed, (g) being stable and strong, and (h) displaying perseverance.
Responses from the superintendent interviews give substance to this list of traits. “Being truthful, open, and honest in all dealings with all people is what makes or breaks your character.” “I don’t want to be judgmental, but I have found that men appear to be empathic. Women tend to be more empathic—just great listeners who can put themselves in the other’s place and feel what they may be going through in life.” “Fairness is a major characteristic that must be visible. You have to be fair to your worst enemy—every time!”

The central office administrators echoed the importance of character traits: “Her greatest accomplishment was bringing integrity to the district. She walks the walk.” However, they were more inclined to talk about the level-headedness of these superintendents, especially in the midst of conflict.

“When people get hot at a board meeting she remains so calm and smiles. . . . As for me sitting there, I would get red in the face and just want to go slap that person, . . . but I guess that is just the warrior mentality of a man. I guess women are just peace makers.”

“She stays calm, takes notes, and poses questions back to the person that put the burden directly on that person.”

The board members who were interviewed brought up personal characteristics. One indicated that his superintendent was an extremely moral and ethical person. Others commented likewise, “She brought a great deal of integrity to the district. People have respected us for cleaning up our image.” “She genuinely knows and cares for the community and its people.” “They [the people] like her because she has no hidden agendas. She is straight with them especially as she articulates what’s best for students.”

The board members, like the central office administrators, also valued the ability to diffuse conflict. As one noted, “She knows how to contain issues in an appropriate manner. . . . She has her facts and will take on anyone when it comes to right and wrong or when it involves children. Oh, please! Watch out when it comes to children!”

The inner values of these females provided the guidance needed for their climb to the superintendency and sustained them in the position. The women related that these qualities emerged during the difficult times they faced as the CEO of their districts. Among these qualities, integrity was considered the most important aspect of their personal identity. The other characteristics round out and complement integrity.

That these women identified their basic values and principles (their personal identity) as the foremost part of their overall professional identity is not surprising. This finding is consistent with Dorn, O’Rourke, and Papalewis (2001) who conducted a qualitative study seeking the leadership qualities found in women in administrative positions. Of the nine qualities identified, five were mentioned by the female superintendents in the current study. Similarly, the general consensus of Ortiz (1991) and Shakeshaft (1995) was that these inner qualities are a primary strength of female superintendents.
Regarding leadership traits, the professional identities articulated were virtually indistinguishable from the themes of professional work and priorities that were identified under Research Question 1. Those factors are not discussed further.

**Research Question 3, Entry to the Profession**

All groups articulated four keys for successful entry to the superintendency: (a) being well-prepared for the position, (b) ability to manage conflict, (c) ability to address finances, and (d) developing supportive networks.

Based on the interviews, being well-prepared included the proper educational background, coupled with relevant experiences. The superintendents’ focus on education began at an early age. The importance of obtaining a quality education was modeled by their parents and teachers. Education was defined as lifelong learning and was divided into two segments—academics and life lessons. Their school achievement was driven by their love of learning, from reading and writing (fundamentals) to fine tuning their skills (graduate studies). This life-long reflection was demonstrated in the degree attainment of these 12 women. Four had doctorates, one had 90 hours beyond the bachelor’s, six had a Rank I degree (equivalent to bachelors plus 60), and one had a master’s.

Consistent with their drive to excel academically was their focus on understanding the value of their experiences. The superintendents related circumstances that shaped their lives. Every opportunity to excel through hobbies, activities, or events in their personal and professional life became a stepping stone to the superintendency. These women utilized workshops, seminars, courses, inservice on district curriculum, district projects, and professional organizations to learn about educational issues, leadership traits, and networking opportunities. These activities led to personal as well as professional growth. Particularly noticeable was the extent of community involvement in the background of these women—board chair person, city council member, and social service agencies among others.

Despite being able to leverage these experiences into professional mobility, the career path of these women still reflected the elementary/student services orientation that is commonplace for female administrators: four began as elementary principals, one as an assistant principal, three as elementary supervisors, and four in special programs or instructional assessment. Ten of the twelve (83%) were first hired in small districts (300–3000). The other two led the second and third largest districts in the state. Although this may seem that female superintendents are primarily limited to smaller districts, these are typical districts in Kentucky, one of the most rural states in the country.

