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Voices of Resilience from Successful Female Superintendents

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School superintendents work in increasingly high stakes environments full of adversity. The purpose of this study was to examine how female superintendents apply strategies to confront adversity and become more resilient in the process. Fifteen female superintendents in New York State were interviewed. The findings about resilient leadership are reflected in five action themes that emerged from the data: (a) remain value-driven, not event-driven; (b) comprehensively assess past and current reality; (c) stay positive about future possibilities; (d) maintain a base of caring and support; and (e) act on the courage of your convictions. The study also reports on participant comments about the distinction between resilient female superintendents and male superintendents.

Purpose of Study

School superintendents today more than ever work in an increasingly high stakes environment full of adversity. Even though adversity is an inevitable part of the job, most superintendents do not have formal professional development training in the area of overcoming adversity. They have few opportunities to learn from others who have overcome adversity, applied strategies to move through the experience, and came out on the other side of adversity in a better place.

The purpose of the study was to examine how female superintendents apply strategies to move ahead in the face of adversity and become more resilient in the process.

In this study, resilience means using energy productively within a school environment to achieve goals in the face of adverse conditions. Resilience does not fluctuate on a daily or weekly basis. Instead, resilience reflects a pattern of how individuals view their current reality and how they assess probability for influencing the future.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is drawn from the work of Patterson and colleagues during the past eight years. In Resilient School
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Leaders, Patterson and Kelleher (2005) developed three components of a resilience framework: (a) the resilience cycle that people and groups experience as they move from adversity to growth; (b) the resilience dimensions of interpretation, capacity, and actions; (c) the resilience strengths exemplified by resilient school leaders. This conceptual framework served as the theoretical basis for the current study.

Literature Review

Resilience

Wikipedia (n.d.) defines resilience as “the ability to recover from (or to resist being affected by) ‘some shock, insult, or disturbance. However, it is used quite differently in different fields.’” Mangham, McGrath, Reid, and Stewart (1995) believe that “this capability develops and changes over time, is enhanced by protective factors, and contributes to the maintenance or enhancement of health” (p. 3). Janas (2002) noted that “resilience forms the foundation for many other positive character skills, including patience, tolerance, responsibility, compassion, determination, commitment, self-reliance, and hope” (p. 117). Christman and McClellan (2005) summarize the ideas of many scholars and view resilience as an adaptive and coping trait that involves the ability to overcome adversity. Yet it is clear that most definitions emphasize the strengths of the individual rather than the specific adversity encountered.
The concept of resilience has been explored in-depth by Daryl Conner, an author who heads an Atlanta-based consulting firm which specializes in facilitating major change initiatives. From his work around the world, he has noted that executives who successfully implement change display many of the same basic emotions, behaviors, and approaches. Conner believes that the single most important factor to managing change is the degree to which people demonstrate resilience: the capacity to absorb high levels of change while displaying minimal dysfunctional behavior (Conner, 1993).

Patterson and Kelleher (2005) have drawn from research on resilient leadership and particularly from the work of Conner to identify six leadership strengths which help leaders to strengthen their resilience. These include the ability to accurately assess past and current reality; be positive about future possibilities; remain true to personal values; maintain a strong sense of personal efficacy; invest personal energy wisely; and act on the courage of personal convictions.

Patterson (2001) also reminds us that resilience is a long-term, not a short-term, construct. Resilience doesn’t fluctuate daily like the stock market. You’re not resilient today and non-resilient tomorrow. Resilience represents your capacity, your collective energy points, available to move ahead under adversity. You build or destroy your resilience capacity one day at a time.

Research on Resilient Female Superintendents

Literature and research on female superintendents began to emerge in the 1970’s. At that time there were very few women school superintendents. Much of the research was conducted among job applicants rather than office holders (Kowalski & Stouder, 1999). This early research concentrated mostly on “quantifying gender representation in certain jobs, identifying characteristics of women who aspired to be administrators, identifying employment procedures and their effects on females, and the verification of career barriers” (Kowalski & Stouder, 1999, p. 1).

