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Viewing Rural Female Superintendents through an Efficacy Lens

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TCWSE Monograph

Women as School Executives: Celebrating Diversity

Diversity in Context
Diversity in Development
Diversity in Relationships
Diversity in Self
Diversity in Leadership Practice

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The Texas Council of Women School Executives
Rural education is an important part of the American educational system. As noted in the Rural Trust report, *Why Rural Matters 2003: The Continuing Need for Every State to Take Action on Rural Education*: "Forty-three percent of the nation’s public schools are in rural communities or small towns of fewer than 25,000 people, and 31 percent of the nation's children attend these schools".

Rural schools are facing a number of challenges. Common concerns among rural schools are poverty, changing demographics, and declining numbers (cite). They are also faced with the issues of accountability and mandates from No Child Left Behind. The challenges are not unique to rural schools; however, the means of addressing the challenges differ between rural and urban. Rural schools often have fewer resources, fewer community support systems, and fewer financial avenues available to them. The ability of rural schools to successfully meet these challenges as well as others that may hinder student learning lies within the strength of the school's leadership. Chance (1999) noted:

The successful rural superintendent strives through interactions with all of the district’s stakeholders to create a culture that supports the educational process for rural students. The rural superintendent must be the ethical, emotional, and transformational leader of the school. He/she must be able to determine focus and direction while creating a climate that nurtures learning and success for all. He/she must be an excellent communicator and collaborative leader who involves a multitude of constituents in shared decision-making strategies. The rural superintendent must be able to flourish in the chaos of expectations and demands that often represent rural schools and their communities. (p. 93)

Rural schools looking for this type of leadership will more than likely find it in women leaders. Characteristics identified with female superintendents include (a) an instructional focus for the district, (b) substantial knowledge and experience in education, (c) an emphasis of putting children first, and (d) being a change agent (Brown & Irby, 1993; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Wesson & Grady, 1995).

According to Wesson and Grady (1995), women superintendents “enjoyed the human relations part of their job—those leadership practices that emphasized the relational aspects of leadership. They recognized the importance and placed value on all kinds of relationships...” (p. 39). The women superintendents also indicated that they had been hired by their boards to introduce and manage change.

In the position of superintendent, however, women leaders continue to be underrepresented. In 2003, women led 18% of the nation’s school districts (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). Furthermore, “[women leaders] continue to be underutilized by school boards and superintendents who do not utilize the talents of their aspiring and practicing female school leaders to make a real difference in the quality of schooling in our nation” (Funk, Pankake, & Schroth, 2004, pp 2-3).
Purpose and Methods

The purpose of the study was to better understand the self-sustainability of female rural superintendents. We anchored the study on discussions in the literature about the importance of resiliency for the female superintendent.

The study was a qualitative, multiple-case study. Structured interviews were conducted based on 22 open-ended questions. The main research question was “How do rural, female superintendents administer in rural school districts?” Sub-questions were framed around four areas: leadership, relationships, change, and support. Participants were female superintendents employed with a rural school district in Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, and New Mexico. The names and locations of all possible participants were identified through the states Departments of Education. The superintendents were invited to participate through telephone contacts that described the structure and purpose of the study. Fifteen were interviewed. The number interviewed was the result of the investigators’ ability to contact the individuals and participants’ willingness and availability to be interviewed during the timeframe of January through June 2004.

The interviews were approximately one hour in length. Three were conducted at the respective superintendent’s school site; twelve were telephone interviews. IRB consent forms were signed and collected. The interviews were transcribed and Creswell’s (2003) recommendations for data coding, analysis and interpretation were used. The collected data were separated into categories: career paths, circumstances, leadership, relationships, change, support, challenges and advice. Data were then analyzed for emerging patterns and themes.

True to qualitative research, we exercised our prerogative to not use a theoretical framework to guide the design and execution of the study (Creswell, 2003). Instead, we identified a theory at the conclusion of our thematic coding. As such, it was evident that our participants employed self-sustainable measures since their pre-service and in-service professional development did not/do not prepare them for the challenges associated with a rural superintendent position or the unique nuances associated with gendered (female) leadership.

