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The landscape of the rural superintendancy is in the midst of a leadership turnover as a significant number of its current administrators reach retirement age. Discussions in the literature have delineated the characteristics of successful rural superintendents and the barriers that threaten their achievement. It lacks, however, adequate discussion of how women have aspired to and sustained success in rural super-intendencies. The qualitative case study presented in this report includes the narratives of five novice, rural, and female superintendents. An efficacious theoretical framework was identified as the lens through which the accounts could best be analyzed and discussed, including proposed implications for additional research to further explore this framework and the academy's preparation of rural female superintendents.

The higher education academy, its educational leadership preparation programs, and practitioners of school administration need to be concerned about the status of female superintendents for rural school districts. The

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qualitative case study presented in this report solicited testimonies from five female super-intendents, each in her initial appointment (less than five years) as leader of a rural school district. The leaders shared their methods of sustainability in a profession that has lacked a significant historical presence of female members. The intent of this report is to justify our selection of efficacious theory as a framework aligned with our data analysis. We then employed this theoretical lens to identify implications for best practices and additional research.

Sustainability of superintendents is a noble quest. Long-term appointments may create the stability and focus necessary for the formation and implementation of school improvement plans. At present, the mission is a critical one as

40-50% of current superintendents are eligible for retirement (Glass, 2001). The literature must continue to articulate the complexities associated with the superintendency to compensate for the exodus inevitable with significant numbers of retirees.

Characteristics of Successful Superintendents

The literature is not silent about the characteristics of a successful superintendent. A consistent trait researchers have identified is the superintendent's ability to perfect "people skills" through which constituents observe genuine care and interest (Copeland & Chance, 1996). Grogan (2003) argued such people skills differ from the ones administrators employ as principals, a common stepping stone to the super-intendency. The author stressed the unique "big picture" demands only superintendents encounter:

> The challenge of forming relationships with members of a highly pluralistic society in which we live is more difficult to meet today. Furthermore, it is understood that these demands must be met on top of all the other fundamental ones that are required to manage the fiscal and human resources of a school district. (p. 11)

Moral responsibility, a second characteristic noted in the literature's accounts of superintendent sustainability, calls attention to the ethical leadership skills necessary for this position to be "an especially promising outcome" (Grogan, 2003, p. 16). For example, Copeland and Chance (1996) analyzed the relationships long-term rural superintendents established with community and school board members. The authors identified 30 attributes of success that included moral connotations, such as being "conscientious, trustworthy, and a Christian" (p. 26).

Superintendents are cognizant that school board members seek out their instructional leadership skills, a third characteristic of successful superintendents. High-stakes testing mandates at the state and national levels force school boards to recruit superintendents able to secure districts' success with the *No Child Left Behind Act's* (NCLB) Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and similar mandates of the 2004 *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* (IDEIA). Glass (2001) examined 155 new superintendents and noted: "Personal characteristics were the chief reason first-year superintendents felt they were hired. Significantly, about a quarter of first-year superintendents believe the board hired them specifically to be instructional leaders" (p. 29). Boone (1998) argued superintendents' instructtional leadership depends on relationships established with principals. Moreover, the author further defined this leadership role in rural districts as "direct involvement in the activities of principals, teachers, and students" (p. 15). In sum, the literature suggests a successful superintendent should be a moral person with exceptional people skills and instructional leadership traits.

Barriers to Success

The literature illustrated additional, complex issues that confront leaders in the superintendency and require appropriate traits. Boone (1998) and Garn (2003) studied rural superintendents and concluded certain tasks hamper leadership pursuits, with budget and finance tasks as the most noted obstacles. Unaware these potential sidetracks may deter their leadership quests, rural superintendents resign or are pushed out of their positions. "Given the unpredictability of the position, it is not surprising that many superintendents do not remain in office very long" (Grogan, 2000, p. 105). Potential candidates for the superintendency aware of the nuances associated with the position often reflect about their would-be relationships with school boards: "The consistent concern about board of education relations seems relevant in understanding the interest or lack thereof in pursuing the position" (Azinger, 2003, p. 4).