In recent years, the focus of studies concerning female superintendents has shifted. Demographic data and general information about female superintendents are no longer the only topics researched. Researchers are now examining the skills, knowledge and abilities necessary for women not only to obtain the first superintendent’s job, but also how to keep it, and how to find satisfaction in the position (McCabe & Dobberteen, 1998).

Even though men continue to dominate educational administration, particularly the superintendency, the percentage of women in these jobs is increasing. However, once women reach the mid to upper levels of educational management, they still encounter many barriers to advancement. Female superintendents are much more likely than their male counterparts to be single, widowed, divorced or to have commuter marriages. They are also more likely to be responsible for domestic chores. They also
continue to face negative stereotyping as a result of entering what is still a largely male dominated culture (Funk, 2004). Successful female superintendents must be able to persist and resist. They must be able to face adversity and overcome it. In summary, successful female superintendents must be resilient.

Christman and McClellan (2005) completed a study with seven women who were identified as resilient administrators and were able to commit to eight weeks of online communication. They collected data from several communications during that time from the women. Christman and McClellan (2005) expected to describe the resilience of these women according to their gender. They expected to hear that the “feminine” traits of these women, such as collaboration and caring, sustained them in their administrative positions. This is not what they found.

The results of their study showed that the resilience of these women was described by a more fluid and complex use of gender in their leadership that defied categorizing them into one gender construction model or another. Instead resilient female leaders embraced or disclaimed one gender norm for another to varying degrees based on specific situations. These resilient women had a more “multidimensional gendered leadership that allowed them to vary their responses to fit the complexity of the organization’s expectations” (Christman & McClellan, 2005, p. 28). They also found that these resilient women were able to navigate the barriers which are created by expectations and choose typically feminine or masculine responses to particular episodes based on the episode itself and the organizational culture as a whole.

**Research Methodology**

To review, the purpose of the study was to examine how female superintendents apply strategies to move ahead in the face of adversity and become more resilient in the process. A secondary purpose was to compare their resilience strategies to those documented in studies in which both men and women were interviewed. The study is a qualitative action research project, utilizing a case study approach. Fifteen New York State female superintendents were individually interviewed. The interview protocols were based on the conceptual framework developed by Patterson and Kelleher (2005). The interviews averaged about 90 minutes in length, and were audio taped and later transcribed. During the interviews, participants were encouraged to talk in-depth about their personal experiences in the superintendency and the resilience strategies they used when faced with adversity.

The participants were drawn from a wide range of demographic variables: rural, suburban and urban districts; student populations ranging from 930 to 10,000 students; professional experience from 3 to 40 years; and representation from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, including European, North American, African American, Latin American and Asian American women. For the purposes of this study, we did not attempt to
disaggregate the data by any of these categories or to draw conclusions for any of the groups.

Findings

This section examines the findings summarized according to key themes that emerged from the data.

Theme: Remain Value-Driven, Not Event-Driven

All the female superintendents stated they were value-driven, not event-driven leaders. The most frequently mentioned concepts were focus, alignment of decisions with values, and the modeling of these values.

Focus

One participant summarized the essence of focus this way, “It is important to know in your heart of hearts why you are in the job.” Another participant offered her view of why she is in the job in the first place, “It really is about creating opportunities for kids and encouraging each child to do the best they can.” This sentiment was echoed in other statements such as, “Whether it’s employee issues or public concerns, you must always focus on the students and their learning.”

Virtually all participants were steadfast in the statements about the importance of not deviating from their core values. As one participant expressed it, “I am not able to compromise my core values. While other things are negotiable, I cannot compromise who I am.” No one in the study suggested that it would be easy to achieve this focus. One superintendent said,

There is no easy road. There will always be conflict and lobbying groups, but I have learned if you talk about children and what is good for them it makes it much harder for the special interest groups to sway me from my core values.

