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Race, Culture, and Strategies for Success of Female Public School Administrators

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Abstract

The purpose for conducting this study was to examine the differences among African American, Hispanic, and white female public school administrators with respect to their perceptions of successful strategies that led to career advancement. Female public school administrators continue to experience barriers to career advancement. The data revealed that Hispanic females perceived themselves as more successful in utilizing more strategies than African American and white females. Few females reported utilizing the informal mentoring technique of forming "new girl networks."

Introduction

The lack of minorities and females with administrative positions in public school education is supported by research. Sixty-five percent of the public school principalship positions are held by males; females hold 35% and furthermore, only 16% of the public school principals are minorities (U.S. Department of Education, 1995). Minority females hold a mere 6.4% of the principalship positions (AASA, 1992). The representation of minority females in the superintendency is dismal; only 12% of the superintendents were women and just 5% were minorities (Futrell, 2002). This approximates the same percentages as those at the beginning of the 20th century.

Strategies are available to women who seek to break the glass ceiling. This article focuses on the use of strategies used by African American, Hispanic, and white females.

The Status of Women in Administration
The number of women exceeds the number of men in school administration graduate programs, in the teaching ranks, but an absence of women in powerful administrative positions in public education persists

About the Author

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(Morie & Wilson, 1996). The superintendent, assistant superintendent, and high school principal roles are filled by males despite a growing body of research attesting to the outstanding potential of women in all administrative positions (McGrath, 1992). Women are clustered at the supervisory and elementary level positions in district administration, positions typically considered to have *staff* rather than *line* authority (Gupton & Slick, 1995). Further, data reveal that women are receiving 65% of the salary of their male counterparts (Waddell, 1994).

Hispanic Females in Educational Leadership

The United States Census Bureau (2000) reported that those who identify themselves as Hispanic or Latino represented 12.5% of the total population. Little research exists addressing Hispanic leaders, and even less has been conducted about Hispanic female administrators and their perceived barriers to higher-level administrative positions. In the early 1980s, data collected from Hispanic women indicated that their placement as administrators was relegated to Hispanic elementary schools (Ortiz, 1982). The more current assertion is that only Hispanic administrators can solve the problems at Hispanic schools (Padilla, 1995; Reyes & Valencia, 1995).

Mexican American female principals in the Rio Grande Valley region of Texas described the difficulties of finding balance being both Mexican American and female. The leadership styles of these Hispanic female principals practiced aspects of management not utilized by white males.

Those included collaboration, teamwork, shared decision making, and a tolerance for diversity (Carr, 1995).

In a case study of the career paths, barriers and strategies of six Hispanic female school administrators, Regules (1997) described the Hispanic female staff and line administrators' career paths as moving from an initial position of bilingual teacher, to bilingual resource teacher, and to district administration before becoming an assistant principal. The Hispanic female then was diverted to district responsibilities before advancing to the assistant superintendency.

Ornelas (1991) reported that women, especially Hispanics, were not equally represented in central administrative K-12 positions. A directorship position was the highest position held by any of the participants. Most respondents reported occupying elementary principalships at predominantly minority schools. White women, compared to Hispanic women, expressed a greater satisfaction with the progression of their careers, yet the Hispanic women aspired to higher career goals than did the white women. The Hispanic group, more than the white group, attributed career success to intentional change and credited themselves, more than others, for choosing, planning, and carrying out the change to become administrators.

In higher education, Hispanic women administrators reported five major factors as positively influencing career advancement: education and training, goal setting, networking, knowledge of mainstream systems, and knowledge of the advancement process. Factors hindering advancement included: Hispanic culture family traditions, the stereotypical view of the female as a subordinate, and issues of ethnicity (Gorena, 1996).

African American Females in Educational Leadership

In the decade after the Supreme Court's historic desegregation ruling in 1954, the number of African American principals in the 11 southern border states (Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas) actually dropped over 95% (Coursen, 1989). The urban residential segregation policies that emerged relegated African American administrators to mostly African American schools. Of those African American administrators, very few were female.

African American women are still perceived to be the least powerful in society and in most organizations (Howard-Vital & Morgan, 1993). They rarely enjoy positions of power or experience the inner workings of organizations. In the past, males have dominated leadership positions in the

African American community obtained through education or the church. Women did not have such advantage and advancement came only with long work hours with heavy workloads performed in front of scrutinizing eyes (Carter, Pearson & Shavlik, 1988). Gill and Showell (1991) documented sexual and racial barriers that prevented African-American women from obtaining top leadership roles in education. Their respondents reported that politics, friendships, network systems, and other factors outweighed the qualifications of education and experience in determining whether a job/position advancement occurred.