Managing conflict was perceived as vital to being considered a serious candidate for the superintendency. These female leaders relied on their col-
laborative skills to enhance their ability to resolve problems. They saw
their ability to listen and engage all parties in productive discussion as a
valued tool. The women incorporated their intuitive sense, pro-active be-
havior, and relational skills into conflict resolution. Particularly important
was the ability to handle tough personnel decisions. All three role groups
voiced the belief that this was a "male" strength and that many females
were perceived as too weak to handle difficult personnel cases.

These communication skills were nested in a general approach to deci-
sion making: combining the ability to relate to people with a strongly artic-
ulated set of goals for the district. Decisions were based on what was best
for children and instructional priorities. As one central office administrator
put it:

She brought departments together for the first time and assisted us in seeing that
instruction was important and that resources needed to be used to assist instruc-
tion. She also solicited input from each person or department because it allowed
for diversity to remain on the table.

Underlying these skills was a fundamental respect for people—an obvi-
ous strength when dealing with the disagreements that arise when people
with different agendas and backgrounds have to share responsibilities
within a school or the district. One central office person put it this way:
"The superintendent has always said that you are only as good as the people
you have around you so it is important to treat people with a level of respect,
care, and concern." Another simply said, "She values people!" This was
echoed by a school board member who contrasted the lack of respect to-
ward others by the former superintendent: "He constantly used both words
and writing (lengthy evaluations or letters to employees) that had a
put-down overtone to them. Now we have someone who cares and treats us
with respect."

Similarly, the ability to manage finances was perceived as a male strong-
hold. The women revealed that they understood the importance of budget-
ing decisions; they sought every opportunity to participate on a committee
to learn about monetary operations. Yet they were not impeded when they
did have limits to their fiscal capabilities. In such instances they used a col-
laborative mode of leadership that brought people to the table to discuss
district finances. The results of this people-oriented approach to finance
were clearly positive. One superintendent noted, "One contribution I be-
lieve is a success is the improvement of our buildings and grounds. Great
gains have been made in renovating our schools . . ." Another woman re-
ported on community feedback: "I am told quite often 'thank you' for
fixing our financial problem."

Implied within this emphasis on financial management was the ability to
prioritize goals. Several central office personnel spoke of the ability of
these women superintendents to get a grip on the district as they realigned
spending to support instruction. One board member simply said, "I say hats
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off to her for taking charge and cleaning up the financial mess in our district.” More nuanced was the perspective of the board member who understood that finances interacted with communication skills:

We had tried for four years to get the previous superintendent to see a tax levy was needed. He did not get to first base. She came in and handled the situation with ease. All during that time, she was addressing the issue with the media and the community. When the community went to the polls to vote, it was passed by a landslide. It was due to her integrity and financial background.

Finally, these women recognized the importance of developing supportive professional networks in their lives. They cultivated relationships with their peers while keeping one eye on those in leadership who could serve as sponsors or mentors. The superintendents articulated an intuitive drive as they differentiated between those deemed as leaders versus managers—a quality needed to move a district forward successfully.

These women described mentors as both professionals and family members who helped structure their identity beginning at an early age. As one woman put it, “A good husband and strong family members help.” Professional role models were observed from two perspectives. The first was negative, inferring what not to do from examples of not prioritizing children. One woman said, “I looked at what the superintendent did in my old district and I said to myself, ‘I can do a better job that that.’” The other was positive, supporting teaching and learning and creating success for all students. Finally, these women expressed gratitude for mentors who helped them master the art of balancing different interest groups. Ranging across former teachers, principals, business leaders, board members, and superintendents, these confidantes were instrumental in their internalizing a basic insight: expending political capital through the articulation of the “children first” principle is essential, particularly since various stakeholders seemed to have a different understanding of how this priority related to their own interests.

These findings mirrored the research of Pavan and Robinson (1991), Logan (1998), and Grogan (1996) regarding preparation for educational leadership. This study provides additional support for the trend that women are aligning themselves with two primary considerations of school boards. First, experience with tough managerial decisions centered on conflict and balancing the agendas of various stakeholders via the children-first principle. Second, consistent with Glass (2000) on the increase of females with a doctorate, these women valued education and advanced degrees as a strategy for obtaining the superintendency. The data on developing supportive networks was consistent with McLean (1994), Brown and Merchant (1993), Brown and Irby (1995), and Glass. Positive networks served a dual purpose: first, in terms of upward mobility, and second, after obtaining the position, navigating political waters as the women balanced competing interest groups.
Conclusion

This study generally confirms the tenets of the emerging model of feminine leadership: working from the center of a web-like organizational structure; employing a collegial, supportive, empowering style; establishing a district culture of increasing achievement through their instructional leadership; creating a positive environment for change; justifying tough personnel issues on the basis of “children-first”; developing supportive networks to address political and budgetary issues; and staying true to their core values of integrity and caring about people. This contrasts with the traditional top-down model of male management typically associated with school superintendents.