Specifically, we identified self-efficiency theory as the best construct to account for our participants’ experiences. We revisited the literature and noted minimal appearance in the school superintendent leadership. Investigators from the fields of psychology and sports medicine represent the scholars accredited with the definition and application of theory. We pose the use of the theory to justify the personal and professional development needs of pre-service and in-service rural female school superintendents.

Self-Efficacy Theory

Self-efficacy is a person’s beliefs about his or her capabilities to organize and execute actions required to perform specific tasks (Cakiroglu, 2005). A strong sense of efficacy enhances human accomplishment and personal well-being in many ways. People who are confident in their capabilities address difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided (Bandura, 1994). Individuals who possess a strong sense of efficacy are more likely to set challenging goals and remain committed to them. They tend to be more resilient—recovering more quickly from failures and setbacks, attributing the failures and setbacks to things that can be corrected (i.e. more effort, gained knowledge or skill), and approaching threatening situations with
assurance that they have control over the situations. The opposite holds true for those with a low sense of efficacy. They have low aspirations and weak commitments to goals they pursue. They tend to be less confident—recovering less quickly from failures and setbacks, attributing failures and setbacks to personal deficiencies that cannot be corrected, and giving up quickly when faced with threatening situations or obstacles (Bandura, 1994).

In theory, individuals with a strong sense of self-efficacy will engage in challenging tasks throughout their education and profession. The engagement is twofold and consists of cognitive and behavioral components. Cognitive engagement includes the application and development of skills. Behavioral engagement accounts for interests and beliefs that evolve throughout an educational and/or professional career (Palladino, 2006). Those with a strong sense of efficacy remain cognitively engaged and task oriented when faced with pressing situations and demands. They maintain a sense of resiliency that allows them to use analytical thinking and appropriate application of necessary knowledge and skills. Patterson and Kelleher (2005) define successful school leaders' cognitive engagement by their demonstrated competence. Besides competence, those with a strong sense of efficacy also demonstrate appropriate behavioral engagement and possess a strong set of beliefs. Instilled beliefs provide them with a sense of control even in threatening situations (Bandura, 1994). Patterson and Kelleher (2005) define behavioral engagement of successful school leaders through the leaders' level of confidence. Patterson and Kelleher noted, Confidence (behavioral) and competence (cognitive) are inextricably linked. Past competence ('I have handled other school tragedies') directly affects present confidence ('I can get through this one, too'), which in turn affects present competence and future confidence, leading to a positive upward spiral of improved performance" (p. 8). Efficacious theorists posit that successful individuals need both cognitive and behavioral engagement in order to excel.

Patterson and Kelleher (2005) also identified nine strategies for translating self-efficacy into action. The strategies are divided between the two building blocks of efficacy: (1) strengthen competence and confidence and (2) maintain and increase connections to others. The strategies for strengthening competence and confidence include (a) build your sense of mastery—appraise your experience and learn from it (self-reflection); (b) set short-term goals and benchmarks of progress—chunk out long-term, complex plans into manageable increments that help sustain motivation, avoid distractions, and recognize success; (c) claim small wins—to sustain efficacy over time; (d) recover quickly from setbacks—to help keep a 'bump in the road from becoming a major pothole;' and (e) manage yourself—learn to maximize benefits of positive emotions and lessen the negative feelings (p. 102). The strategies for maintaining and increasing strong connections to others are (a) believe in the power of team—faith in the capacity of your colleagues will help in moments of personal doubt and uncertainty; (b) stay connected to mentors—seek advice when possible; (c) maintain strong relationships—turn to trusted friends and confidantes for counsel during challenging times; and (d) maintain strong personal relationships—to sustain personal efficacy over time (p. 103).

Findings

Our participants' experiences as rural female superintendents are shared through the self-efficacy lens of Patterson and Kelleher's two key building blocks: (a) competence and confidence and (b) strong connections to others. The participants' comments and
practices are further categorized by Patterson and Kelleher's identified strategies for transferring efficacy into action.