Alignment

Most superintendents know what it takes to be effective leaders. The superintendents in this study, however, emphasized it goes beyond just understanding. Leading in tough times calls for aligning one’s leadership actions with what one professes to be important. Here’s how one participant described alignment,

It’s critical to solicit feedback from others to verify that practices align with values. I give the leadership team a chance to do this at every meeting. Also in this day and age it’s always about the quantitative data and analyzing student achievement results.

Superintendents put their values about student achievement on the line each time they make decisions. And the participants in the study were quick to point out that what happens in the classroom is the most powerful measure of actions aligned with values, as exemplified by this comment, “There’s usually a discrepancy between what we say and do. Implementa-
tion tends to lag behind reality. It’s when you do walk-throughs and see what is really happening in the classrooms that you get the real feedback (about alignment).”

**Modeling**
The superintendents in the study expressed, in various ways, the importance of modeling. One participant acknowledged that modeling of values occurred all of the time. “You model daily by modeling all the time your core values.” So it is not a matter of choosing to model or not. It is a matter of what the leader chooses to model that sends signals about true values. In the view of another participant,

You have to model that you work hard and that you have integrity and honesty and that you are worthy of respect and that you respect others. It’s the whole of who you are and what you model every hour of every day.

**Theme: Comprehensively Assess Past and Current Reality**
The superintendents in this study were virtually unanimous that resilient leaders need to be able to accurately and comprehensively understand what is happening that affects the adversity they face. While the specific nature of adversity varied across participants, two common sub-themes emerged: expect that the world is going to bring you disruptions, and develop a high tolerance for ambiguity, paradox, and complexity.

**Disruptions to Expectations**
Most of the superintendents acknowledged that the best laid plans were simply plans. Inevitably, life gets in the way and resilient leaders need to anticipate possible disruptions and plan accordingly. One participant put it succinctly, “Figure out what can go wrong and build contingency plans accordingly.” Another participant described this as, “Always plan a best case-worst case scenario.” One female superintendent was more blunt about her approach in planning for disruptions, “Plan for someone to do something absolutely ridiculous that we have no control over and have the confidence you will work your way through it.”

By expecting disruptions to plans, superintendents did not siphon off their important resilience energy by being surprised when things did not go as expected.

**Tolerance for Ambiguity, Paradox, and Complexity**
The leaders interviewed in this study underscored a common theme: to survive in this job a person needs to have an incredibly high tolerance for ambiguity and paradox. The superintendents discussed several strategies for handling this. One participant said, “I don’t sweat the small stuff. I will not spend all my time thinking negatively.” Another commented that her tolerance for the elements in this theme began at an early age, “Growing up black in a predominantly white school, I was always questioned as to why I
was there. I had to learn to handle bigotry and ignorance.” In a related way, another person revealed her own adversity, “Growing up I faced adversity including being diagnosed with cancer at age 28.” She described how she fought through those tough times and attributed her success to being a survivor.

**Theme: Stay Positive About Future Possibilities**

There are plenty of reasons to be negative in one’s job as superintendent. Those interviewed left no doubt that it is probably the toughest assignment they have tackled. Still, they found ways to stay positive about the future. They accomplished this in three broad ways: a focus on opportunities rather than obstacles; an expectation that good things can possibly happen; and a belief that personal influence can make a positive difference.

**Steady Focus on Opportunities**

Patterson and Kelleher (2005) developed four profiles depicting leaders’ orientation to the future: unrealistic pessimists, realistic pessimists, realistic optimists, and unrealistic optimists. The leaders in this study tended to be realistic optimists. They believed that good things can happen, within the limitations of reality. As one leader framed the predicament, “The past is gone. You learn from it.” She then commented that the leader’s challenge is to form the future from what you have learned about the past. She added, “Life is a series of recycling this.” One participant traced her realistic optimism to her father, who taught her how to see opportunities during tough times as she was growing up. Another superintendent emphasized the belief that a leader may need to change strategies to achieve the opportunities sought. “You have to be a realistic optimist and know you may need to switch to a contingency plan.” So for these superintendents, the overall strategy of achieving opportunity remains steady, even as the tactic or plan changes to meet the objective.