Candidates who do pursue the position but are unable to overcome the numerous challenges associated with it oftentimes jeopardize their image as a "master educator" with the use of micromanagement techniques (Glass, 2001, p. 30; see also Copeland & Chance, 1996). Boone (1998) identified this problem in his qualitative research about the leadership of rural

superintendents: "[They] seemed not to have a preferred method of teaching or to express that preference to others. Few of the superintendents indicated that they personally monitored classroom activities by evaluating what is taught or how it is taught" (p. 18). Likewise, Irby and Brown (1994) worked with rural female superintendents in a professional development program and noted how their participants "indicated anxiety and felt that they were not equipped to meet the demands of leadership roles" (p. 3).

Discussions about the specific characteristics of rural superintendents and the challenges they face are underdeveloped: "The unique character of the rural superintendency is often obfuscated by national surveys and the current focus in the literature on urban superintendents" (Garn, 2003, p. 3). An additional slant indicates male superintendents have had a greater voice in the literature than women. Grogan (2000) summarized the justifications in the literature about this gender bias as (a) the lack of a women's historical presence in the superintendency necessary for research pursuits and (b) the belief of certain members within the academy that no such paucity exists.

Björk (2000) outlined the historical phases of female school leadership research. The first stage occurred during the 1970s and reported descriptive information about the census counts of female school leaders. The second stage, the 1970s, resulted in reports of noteworthy female school leaders. The third stage dominated the 1980s and unearthed the factors of discrimination that prevented women's access to leadership positions. The final stage emerged in the 1990s and empowered women to identify their own perspectives as a means to study the collective experiences of female school leaders.

During the final stage, Irby and Brown (1994) defined the focus of female leadership research as a need to answer their proposed question: "Where are the women in their development and where do they need to be based on the literature regarding successful women leaders?" (p.2). Skrobarcek and Stark's (2002) research about the career paths of aspirant female superintendents in Texas suggested the final stage has yet to achieve closure and justified the need for ongoing

research about the lived experiences of female school leaders. The authors noted the barriers female superintendents encounter are different from their male counterparts because:

> Women have not been socialized to aspire to administrative positions or to prepare for them; school systems are structured in ways that tend to exclude women from higher-level jobs; and male dominance in society overall results in covert and overt forms of sex discrimination that limit women to subordinate positions both publicly and privately. (p. 8)

More specifically, research needs to address the role of female superintendents in rural districts (Wallin & Sackney, 2003). Chance and Cummins (1998) provided the following definition of rural districts as:

> Those having fewer than 3,000 students, constitute approximately 75% of districts in the nation and provide an education for about 30% of the elementary and secondary school-age population. Fifty-one percent of all districts are both small and rural. (p. 1)

The focus of our research presented in this report was to contribute a response to the literature's need for additional studies about the role of female superintendents in rural school districts.

Method

Wallin and Sackney (2003) suggested researchers not subscribe to a general definition of a rural school district and instead generalize their operational functions:

> The definition of 'rural' is ambiguous, since its meaning tends to vary with the perspective of the defining individual. Rural areas differ greatly from each other, especially in terms of economic resources, community priorities and purpose, demographics, and political efficacy. (p. 1)

In response, we selected qualitative methodology as the best means to explore the unique experiences and reflections female superintendents in rural communities could offer. Our initial quest was to better understand

how these women initiate, sustain, and reflect about their 'resistance,' a term Grogan (2003) proposed for the conceptual awareness of female superintendents:

> Similar to feminism, postmodernism provides us with concepts that enable us to understand the superintendency in terms different from those that have been used in the past. Such concepts include discourse, subjectivity, power and knowledge, and resistance. (p. 18)

We used state directories to identify potential candidates from two upper Midwest states, one Midwest state, and one Western state. We telephoned each female superintendent and secured the participation of eleven women. Each woman was in her first appointment of less than five years, a subgroup of female superintendents about whom a paucity of literature exits. Given the small number of potential participants, the final selection was a significant count.