Fontaine and Greenlee (1993) reported that African American women who were the solitary members of a sex and racial group in the workplace believed they had to outperform majority group counterparts. Jones (1993) offered four conditions that African American female administrators face in the workplace. First, they must observe carefully the unknown. They experience social and professional isolation, encounter false assumptions and stereotypes, and finally, they are expected to serve on multiple committees within their division to represent a minority perspective. For African American females, self-validation sometimes may be the only source of acknowledgement received (Phelps, 1995).

Strategies Utilized to Overcome Barriers
Moire and Wilson (1996) list four key factors that may assist women in overcoming the barriers to career advancement in educational administration: (a) have powerful motivation; (b) have successful career-family configurations; (c) have guidance from mentors and spouses; and (c) have the determination, persistence, and tenacity that is required to succeed despite the innumerable deterrents that are imposed.

The need for mentorship or sponsorship has been strongly reinforced in the literature. Berman (1997) reported that mentors can help women's careers by giving their protégées career direction, support, career aspiration, and by assisting with career change. Whitaker and Lane (1990) stated that through mentors, women could receive practical experiences, knowledge about job openings, "inside" information about positions and districts, as well as encouragement and advice. Yet, two issues influence whether women have mentoring relationships in public schools. First, opportunities for women to have mentors are limited by the scarcity of women who occupy appropriate positions in administration. Also, cross mentoring between male mentors and female protégées is frequently of reduced value or importance because of gender role attitudes. Findings by Gupton and Slick (1995) support the

importance of mentoring. They confirmed that the majority of the *highly successful* women educators have had significant numbers of positive role models and supportive mentors in their lives. Moire and Wilson (1996) reported that female superintendents had mentors in multiple areas of their lives that have provided different types of support: professor mentors in doctoral programs, on-the-job principal and superintendent mentors, and spouse mentors. Other strategies for advancement in the field include career plans (Beason, 1992; Clemens, 1990; Edson, 1988; Jones & Montenegro, 1982; Truesdale, 1988; Warren, 1990), participation in professional and community organizations (Bowman, 1987; Truesdale, 1988), networking (Beason, 1992; Blum, 1990), and professional visability (Edson, 1988).

The Glass Ceiling Commission
Public Law 102-166 of the Civil Rights Act of 1991 enacted The Glass Ceiling Commission for the purpose of conducting studies and preparing recommendations concerning (a) eliminating artificial barriers to the advancement of women and minorities; and (b) increasing the opportunities and development experiences of women and minorities to foster advancement of women and minorities to management and decision-making positions in business (United States Department of Labor, 1995). The fact-finding commission reported "women and minorities who participated in focus groups, researchers, and government officials, all agree that a glass ceiling exists and that it operates substantially to exclude minorities and women from top levels of management" (USDL, 1995). The report, in addition to describing the types of artificial barriers that face women and minorities in the business world as societal barriers, internal structural barriers, and governmental barriers, provided strategies used in business to manage change effectively.

Despite the implementation of these strategies by growing numbers of corporate leaders, significant informal and artificial barriers continue to exist at various levels within organizations and are experienced differently by different ethnic and racial groups (USDL, 1995). Female and minority administrators in the public school system are examples of those who continue to experience barriers when attempting to "climb the career ladder."

Description of the Study
Ten strategies were identified from the literature about women in the workplace that are faced with a "glass ceiling." The strategies included: (a) setting career goals and formulating a plan of action, (b) developing/utilizing

"New Girl Network," (c) enlisting influential sponsors, (d) seeking advanced training and certification, (e) being assertive in pursuing career goals, (f) becoming professionally visible, (g) improving professional image, (h) attending seminars and administrative training workshops to improve professional and interpersonal skills, (i) learning to cope with multiple roles-wife/mother/professional, and (j) obtaining support from family and/or peers.