**Good Things Can Happen**

Even though superintendents will be among the first to say disruptions inevitably will occur, resilient superintendents are also quick to point out that good things can happen in the midst of life’s storms. One female superintendent described the burden and responsibility that rests on a superintendent’s shoulders, “It’s your responsibility as a leader to communicate that there is hope and things will get better.”

**Theme: Maintain a Base of Caring and Support**

In most studies on individual resilience, a foundation of caring and support ranked among the highest on a list of resilience strengths. This study came to a similar conclusion. The participants identified the following common threads as essential for their caring and support: support of family and friends; support from colleagues and mentors; and support in the form of religion and faith.
Support of Family and Friends
Family and friends are cited as key to emotional support by several superintendents. In some cases, the support was found in a broad base. As one superintendent described it, “Family and good friends help me get though so many things.” One participant said that the friendship circle she relied on was restricted to “only those outside the school world.” Other superintendents identified a more narrow band of support with statements such as, “My husband is my only confidant.” In contrast one participant observed, “I rely only on my adult children. It’s very lonely.”

Colleagues and Mentors
Whereas some leaders in the study relied on those outside the professional context, others counted on colleagues and mentors. Mentors were specially regarded as a solid source of help in the face of adversity. A mentor, in one participant’s words, is “someone to think aloud with and share ideas.” Mentors come in many forms. One participant mentioned the school attorney as her mentor. Another said most of her role models have been men. A colleague echoed her sentiment, “Females don’t know how to mentor other females. It becomes a competitive thing. Our generation of mentors was all males.” From whatever source one picks a mentor, a participant made this observation about the importance of the selection process, “Be very selective in picking a mentor. That process has the capacity to significantly influence your future.”

Spiritual Support
The participants in this study offered diverse interpretations of what spiritual support means. Some of the female leaders referred directly to the power of God in their life. Others were more generic. One person spoke in general terms about the power of faith. Another said, “I believe we are guided in life by forces.” Still another found her support in a sense of purpose, “I have a strong belief that we are all here for a reason and a purpose.” One superintendent commented that her job has become a calling, “It wasn’t a calling for me to be a superintendent in the beginning, but now it is.” Another perspective was offered by a superintendent who spoke of her support as being drawn from “the human connections, in humanity, in nature, and in the walls of the church.”

Theme: Act on the Courage of Your Convictions
Participants in the study spoke to the common theme of acting on the courage of your convictions. They pointed out through many examples that assertions alone are not enough. Resilient superintendent move beyond just talking about their convictions. They acted on their convictions in the ways described below.

Clarity About What Matters Most
Similar to many other executives in high-stress, high visibility positions of
responsibility, the superintendents in this study struggled with spending scarce resilient points on the urgent in contrast to acting on those aspects of the job that matter most. Several superintendents emphasized that it is important to maintain perspective about who you are now and how you define yourself as a leader. One participant commented, “My job does not define who I am. It used to when I began. Now it is a part of a total life but it does not complete my life.” This thread of putting the job in perspective was woven throughout the tapestry of interview comments. A superintendent in the study put it succinctly, “Life is a precious commodity.” Another superintendent offered advice to others in this grueling job, “The superintendency is the toughest job I ever had. As long as you have a sense of purpose and a good sense of humor, you will make it.”

**Courage in the Face of Opposition**
Courage is not just about doing what seems right at the time. Courage also entails doing what is right in the face of aggressive, sometimes hostile, opposition that is very public. Superintendents need to draw upon their resilience reserves at times as they take tough public stands in the face of tough public opposition. A superintendent offered this example in her interview,

> The community was much divided on the removal of a tenured teacher. People would say you need to do this or that and I would say not. We need to hold the course. We got the dismissal but it could still go to the appellate court. My courage under fire and a sense of fair play has carried the district through so many of the hard times.