Our intent was to tap into our female participants' unique stories of resistance. Therefore, we did not impose an overall theoretical lens to guide our research questions or data analysis. Rather, we discussed the challenges superintendents encounter and probed for a better awareness of how these women overcame them in order to exert their full leadership potential and subsequent commitment to foreshadowed, long-term superintendent careers. In this manner, we subscribed to Creswell's (2003) inductive logic model for qualitative research, whereby we identified a theoretical perspective at the conclusion of our data analysis that best captured the participants' accounts and offered a bridge to our discussion and implications.

We posed four research questions to guide our ninety-minute, semi-structured interview with each woman: How do rural female superintendents (1) implement and sustain change, (2) describe their leadership style, (3) build relationships, and (4) seek out professional support and mentors? Each of the investigators manually coded the transcribed interviews to note phrases and examples that encapsulated the essence of the participants' responses. Given each investigator had different previous and present school leadership and research experiences, the analysis process achieved unique perspectives that would otherwise not occur without the investigators'

combined contributions. The individual coding process was the first iteration of our qualitative analysis. The second iteration included the merging of each investigator's codes and subsequent discussion about similarities and differences. The dialogue resolved any unintended biases. The third and final iteration resulted in an agreed-upon code list then reapplied to each transcript to confirm its accuracy. No codes were deleted or added at the conclusion of the third iteration.

Results

The present report is about one thematic finding, "relationships." We emphasize this finding because the participants identified inter- and intra-school relationships as the essential core of their resistance, success, commitment, and joy as rural superintendents. They offered both solicited and unsolicited accounts of their relationships regardless of the questions we posed. For example, when we asked follow-up questions about financial matters, an issue the literature associated with superintendent burnout, the participants explained how specific relationships they formed helped them succeed with financial matters.

The relationship accounts challenged our concept of "resiliency" identified at the onset of the study. We initially interpreted and accepted the literature's description of the term as endurance, an image of 'fighting the good fight.' It was obvious our female participants responded to challenges and conflicts with proactive, genuine relationship-building that defused any connotations of survival. Communication and time invested with all constituents comprised the core of these relationships.

We present the reader with five vignettes, samples about the relationships all eleven participants described. Our format counters the typical theme/sub-theme often employed in qualitative research. We justify our approach since a paucity of female school leaders' personal accounts exist, as referenced in the literature review. Also, thematic discussions can reduce the rigor of standalone testimonies. Young (2003) argued investigators need to overcome such a possible outcome within feminist research about educational leadership as

means to promote "the ethics of qualitative writing" (p. 48).

Vignette I: Angie

Angie's rural school district spans 1,500 miles of farmland in the Midwest. Although the district has one of the largest boundaries in the state, it only educates 550 students in two elementary, two middle, and two high school buildings. Prior to the 1940s, students received their education in one-room school houses that dotted the small farm communities. The non-consolidated infrastructure did not require students to ride buses long distances as the current model requires. Angie reported 40% of her students reside in low-income households, a typified statistic reported in the rural education literature.

Angie delighted in the special attention that accompanies her "femaleness" in her present position. She described how male members of the community related her gender with her leadership, and how she neither affirmed nor rejected the bias. In particular, she discussed her ongoing relationships with the most influential citizen group in town whose mascot is "The Bulls" (pseudonym). She laughed and pointed out the obvious, "nice gender specific name, huh? Tells you who [gender] is in charge around here." She described the Bulls' gendered-focus behavior occurred at her most recent presentation to them about the school district:

> And they were all, 'Well ma'am, can we help you with this; ma'am can we help you with that? Can I carry this out to your car, ma'am? Thank you ma'am; we appreciate all of your information.' There was one man who came to the meeting who asked some good, challenging questions of me, and I was willing to answer them. But the Bulls interpreted the man's behavior as an inappropriate challenge to a woman and told him to shut-up or leave.

Angie's relationship with the Bulls is one of many she attempts to establish within the community in order to garner support for her initiations for changes within the school district. "I talk and get input from everybody, and everybody gets my information." Her proposed changes for the district were not top-down mandates, but "responses to the concerns the community brings to my attention." Determined to elicit these concerns, Angie requested all school board meetings include a formal agenda topic whereby board and community members "can have the opportunity to say whatever they want."