Two hundred sixty female administrators in one southern metropolitan school district were surveyed about strategies. The respondents were asked to rate the strategies in terms of successful application according to a three-point Likert Scale with 1 being unsuccessful, 2 being somewhat successful, and 3 being highly successful. A fourth category was provided to indicate that the strategy was never used. A response rate of 59% (n = 153) was obtained. The demographic breakdown by race was 32% (n = 49) white, 33% (n = 50) African American, and 35% (n = 54) Hispanic. The same breakdown by leadership positions was 68% (n = 104) elementary school principals, 9% (n = 14) middle school principals, 2% (n = 3) senior high school principals, 9.5% (n = 15) directors, 2% (n = 3) assistant superintendents, 0.7% (n = 1) deputy superintendent, and 9.5% (n = 16) other non-school site higher-level administrators.

Results

The ten strategies were analyzed using a Chi-Square statistic to determine if differences existed among the races in degrees of success. Of the ten strategies, four showed significant differences among the three races for success in career advancement: (a) improving professional image, (b) becoming professionally visible, (c) seeking advanced training, and (d) being assertive in pursuing goals. Table 1 displays the number and percent for each of the strategies.

There was a significant difference among African Americans, Hispanics and white women in the successfulness of the use of the strategy *Improving Professional Image*, χ^2 (4, n = 141) = 20.38, p < .001. Forty-one (82%) of the Hispanic female administrators indicated it as highly successful, 30 (65%) of the African American female administrators indicated it as highly successful, and 26 (58%) of the White female administrators indicated it as highly successful.

Becoming Professionally Visible also showed significant differences by race χ^2 (4, n = 144) = 11.26, p = .024. Thirty-seven (74%) of the Hispanic female administrators indicated it as a highly successful strategy, 30 (64%)

Table 1

Strategies Showing Significance, by Number and Percent*, and by Race

	Highly Successful N (%)		Somewhat Successful N (%)		Unsuccessful N (%)	
Improving Professional						
Image	30	(65.2)	10	(21.7)	6	(13.0)
African-American	41	(82.0)	9	(18.0)	0	(0.0)
Hispanic	26	(57.8)	19	(42.2)	0	(0.0)
White						
Becoming Professionally						
Visible	30	(63.8)	13	(27.7)	4	(8.5)
African-American	37	(74.0)	13	(26.0)	0	(0.0)
Hispanic	24	(51.1)	22	(46.8)	1	(2.1)
White						
Seeking Advanced Training						
African-American	37	(75.5)	7	(14.3)	5	(10.2)
Hispanic	44	(84.6)	8	(15.4)	0	(0.0)
White	31	(68.9)	13	(28.9)	1	(2.2)
Being Assertive in Pursuing						
Career Goals	24	(52.2)	16	(34.8)	6	(13.0)
African-American	37	(75.5)	7	(14.3)	5	(10.2)
Hispanic	32	(61.5)	20	(38.5)	0	(0.0)
White	21	(46.7)	22	(48.9)	2	(4.4)

*Percentage may not equal 100% due to rounding.

of the African American females indicated it as a highly successful strategy, and 24 (51%) of the White females indicated it as a highly successful strategy.

Seeking Advanced Training and certification showed significant differences by race as a strategy utilized in accomplishing career goals, χ^2 (4, n = 146) = 10.96, p = .027. Of the Hispanic female administrators, 44 (85%) indicated it as highly successful. Thirty-seven (76%) of the African American female administrators and 31 (69%) of the White female administrators indicated it as a highly successful strategy.

The strategy, *Being Assertive in Pursuing Career Goals*, showed significant differences by race, χ^2 (4, n = 143) = 9.81, p = .044. Thirty-two (62%) of the Hispanic female administrators indicated it as a highly successful strategy, 24 (52%) of the African American females indicated it as a highly successful strategy, and 21 (47%) of the White females indicated it as a highly successful strategy.

The choice "Never Used" was chosen by 3 to 35 female administrators when answering nine of the ten questions. When responding to the use of the *"New Girl" Network."* Strategy, 76 of the female administrators indicated that they had "Never Used" the strategy.

Table 2 displays the number and percent of each of the three groups of respondents that responded to the remaining six strategies for advancing careers. No statistical differences were found among the groups in terms of the successfulness of the strategies.

Discussion

Significant differences by race were found in four areas. Hispanic higher-level female administrators were more likely to (a) seek advanced training (84%); (b) become assertive in pursuing career goals (62%); (c) become professionally visible (74%); and (d) improve their professional image (82%). Hispanic female administrators rated themselves more highly successful when utilizing strategies to overcome stated barriers when answering seven of the ten questions on strategies as compared to white female administrators and African American female administrators. Hispanic female administrators in this large metropolitan school district perceived themselves as being successful in achieving what white and African American female administrators are still finding troublesome: assertively utilizing available resources to enhance their careers.