The symmetry of these findings with previous research raises the issue of generalizability. This study extends the literature on women’s educational administration in a number of important ways. First, schooling in America is a state, not federal responsibility. Considerable differences exist from state to state, and no previous studies had been conducted on Kentucky’s female superintendents. Second, Kentucky is a rural state with traditional values. It cannot be presumed that emerging feminist leadership in more urban environments necessarily extends to a rural southern state, yet these findings confirm that trend. Third, KERA is perhaps the most comprehensive among state reform packages with a strong value-added accountability system. Most of the research on women’s leadership has been conducted prior to or in settings less dominated by strong accountability mandates. The demands for increased achievement could easily lead to an increase in hierarchical decision making. Yet these women demonstrated their commitment to leadership through empowerment, not top-down force.

The fact that this research was conducted in Kentucky is particularly important. KERA represents a paradigm shift in schooling. Requirements for the superintendency have changed from providing traditional order and discipline, with focus on maintaining stability in personnel and financial matters and ensuring a strong extracurricular program (especially sports), to a value-added focus on increasing the level of student achievement over time. No longer is it presumed that district achievement is determined by the demographic characteristics of the community. Instead, organizational effectiveness is predicated upon how much the human capital of the entering students is enhanced by curricular and instructional practices.

The current study confirms that the feminine model (priorities for children, instructional focus, and empowering leadership that cultivates respect through collaborative human relations) is consistent with the leadership required to be successful under KERA. But this research does not imply, and should not be construed as, an endorsement that only women behave and lead in this manner. Murphy’s (1994) work suggests that successful superintendents in Kentucky are engaging in instructional leadership that very much mirrors women’s approach to leadership: empowering
changes in curriculum and instruction to improve school outcomes and moving away from the top-down, traditional style of management. Thus the "feminine style" may well not be the sole province of women (cf. Gupton & Slick, 1996).

In a traditional rural state, these women seem to have altered perceptions about female leadership, at least in their own districts. They articulate a children first, instructionally-based, collaborative style of leadership. They utilize the skills of others, especially in areas such as finance, to supplement any weakness that they may have. They seem willing to make tough, unpopular personnel decisions, justified by what is best for children. Within the context of Kentucky's high-stakes accountability, these pioneering women superintendents are demonstrating their feminine leadership—helping children achieve value-added growth.

Recommendations

Future research on women superintendents should focus on the nexus between (a) women's leadership style and (b) the evolution of educational administration as moving away from a hierarchical model of managerial efficiency to instructionally oriented, change focused, empowering leadership. The convergence of these two fields raises a number of questions (cf. Miller et al., 2006a). Interestingly, the need for understanding these issues was articulated just as much by the central office administrators and school board members as by the superintendents.

Does women's leadership style differ by effectiveness, i.e., do more and less successful women (in terms of accountability outcomes) engage in different practices and approaches? Does the accountability model make a difference, i.e., is the evolving instructional leadership model sensitive to differences in the parameters of accountability? These questions cry out for comparative studies across states, types of accountability, levels of district effectiveness, and gender. The current case study did not address any of these factors directly.

Other useful research would include "pipeline" studies to determine the number of females (and other minorities) at various stages of the career path to the superintendency. Of particular concern is whether the traditional patterns (female-elementary principal-central office staff versus male-coach-secondary principal-line administrator) have been broken. Discrimination in hiring, e.g., the continuing existence of "old boy" ties, might be addressed through network analysis studies. A related issue is the gender imbalance of boards of education. This could be addressed indirectly by examining hiring practices of SBDM councils (increased percentage of females) versus school boards (lower percentage females). Finally, recruitment practices of school boards and search firms are relevant (e.g., Chase & Bell, 1994).

All of these issues represent structural inequalities in the larger context of education. It is not likely that the meager number of female superinten-
dents will change much as long as these underlying inequities remain. Consistent with Rogers' (1971) work on the S-curve phenomenon in the adoption of innovations (in this case female superintendents), true equal opportunity will not be achieved so long as the hiring of women continues to reflect pioneer status rather than all districts searching for, as Steele (1990) notes, the best person based on qualifications and the “content of our character.”

References


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