We asked Angie to explain how she prioritized the feedback she received. "First, we have to get a grip on poverty, a big issue in this community." Her next move was to "limit the discussion to what is in our control to change; I get everyone to see reality." Outside of these formal meetings, Angie formed relationships by "going to every event posted in the community. I've got this philosophy, 'it's my job to make my people comfortable with me.'" She identified her attendance at church crucial to this buy-in:

> In order for me to relate with them, they need to know what I am all about, what I stand for and believe in. I let 'em know who I am, and I take advantage of the nurturing role they think I, a woman, should have. I do nurture them and build upon that relationship to address their concerns and move the district along.

Angie was quick to share her palm pilot with us to prove, despite all her involvement in the community, she also schedules "nail appointments, hair appointments, all those things I need to do for myself; I schedule all important personal time."

Vignette II: Tracy

We interviewed Tracy during her first year as a superintendent, a position for which she described as "the goal from the very beginning." Yet, at the time she completed her preservice program, she wrestled with the commitment to move from a principalship at another district into her current position. The final push was her self-imposed mantra, "If I don't do it now, I will never do it." Tracy described her school district as a "large land mass" composed of several small towns, each a bedroom community to a larger one beyond the confines of the district's boundary.

Tracy described her leadership style as "I'll-back-away-and-let-you-run-with-it" in hopes of

"getting all people on board." She reported her quick resolve of important issues without full input from others, if necessary. "I'll look at all sides, but everyone knows the buck stops at the superintendent's office. I'll make the decisions that need to be made; I think I'm visionary."

Similar to Angie, Tracy spent a lot of time in the community "getting to know kids and their families." She once lived in the district, and she considered her return to the community and acceptance of the superintendent position as an advantage. Her "local gal" status combined with her gender and young age made her appear as a "true advocate for the kids." Members of the community informed her about predecessors who were "screamers," an attribute to which she does not subscribe:

> I know kids in all different types of settings, not just school. I see some of them at my home, with my own kids. I can walk out of my house and run into 40 kids I know. You [superintendent] learn a lot if you just listen [to the students]. With parents, I think they just expect and know if I commit to doing something, it's a done deal. I have earned unconditional trust by building relationships.

Vignette III: Christie

No sign greeted us or any other visitor to Christie's rural town of 200 citizens. Nestled among other small farm communities, her home-town was best known as the seat of the school district with student enrollments from its neighboring communities. Since the late 1970s, the district had only served students through eighth grade, after which time the community contracts with another rural school district for high school services.

The current enrollment consists of 120 students, with 20 in receipt of integrated special education services, a significant challenge Christie identified above and beyond the typical limitations rural school districts often encounter. She also served as the principal for the elementary school program.

Despite her mentor's (another superintendent in the state) advice, Christie dismissed the

suggestion she not make a lot of changes her first year:

> I had to do it [make changes]. But in doing so, I felt I have had to be totally open and communicative with people around me. I have filled people in about this issue and that issue, helping them understand why I wanted to make the changes I proposed. I have never said, 'This is it,' and expected all of these changes.

When asked to give us an example, Christie shared the process she implemented to find a new teacher evaluation form:

> I had to bring it up [the topic of teacher evaluations]. It was not as if any teacher said, 'Oh by the way, we think you need a new tool to use when evaluating us.' I told them how I got five copies of different evaluation tools from other districts and selected the one I liked. I showed it to them, shared it with them, and asked them if they would be interested in letting me try using it with them. I got their respect and everyone said, 'Yeah, sure, give it a try.'

Vignette IV: Debra

Debra's school district offered a unique perspective to our study. Although rural based on size and location, the district had expanded in the last five years and will continue to build additional facilities with funds from a recent and successful bond campaign. Similar to the other participants' districts, Debra's school district was part of a bedroom community with parents who commuted far distances each day to work blue-collar factory-type positions.

