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7-2004

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Moss, Glenda, "A Reflective - Reflexive View of Women and Leadership" (2004). *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership*. 123.
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A Reflective – Reflexive View of Women and Leadership

Glenda Moss

This article reflects the author's personal experiences through a reflective-reflexive view of women and leadership. Significant writings on women and leadership, particularly Rhode (2003) *The Difference "Difference" Makes: Women and Leadership*, are included in the analysis.

During my ninth year of teaching, one of my male colleagues said, "No woman will every be principal here if I have anything to do with it." The comment was in response to hearing that I was thinking about applying for the position, that had been vacated by the principal's move to assistant superintendent. I had been enjoying a successful teaching career in the school and had been selected as District Teacher of the Year two years earlier. I had a master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction, had written and self-published a book, was mid-management certified, and presented at professional conferences and inservices for classroom teachers. I was committed to the school, in which nearly 70% of the students were on free or reduced meal programs. I did not apply for the principal position since I did not think I had a chance. I supported the new principal but found it difficult to work under his autocratic leadership style. Two years later I resigned from my teaching position to pursue a doctorate in educational leadership.

For the most part, I was supported by the faculty in the doctoral program. It seemed to me that two of my male professors used their position to dominate rather than contribute to my professional development. During a philosophy/ethics class, my male professor expected me to examine feminist educational literature. I remember expressing feelings of not being able to relate to one particular feminist reading, and my male professor challenged me by saying that I was afraid. I did not feel afraid of what I had read, I just did not relate to that particular author's perspective. It was paradoxical to me that the same professor, who required me to be open to feminist ideas,¹ was oppressive in the exercise of his authority in relationship to me as his student. I was not afforded the right to disagree with him; and, on one occasion, as my adviser, he stated to me that I would never attain a teaching position in a university because I had never held a position in school administration. He was far from a feminist disposition of leadership and teaching. I requested a

About the Author

Glenda Moss is an assistant professor of secondary education and associate director of the Appleseed Writing Project at Indiana University Purdue University Fort Wayne. She merges theory and practice in preparing preservice and inservice teachers to emerge as teacher leaders to face the complex problems in education. A critical narrative methodologist, her research includes scholar-practitioner teacher leadership, field-based teacher education, critical pedagogy, and portfolio assessment.

different adviser, completed my doctorate in educational leadership, and moved into a university teaching position in which I prepare secondary classroom teachers and serve as the Associate Director of the Appleseed Writing Project.

In Rhode (2003) edited book, *The Difference "Difference" Makes: Women and Leadership*, "Women remain dramatically underrepresented in formal leadership positions. The aim of this book, and the women's leadership summit on which it is based, is to explore the reasons for that underrepresentation and identify strategies for change" (p. 3). Although the verbal discouragement I received from the two males in the above scenarios is not the only barrier to women moving into positions of educational leadership, women need more than the extinction of explicit roadblocks. White men must champion change for women (Barnes, 2003; Jones, 2003). Rhode (2003) identified four barriers to women accessing leadership positions in the field of law:

- Gender stereotypes
- Lack of mentoring
- Workplace practice vs. Family commitments
- Lack of legal support to address gender disadvantages

Rhode also suggested strategies to facilitate change:

- Recruit, retain, mentor, and promote women as a matter of policy
- Assess gender-related issues getting in the way of women accessing leadership positions and respond through affirmative policies

- Equalize leadership opportunities through serious commitment to addressing work-family conflicts and related issues involving quality of life
- Encourage mentoring programs and women's networks

Kellerman's (2003) "You've Come a Long Way, Baby—and You've Got Miles to Go" is applicable in the field of education. It engaged me both as a woman in a male-dominated society and as a classroom teacher in a field dominated by top-down authority—male-dominated school administration vs. primarily female classroom teachers and male-dominated academic scholarship vs. female-dominated classroom practice.

Drawing on Kanter (1977), *Men and Women of the Corporation*, Reskin (2003) noted that "people who see little chance of advancement tend to disinvest in their careers, and sex segregation means that such people are more likely to be female than male" (p. 62). While a middle school classroom teacher, I felt powerless and voiceless. Part of what I hoped to accomplish through studying educational leadership and attaining a doctorate was to access higher education and the privilege of having voice in the academy. I hoped to exercise leadership from that position and validate the professional experiences of classroom teachers. It is because of my position in higher education that I have been afforded the opportunity to participate in the discourse.

The Difference Different Positions Make

I am an assistant professor who is grounded in classroom teaching practice and scholar-practitioner² leadership doctoral studies (Jenlink & Horn, in press; Moss, in press). Scholar-practitioner leadership, although grounded in a critical perspective, is not gendered. Emerging as a female teacher leader, I engaged in leadership conversations with three other women in positions of leadership at Indiana University Purdue University Fort Wayne, the university where I teach. I co-designed a study in preparation for a presentation at the 17th Annual Women in Educational Leadership Conference. During one focused conversation, and after I had made a position statement that all members of educational organizations can lead from whatever position they are occupying, the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs stated her interest in studying leadership among people in positions of authority.