Strengthen competence and confidence

One strategy Patterson and Kelleher (2005) identify with strengthening competence and confidence is to build a sense of mastery. Successful experience expands knowledge and increases skills; building a sense of mastery involves self-reflection within which an analysis and appraisal of the experience occurs. Our participants shared incidents and experiences that reflected how past experiences increased their level of confidence. Following are examples from three of the participants:

I was in nonprofit administration for 15 years. I was used to being in a position where I needed to make decisions, be responsible for budgets, personnel, hiring and firing, working with boards, the community and fundraising, and all those things.

For strategic or continuous improvement efforts, we have a district leadership team and site teams. I am process-oriented and my training comes out of the world of facilitation. I completed some facilitation training with the intercultural group in [the state] and also a national group when I was still doing the state department work. That has been something I've carried through into this position.

I started out in health and physical education, and I coached volleyball and basketball. Those experiences gave me a different perspective on how I treat people and see people. [The superintendent position] involves give and take and getting along with others.

One superintendent commented on lessons learned from her years of experience in education: "I've learned to sit back a little bit and not be the first person to jump on board and believe that this is actually going to stay. I think just good, solid educational philosophy will carry us a long way."

Another shared a specific experience that helped her prepare for the superintendency:

The superintendent was open; it was open twice. The first time I didn't get the job. I really wasn't properly prepared. I learned a whole lot in that four year period working at a college as an assistant to the president. I gained a nice background in lots of things from budget to business and in personnel. Before I was involved with children and curriculum and knew that backwards and forwards, but I didn't have experience in public relations. So I had this wonderful experience. It made me a better candidate the second time around.

One individual emphasized the strength of real experience for building confidence in the superintendency. She stated, "The best experience is hands-on. I am glad that I had a variance [for licensure] and was able to go to my classes, learn something and go back and use it. I feel for those people who are working on administrative degrees, are teaching and have no way to use what they're learning. I have had such great experiences. I am so thankful for it."

Participants also understood the importance of setting short-term goals and benchmarks of progress in an effort to make long-range, complex plans manageable—another strategy identified with strengthening competence and confidence. For instance, one participant articulated the process she used for obtaining buy-in and support for budget cuts:
Each committee met and came back with recommendations in that area. We had to make some tough calls. We cut things that I know they didn't like, but I think they understand. I had hardly any complaints about any of those decisions – very few. A couple of sports ones, of course, but that was basically it. They had their chance to speak; they had their chance to participate and they had a chance to understand if they really wanted to. That helped us out. I was comfortable doing that because, again, I like to get the input of a lot of people. Then a person can make an intelligent decision.

Another superintendent referenced the process of completing her doctorate as an experience key to learning how to set short-term goals: "Now I have these projects that are as big as my dissertation that I can tackle without batting an eye."

A third participant stated:

When you put a strong person in a position, other things will change because of that. So, it’s to have the vision of what’s coming, what’s here that we absolutely have to deal with right now, what’s coming, prioritize it, and let’s go. I’m one of those, you keep the mountain in view but you’d better start picking off pebbles first or you never get it done.

Patterson and Kelleher contend that if a school leader has “an overdeveloped sense of responsibility” that when things go wrong, that individual will determine he/she is deficient in knowledge and skills and may become “plagued with self-doubts” that leave it difficult to see or credit small successes (p. 87). In an effort to avoid this experience, a successful school leader learns to claim small wins. A participant shares one of her small claims:

In the beginning, especially with the Board chair, the Board was controlling; they were used to being involved in a lot of different things that weren’t necessarily their role. As the year has progressed, that has really lessened. I’d like to think that part of it is just that we’re so open and communicate all of the time so there is no need to necessarily worry about it.