What are the contributing factors to these results? An important demographic statistic reported by the administrators indicated that the Hispanic female administrators showed a significant difference when identifying their place of birth. Of the 50 Hispanic administrators who answered the question, 40 (80%) were born in Cuba and 10 (20%) were born in the United States. The white female administrators and the African American female administrators were all born in the United States.

Perhaps those Hispanic females who responded to the survey had a strong sense of identity with their culture. Researchers have shown that people with a positive self-concept and with high self-esteem will have a strong and favorable ethnic identity (Charleswork, 2000; Samuels, 1977). In fact, Phinney (1990) reported that self-esteem is unquestionably related to ethnic identity. Recent immigrants have been shown to have strong ties to their culture of origin and exhibit less flexibility within the macroculture (Lee, 1997). They learn the language and adapt to practices of the macroculture, yet continue to nurture the cultural customs of the "old

Table 2
Strategies Showing No Significance, by Number and Percent*,
and by Race

	Highly Successful N (%)		Somewhat Successful N (%)		Unsuccessful N (%)	
Attending Seminars and Workshops						
African-American	29	(59.2)	15	(30.6)	5	(10.2)
Hispanic	39	(75.0)	13	(25.0)	0	(0.0)
White	25	(54.3)	15	(32.6)	6	(13.1)
Enlisting Influential Sponsors	17	(40.5)	18	(42.9)	7	(16.7)
African-American	20	(50.0)	21	(50.0)	0	(0.0)
Hispanic	16	(50.0)	14	(43.8)	2	(6.3)
White						
Setting Career Goals						
African-American	30	(61.2)	16	(32.7)	3	(6.1)
Hispanic	36	(70.6)	15	(29.4)	0	(0.0)
White	29	(64.4)	16	(35.6)	0	(0.0)
New Girl Network						
African-American	6	(23.1)	11	(42.3)	9	(34.6)
Hispanic	7	(25.0)	18	(64.3)	3	(10.7)
White	6	(27.3)	13	(59.1)	3	(13.6)
Obtaining Support from Family/Peers						
African-American	41	(87.2)	5	(10.6)	1	(2.1)
Hispanic	42	(79.8)	10	(18.9)	1	(1.9)
White	32	(69.6)	13	(28.3)	1	(2.2)
Coping with Multiple Roles						
African-American	27	(69.2)	11	(28.2)	1	(2.6)
Hispanic	36	(75.0)	12	(25.0)	0	(0.0)
White	25	(64.1)	13	(33.3)	1	(2.6)

*Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding.

country" (Lee, 1997). The cultural factors that influence individuals are described by Locke (1998) as psychological and behavioral qualities, child-rearing practices, religious practices, family structure, and values and

attitudes. Those factors have a strong influence on the perceptions of the Hispanic females when considering the success of strategies used for career advancement.

Hispanic female administrators did not identify the "New Girl Network" as an indicator of a successful strategy. As stated by Blum (1990), such mentoring and networking could serve to provide support, encouragement, feedback, and insight.

The success perceived by Hispanic female administrators in utilizing strategies to overcome barriers to career advancement should be shared with administrators of other races. The extent of the variations in perception has the potential to allow for greater understanding among females of all races. Regardless of race, all females share common experiences and bonds. These unique experiences, expertise and knowledge can be used to transform the diversity into an advantage and promote strength among and between female public school administrators of all races and ethnicities. Individual and group differences can contribute to the accomplishments of all. Only then can the extensive diversity be transformed into a stronghold.

Questions remain as to how cultural dynamics differ among races. The survey administered was not designed to answer those questions. Therefore, future research recommendations focus on the cultural dynamics of females of various races and ethnicities that contribute to them being able to achieve despite the existence of the glass ceiling. Also of interest is the probable relationship between culture/race and the perception of the existence of barriers in the attempt to advance in public school administration. Understanding differences and strengths will lead to cohesiveness and more females participating in informal and formal "new girl networks." Females must utilize this information as an added strategy to overcome the artificial and informal barriers placed in their paths with a resulting accomplishment of all achieving self-actualization in their careers.

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