**Courage to Acknowledge and Learn from Mistakes**
Many leaders have moved through life and job by working extra hard to be right. They are rewarded with good grades for being right in school. They are rewarded with promotions for getting it right in their job. When they are selected for the superintendency, they achieve this distinction in part due to their track record for right decisions along the way. No wonder it becomes so difficult for superintendents to acknowledge that they may have gotten it wrong. But resilient superintendents possess a sense of efficacy to acknowledge their mistakes. A participant in this study captured the essence of her colleagues’ perspectives on the subject of mistakes, “Admit when you make a mistake. Not only is it the right thing to do, it diffuses the criticism quickly. It also moves you to the solution. Ask, ‘What do I need to do to make it right?’” One superintendent said she has shifted her paradigm from a win-or-lose mentality to a model of not having to prove she has all of the right answers. In her words, “I do not have to win all the time.”

**Distinctions Between Female and Male Superintendent Leadership**
Patterson and Kelleher’s (2005) research involved interviews with both
males and female superintendents. This research study focused only on interviewing females. One question posed to the participants asked them the extent to which they observed differences in how males behave when faced with adversity versus how females behave. From the interviews, no consistent, dominant themes emerged about male-female differences. However, there were two sub-themes.

One group of participants pointed to the win-lose differences between male and female superintendents, particularly in the area of confronting adversity. Participants who shared this perspective commented that men had more of a need to emerge as the winner in the face of conflict. One participant observed, “The minute somebody came in crisis and it was an issue they (men) had to win and they didn’t know how not to win.” Another person expressed this thought in a similar way, “We don’t do the stand off, the guns drawn. We are probably more comfortable saying ‘Okay, let’s try something different’ rather than no, that’s the way it’s going to be.”

Another group of participants downplayed the male-female differences, and pointed more to the feminine-masculine types of leadership traits found in both male and female superintendents. This finding is consistent with the research reported by Christman and McClellan (2005). In the words of one of the participants,

I am not one that sees a lot based on gender. I can think of male superintendents whose strategies or approaches seemed more feminine in nature to me and vice versa. So it’s not gender of male/female but more masculine, feminine types of traits and approaches. Primarily I don’t think about that. I think of it as leadership and different approaches to leadership. I made a conscious decision somewhere along the way that out of all the time I was going to devote to the profession, not just to the school district, I was not going to put my energies into the gender based study piece as much. I don’t really look at it like that and I have some conviction that if you have a really strong female superintendent who spends too much time working at it from a female perspective that is harmful ultimately to her leadership.

**Summary and Conclusions**

This qualitative research study was based on interviews of 15 female superintendents in New York State. The analysis of the data revealed five themes associated with female superintendents becoming more resilient in the face of adversity: (a) Superintendents focus on being value-driven, not event-driven leaders. They drain their resilience and those they serve if their response to adversity is based on what is politically expedient in the moment; (b) Resilient leaders do whatever it takes to comprehensively assess past and current reality. They need to know the bad news as well as the good news of a given situation so they can make the most informed decision possible; (c) In the face of adversity, resilient leaders stay positive about future possibilities. They believe something desirable can come from set-
backs, but they also know nothing is guaranteed; (d) Strong leaders draw on a base of caring and support during tough times. This theme permeated all of the interviews. Leaders need a safe haven to talk about adversity and strategies for moving through the adversity in a healthy way; (e) Resilient leaders act on the courage of their convictions. They realize that convictions without corresponding actions are nothing more than promises unfulfilled.

The results of this study provide female superintendents and aspiring leaders with both a conceptual framework for understanding the dimensions of resilience and also concrete strategies to become more resilient during tough times. In addition, the study underscores the need for school superintendents who stand for values and demonstrate personal resilience. We can learn much from those female superintendents who have demonstrated success in these areas and drawn upon their proactive strategies to help other females not only break the superintendency’s glass ceiling, but be successful, highly effective contributors to this nation’s schools.

References