Another participant shared the following win:

When I first started, Board meetings were two and one-half to three hours long. They were rambling meetings. I decided at that time that if I have a long agenda, we can probably get through it in a couple of hours or less. And I started a pre-meeting letter that shares key information about agenda items. After our first meeting lasted an hour, I was accused of hiding things or keeping things under the table by a couple of teachers. So, I contacted the Union president and I said, “I am going to tell you what I’m doing, and I am going to give you a copy of everything.” So, the Union gets a copy of my cover letter and my whole packet each month. They can see there is nothing under the table. They have their representatives who come to the meeting and they can see that we’re doing what is on the agenda. That was something that I “tipped in the bud” right away.

Participants also demonstrated the application of two additional strategies: recover quickly from setbacks and manage yourself. One superintendent stated, “I really have learned to focus on the big picture. I know I can be very forceful but yet in a way that is not real demanding.” Another commented, “Open, honest communication is real important to building relationships with school board. I have learned to live by the rule of thumb, if you tell one board member, you tell all board members.” A third participant stated, “I use to think I could not handle people who thought I was doing a bad job. I’m no longer fearful. I’m at a new
level, a lot freer. I'm okay with picking my battles." And another stated, "I ask myself, 'How bad can you screw it up?' I know the board has started my review and they are like, 'Are you nervous?' I replied, 'No, I don't see anyone standing in line for my job.'"

Another participant shared advice on managing self:

The biggest thing I know and practice and am reminded all the time is to never promise anything you can't follow through on. If people come to me, I usually just hear them out and say, "Okay, great, can I think about it for a while?" That's probably been the best thing because we've all been in situations or promised something or had to backtrack on it. It makes everything uncomfortable plus you lose face in front of people.

Yet another participant reflected on the fact that it takes time within the superintendency to establish a sense of how to manage self:

A couple of new female superintendents that I have gotten to know who are maybe in their first or second year right now are saying, "I'm not going to be doing this for very long." I remember saying that myself because when you start out, it is so difficult. You just think, "I can't live like this." But then you work through it and things get better, you get better, you get so you can handle it.

Maintain and Increase Strong Connections to Others

One strategy connected with maintaining and increasing strong connections to others is to believe in the power of the team. This belief extends beyond personal efficacy to "collective efficacy"—the belief in the team's capability to face any threat that arises with a sense of confidence that the group will prevail (Patterson & Kelleher, 2005, p. 92). One superintendent shared her efforts at establishing a strong sense of team with her school board:

I have tried to take responsibility for the Board's bad behavior as best I can. I model how they could respond in a professional manner so they could see there are other ways of interacting. So that they don't go there, do their thing, posture and walk out. Because a board has to work together; they don't have any power unless it's together.

Another discussed the level of confidence she and her principal had developed:

My present high school principal, who, of course, replaced me, was a teacher/dean of students in the district and was very disappointed he wasn't given the position when I got that high school position. I was a little nervous about how we would be able to work together, once I became the superintendent but it's just been a piece of cake. Again, I think out of respect, and it was never handled on my part as "I got the job—you didn't." It was, "OK, I'm here. We've got to work together." Both of us made a transition at the same time together. Ironically, he's a male and whenever we go some place and inform people that the superintendent and principal are both here, they assume he is the superintendent and I am the principal. We laugh about it a lot. But to his credit, he doesn't have an issue working for a female. I don't think it ever enters our minds ever; we complement one another well.

Staying connected to mentors is another strategy identified with maintaining and strengthening connections. Mentors offer emotional support as confidantes and practical support as problem solvers (Patterson & Kelleher, 2005). One participant readily identified one of her mentors as "The superintendent I worked for as a principal and who served as my supervisor for the superintendent internship." She stated, "Anytime
I have a question, he's my first call. He's been doing [the superintendency] for 17 years so he just has more experience than I'll ever have."

Another participant referenced her connection to a professional organization as a form of mentoring:

I am involved with American Association of University Women on a national, state and local level. I would say in terms of licensure and ease, that organization has probably helped me more than any other one in terms of encouraging me. I've received some just marvelous leadership training through the organization.