Also unique was Debra's background. Unlike the other participants who moved through a pipeline that began with positions in classroom teaching, followed by principalships, and ending with superintendent appointments, Debra worked in a state office position prior to her current position. Yet, despite her unique career path, she described her leadership in ways similar to the other participants' testimonies:

> I would say it's inclusive, collaborative when needed. I'm not afraid to make decisions and can make them when they

are time-sensitive; sometimes there isn't time to process with everyone the decisions I need to make. But for strategic or our continuous improvement efforts, we have a district leadership team; we have site teams. I am very process-oriented and my training comes out of the world of facilitation.

Debra revealed that certain school board members have questioned her commitment to specific hands-on work and have cited her "generous availability" to community members as an ineffective method of leadership:

They criticize me because they know anyone [in the community] can call me at home or email me. With parents, my belief is I should respond to them within 24 hours, the same expectations I have for the principals. Teachers, students, and staff all know they can come in and talk with me and I will listen to them, take some time to process their situation, invest time to find out the other side of the story, and get back to them. Such commitment is crucial for me to be successful.

Vignette V: Lenora

Like Debra, Lenora always envisioned herself as an administrator, albeit not a superintendent, early on in her career. She began her career with a commitment to teaching a specialty area for which limited jobs existed. She worked short-term and part-time positions in various rural school districts, determined to teach her content area and, more important, enhance the instructional effectiveness of each district where she taught.

Lenora equated her commitment to instructional effectiveness as the impetus for her decision to leave the classroom in pursuit of an administrative career. She ignored her university advisor's suggestion to abandon her pursuit of a graduate degree in curriculum and instruction for one in school administration. Rather, Lenora opted to complete her instructional degree with the self-awareness and commitment to follow it with coursework necessary for an administrative endorsement.

Lenora was aware some of her school board members initially did not want to hire her based on the perception she was not a viable candidate to deal with the business side of the position. Upon hire, she committed to ongoing communication with her school board members:

When I first walked through the door, there was one board member who didn't know much about me. I had heard through the grapevine he made a comment about how he didn't think he could work with me. He's now my right-hand man. We talk every day. He's an example of why this job is all about getting in and proving yourself with honest dialogue.

Lenora described her role as a "messenger" who relayed information from school personnel, students, families, and the community to school, and vice versa:

Once everyone realizes I am not here to force anything down anyone's throat, they listen to me, just like I listen to them. It's all about getting information on the table to get agreement and make the necessary changes.

When asked to share an example of contentious change during her first year as superintendent, Lenora recounted how the junior high and senior high schools implemented a newer schedule format for which school personnel, students, and parents did not favor. She detailed her continuous relays of anger constituents voiced to the school board. In turn, the school board members told her the schedule was "a done deal and there was no going back." Lenora conducted a year-long survey and collected data from administrators, teachers, parents, and students about the schedule. She used the data to help the school board members accept the fact change was needed. In the end, Lenora was able to change the schedule and contributed her commitment to her constituents' "voice" as the core of her success. She said the school board members also did not complain, "even though it killed them financially. I'm now the one suffering from the financial fallout, but at least I bridged the two sides."

Discussion

We argue the participants' relationships were part of a broader, two-way linear perspective. The women's relationship-building skills did not begin at the onset of their superintendency with the end goal of sustained employment. Rather, the skills were part of a repertoire each woman developed and valued in their previous work of teaching or administrative experiences. This reality forces us to consider the success of newly hired rural female superintendents as a process that begins before a superintendent appointment. If the academy accepts this purview, then acceptance of self-efficacy theory (SET) may benefit the recruitment, sustainability, and research about new rural female superintendents.

Self-Efficacy Theory

A historical and present use of SET appears in the behavioral sciences (e.g., sports science), and its role in educational research has analyzed students' achievements: "Research has identified self-efficacy as the essential motivational construct for students in educational settings, given its positive impact on their academic attainment and quest to accomplish complex tasks" (Palladino, 2006, p. 327). In theory, students achieve success because of cognitive engagement (application of acquired skills) and behavioral engagement (interests and beliefs). We selected SET and applied its tenets to describe our participants' relationship skills as both cognitive and behavioral forms of engagement.