A third participant addressed the importance of mentors as she provided some advice to aspiring female superintendents:

Don't short change yourself. Have the confidence that you can do this. Use the advice and support you have from others to help you through the low spots. Remember it may look like and feel like a real isolated position, but it doesn't have to be. You can get good support from others and that will get you through in those times when you feel you are the only one making the awful decisions.

Two of the participants felt prepared to serve as district leaders not only because of their competence but also their relationships. Their longevity in the community allowed them to establish and maintain strong workplace relationships and personal relationships. Patterson and Kelleher (2005) noted, "Translating your efficacy into resilient behavior most frequently occurs in a social context, within a web of your relationships with others" (p. 96). The participants addressed the level of respect they had earned within the community due to their years of effective teaching and commitment to the community. For instance, one commented:

My relationship, my stature in the community—the way the community sees me—was developed when I first started and came and stayed and worked with their children. It's been 29 years. I now have students' children and I'm getting close to some grandkids here. Some of it is time, but I pride myself on that I am well respected in the community because I am honest. If I say I am going to do something, I do it. If I can't, I won't promise to do it. I think how their children have been treated, how they see other students being treated, and over time I think that has just carried through.

Another shared:

People trust me because I've been here a long time. They knew how I operated as a teacher, they knew how I operated as a principal, so they're pretty comfortable that I am going to look out for kids, that I'm going to put kids first, that I'm going to do what I think is the best educationally. I don't have people questioning that. Your persona has to be that and it kind of goes from there. I try to communicate with people as much as I can in as many ways as I can.

A third stated, "I know it helps that I'm here. I graduated here, and I try to be real active in the service organizations like the Lions Club. This community is just phenomenal. We get more support than any school community I've ever seen."

Two others commented on the support and encouragement received from others to move into the superintendency:

People have approached me. That's how I got into the superintendency. I was a high school principal here, which I sought. They hired me for the principal's job, and then they had trouble with the superintendent so they approached me and asked me if I would be interested. I didn't look ahead to think, "Hey, now
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I'm going to be the superintendent." But I felt responsible because that's my nature. I felt like who is going to hold this school together? We're kind of going through crises here. They are firing someone. Our levy things need to be done, our finance needs to be taken care of, we've got to hire some teachers - so I felt responsible.

A lot of my colleagues encouraged me to go forward with school administration, especially when it came to the superintendent issue. I was hesitant as to whether I was ready to do that or not. I did like my job. I didn't feel like I needed something different. I didn't have any of those thoughts. I had a lot of encouragement from my colleagues as well as the present superintendent at that time. I think that all had something to do with it. I thought if they were confident I could do this or I should do this, I guess I'm fine with it, too.

Discussion

Our study was framed around the question, "How do rural, female superintendents administer in rural school districts?" Within that question we addressed four areas: leadership, relationships, change, and support. Our participants' responses and experiences led us to the efficacious theoretical framework. Research conducted in the area of efficacy has validated that school leaders who have a strong sense of personal efficacy believe in themselves and believe they can influence the outcomes of adverse circumstances. They also demonstrate a high level of confidence and a "can-do" attitude. In general, they have the competence and confidence needed to lead (Bandura, 1994; Patterson & Kelleher, 2005). Our participants demonstrated a strong sense of efficacy describing it as one participant stated, "an attitude that follows you around." Two students who interviewed the participant as a part of a class project in which they were to interview someone in a unique position [female superintendent] said to her: "We don't get it, Ms. [Smith], you just walk into a room and things change."

The participants articulated actions, decisions, and beliefs that demonstrated strategies tied to two qualities—confidence and competence and strong connections to others—identified by Patterson and Kelleher (2005) as key to sustaining a strong sense of self-efficacy. For instance, responses to questions asked in the areas of leadership and change connected with the strategy of "build a sense of mastery." Participants applied the knowledge, skills, and dispositions gained during past experiences to present situations they faced as a superintendent. The positive results from the application strengthened their confidence about their ability to lead a school district.