Cognitive Engagement

None of the women dismissed the value of her graduate school program, nor identified it as an all-encompassing pre-service preparation for their roles as superintendents. The skills (cognition) they referenced the most were the ones they developed as classroom teachers and principals in rural school districts, namely their relationships with students and families. As one participant articulated:

> A woman sees the rural superintendency as a means to serve her people, the very individuals with whom she has lived among and taught for so many years.

> Men, in my opinion, see it more as a stepping-stone, the place in which you 'do time' until one of the larger, urban spots [superintendencies] opens up.

We do not subscribe to any negative stereotypical view of male rural superintendents. However, we do confirm all of our participants reflected about their ascensions to the superintendency in terms of what they could offer their fellow rural community members and not as notches on career ladders aimed for higher destinations. Therefore, they understood their need for people-focused leadership skills above and beyond their abilities to supervise instruction, manage finances, and other tasks the literature has reported as potential detriments to superintendents' success.

Behavioral Engagement

True to SET, the participants linked their cognitive skills with their behavior. In doing so, they examined each problem and understood how its resolution would require genuine relationships with community members, parents, school personnel, and students. They reflected about and replicated their previous collaborative successes as classroom teachers and principals to their present superintendency challenges. It was as if they said, "I have succeeded with a similar task in the past and can do so now if I just apply my repertoire of people-skills." Their trust in themselves resulted in success, rather than a false sense of power or self-esteem garnered from the title of superintendent.

Recommendations for the Academy

Our female participants were conscientious about their needs to link cognitive skills with behavioral engagement in order to succeed in rural superintendent positions. Their heightened awareness led us to ask the question: "To what extent are the academy 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 gender may create (see Irby & Brown, 1994). Yet, no discussion exists about self-

efficacy among potential aspirant female superintendents. We recommend the academy accept this theoretical framework for its superintendency preservice programs and its research.

First, we suggest the academy should establish partnerships with rural school districts and conduct forums with female educators. Semistructured conversations could help women understand the skills they have developed as classroom teachers and principals are akin to the ones successful women have employed in the superintendency. In this manner, the academy and its joint partnership with school districts would serve as the catalyst to help women link their cognition (skills developed as teachers and principals) with their behavior (potential careers as superintendents). The outcome could cause school board members, community leaders, and educators to alter the typical criteria used to recruit rural superintendents and realize candidates' self-awareness of their efficacious abilities as a foundation of success.

Second, we suggest the academy infuse SET into its preservice programs. Efforts to link preservice female superintendents with women such as the ones recruited for our study could model the connection between cognition and behavior. Internships are ideal opportunities and settings in which to achieve this goal. The academy should then guide the preservice women's reflections and help them identify their mentors' self-efficacy. Such efforts might help preservice women avoid "moderate to considerable stress" first-time superintendents have reported (Glass, 2001, p. 31).

Third, we suggest the academy address the overall dearth of literature about self-efficacy in the rural superintendency. As reported, the literature has painted bleak pictures about the representation of women in superintendent positions despite their significant presence in classroom teaching positions. At the same time, the literature and our study have identified the ideal leadership and longevity of women's rural superintendencies. We argue no potential solution to women's absences in rural superintendencies should go unexplored. Our qualitative study requires replication in other settings and with other women in order to establish a more grounded exploration of SET to exceed the bound limitations of our study.

Conclusion

The purpose of our qualitative study was to better understand the self-sustainability of first-time rural superintendents. We anchored our study on discussions in the literature about the importance of resiliency among female superintendents. Our identification of self-efficacy theory (SET) as a framework that best captured our participants' testimonies offered a unique contribution to the literature that has otherwise not existed. We used the theory to propose practices and research implications for the academy.

Limitations and Future Research

Our study lacks generalizability to other women and settings. It requires additional implications in which specific aims to explore SET are proposed. The results of these implications could further define and refocus the application of SET to the recruitment and sustainability of rural female superintendents. Likewise, our study lacks generalizability to male superintendents. The overall intent of our research was to tap into the voice of female superintendents. Our exclusion of male superintendents was not a dismissal about their recruitment and sustainability in rural superintendencies. We welcome other researchers' applications of our proposed theoretical framework to male preservice candidates, a counter voice that would ultimately enhance all research about the superintendency and those who could and have aspired to this noble profession.

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