Participants' responses to our questions about addressing change elicited responses that meshed with the strategy—"set short-term goals and benchmarks of progress." Patterson and Kelleher stated, "Actively envisioning some concrete short-term and desired outcome—as opposed to only articulating an abstract, indeterminate, remote goal—can motivate you, shape your actions, define your competence, and ultimately provide real evidence of efficacy" (p. 86). Participants discussed approaches they used to make change manageable for their staff as they approaches issues such as changing student demographics, No Child Left Behind mandates, and state level accountability measures.

Participants addressed the challenges of implementing change by using another self-efficacy strategy—"claim small wins." Claiming small wins can accomplish three things with self-efficacy: (a) a person can view small wins as acclimation that the accomplish-
ments occurred due to acquired abilities from past experiences rather than chance, (b) a person who attributes the accomplishments to personal skill will undertake more difficult tasks and preserve for longer, and (c) a person who claims small wins tends to allow herself and those who support her to inflate perceptions of capabilities (Patterson & Kelleher, 2005). The participants’ attentiveness to acknowledging staff and community expertise and to providing their own competence and confidence as issues such as budget reductions and state mandates were tackled allowed others to see progress toward the ultimate goal of improving student learning.

Effective school leaders “recover quickly from setbacks.” They realize that the complexity of their positions means that oversights and mistakes are inevitable. The participants did not dwell on negative experiences. Instead, they focused on the positive and shared stories and experiences that demonstrated improvements and collaboration within the school and the community.

Participants were aware of the importance of the strategy—“manage yourself.” They understood the importance of being attentive to physical and emotional states of well-being. Individuals with a strong sense of self-efficacy establish self-control strategies in emotional situations and establish a physical regime that addresses physical health. The superintendency is a demanding position; the participants described techniques and methods they employed to ensure that they took care of themselves as well as they took care of others. They scheduled time for themselves and their family. As one participant stated, “My family is very important; my religion is very important. So they get scheduled right in... even like my nail appointment, my hair appointment, things that I need to do for myself are scheduled.”

The strategy, “believe in the power of the team,” focuses on moving efficacy beyond self-efficacy to a “collective efficacy.” Collective efficacy emphasizes the belief in a group’s capability to face any threat that arises with a sense of confidence that the group will prevail (Patterson & Kelleher, 2005). Through questions asked about leadership and change, participants discussed the time and energy they invested in establishing a collaborative environment that provided as many people as possible with the opportunity to have a voice and to share their expertise. They realized that today’s educational challenges can not be addressed alone.

Participants also were not afraid to ask for help. They turned to professional organizations, mentors, and other for support and guidance on a number of issues. They had no difficulty implementing the strategy—“staying connected to mentors.” Staying connected to those who can provide guidance and direction strengthens self-efficacy. Participants were quick to identify mentors who served as confidantes and problem-solvers for them.

Relationships were of key importance to our participants. Throughout the interviews, they demonstrated a commitment to the establishment and maintenance of relationships. They provided ample examples of how they “maintain strong workplace relationships” and “maintain strong personal relationships” and they articulated the value of those relationships in connection with maintaining and increasing self-efficacy. The emotional and physical demands of the position, the challenging decisions that had to be made, and the intensity of time commitments were made manageable by the relationships they had developed.
Conclusion

Research has validated the importance of self-efficacy for school leaders. When we analyzed the transcripts of our participants we were able to make an observable connection. Our participants also noted a conscientious need for self-efficacy as they strove to succeed in rural superintendent positions. Their heightened awareness led us to ask: "To what extent are preparation programs and the school leadership profession helping potential rural female educators understand their self-efficacy as a bridge to the superintendency?" The literature has described networking among female superintendents as a self-selected strategy to overcome the challenges of the profession and the isolation that gender may create (Irby & Brown, 1994; Young, 2003). Yet no discussion exists about self-efficacy among potential aspirant female superintendents. We believe studying self-efficacy and practicing self-efficacious strategies can strengthen female leadership in the superintendency. We propose that preparation programs: (1) establish partnerships with rural school districts and conduct forums with female educators, (2) infuse self-efficacy theory into its preservice programs, and (3) address the overall dearth of literature about self-efficacy in the rural superintendency.

References