Vice Chancellor Hannah: A lot of people can at different times and different places assume a leadership role, and that's really what she [Glenda] is talking about. She's talking about the leadership people can provide any place in an organization—in the classroom, or one project or another. But

I'm in a particular place in my leadership development, where I am interested in leadership as practice by people who also have authority. What do they do with that? So while I don't disagree at all, that people in lots of different places lead, we couldn't do our job if there weren't leaders all over the place doing their job. But because of where I am and what I'm doing right now, I'm particularly interested in leadership as practice by people who also are in positions of authority. (Murphey, Moss, Hannah, & Wiener, 2003, p. 4)

I realize that positions do carry with them power that we cannot access without being in that position. I used to have an ideal view that the position in and of itself did not necessarily create power, that it was the person, the people. But I have to face the fact that given the position of being a faculty member, there are some things I can do as a result of holding that position that I wanted to do when I was a seventh-grade teacher. As a seventh-grade teacher, I had visions of accessing the services of preservice teachers to work with me in teaching the numerous students in my classes who were identified as at-risk of not graduating from high school. It seemed like a simple project to organize and facilitate and one that would benefit preservice teachers, middle school students, and university teacher educators. I pictured myself helping the university teacher educators prepare preservice teachers by allowing them to come into my classroom, where I could teach them how to teach in a diversely-populated middle school context. However, I never had power to play the role I wanted to play in preparing classroom teachers until I pursued a doctorate and accepted a position in higher education. Now, from this position, I have found avenues to return to the public school classroom to prepare teachers, but I had to do it from my position of authority. That is the difference position made for me as a woman and a teacher.

However, my position as a teacher educator did not have the overriding authority and power needed to transition my methods courses to a high school campus. As pointed out by Dean Wiener³ of our School of Education:

Dean Wiener: But it also depended on the leadership above you. If I had said, "I don't like that idea," or if Susan had said, "No, I don't like the liability," or if I said, "I'd rather that the faculty teaches in a class right here," you couldn't have taught your class at a high school. So, you had control of your ideas and where you wanted to go, but still you had to rely upon the hierarchical system. (Murphey et al., 2003, p. 10)

I have been fortunate to be a part of an educational organization that supports innovation. I was also fortunate, for two years, to be a part of the only department on campus led by a female dean. From my point of view, she was a model and mentor.

Rhode (2003) identified mentoring programs and women's networks as strategies to facilitate change for women accessing leadership positions, but I think it takes more than mentoring programs. It takes the commitment of women and men in leadership positions supporting subordinate women as they emerge with creative leadership ideas. In my own case, we do not have an official mentoring program, but I perceived both my Dean and Vice Chancellor as developing leadership among female faculty members as a type of mentoring.

Rhode (2003) heightened my awareness of the void of women in positional leadership and made me conscious of the ways I had been excluded in the past and the ways I have been mentored into positions of educational leadership in the present. Similar to my opening stories, I felt devalued when the school board of the small parochial school where I enjoyed my first teaching job contacted me and informed me that my contract was not being renewed. The board member told me that I had done an excellent job during my three years at the school, that my file was without blemish, and that I had received an excellent evaluation by the outside evaluator. He said that he could not explain why my contract was not being renewed. The outside evaluator hired to evaluate all the teachers in the school that year later told me that I had received the highest evaluation in the school. He told me that the decision must have been political, but I should not pursue making a legal case on my behalf if I wanted to continue in a teaching career. He pointed out that other schools would not hire me if I made a legal case out of my situation. I then accepted a new position in a public school setting. That fall, I learned that the new male football coach at the parochial school was teaching my classes. I did not make a case out of the inequity.

Stretch Assignments

The transition to public schools turned out to be a good move for me and retrospectively appears as a "stretch assignment," defined by Hill (2003) as "assignments with which considerable positional power is associated" in that it included "*relevance, visibility, and autonomy*" (p. 155). Based on Hill's diagram, *Building Power and Influence Over the Course of a Career*, my personal, reflective-reflexive analysis is on target. Hill outlined the process as follows: Fit, learning opportunity → Stretch assignments → Expertise → Results → Track record/Credibility → Stretch assignments, positional power (relevance, autonomy, visibility) begins to grow → Expertise → Results → Track record/Credibility → Stretch assignments, Positional power (including formal authority) continues to grow → Currencies to exchange. This process parallels building network relationships and centrality.⁴

In reality, I had little official line power in the school's site map; but in my new middle school teaching position; I quickly grew a reputation as an outstanding teacher, successful with underachieving students. The female assistant principal was a strong instructional leader and mentored me to grow in confidence as I brought my creative teaching ideas to the forefront and advanced my teaching for student learning. During my second year in the school, she supported me as I wrote a small anecdotal book, *Tender Talk for Tough Kids*, and began to inservice classroom teachers and presented my ideas at professional teacher conferences. My assistant principal completed her doctorate that summer and accepted the principalship in another school. I continued to grow under the support of the male principal and the new male assistant principal, but this changed during my ninth year at the school, when a new, autocratic principal was hired. It was then, that I pursued a doctorate in educational leadership.

Female and Male Mentorship Makes a Difference Women and Leadership

At the beginning of this essay, I related one story of discouragement in the doctoral program. The scenario was more than balanced by three doctoral professors, two white male and one white female, who mentored me through the completion of my dissertation and transition into higher education. To this day, the two white male professors have remained sources of support whenever I decide to give either one of them a call to discuss a difficult situation that I am facing as I continue on my journey in educational leadership. Likewise, I have described the rich mentoring experiences and support I have received in my university teaching position.

My experiences support the difference that white men can make in terms of women advancing in leadership. In her chapter, "Strategies for developing white men as change agents for women leaders," Barnes (2003) stated that "white men must be brought to the table to participate actively in the dialogue for change and to become champions for women's leadership" (p. 181). Interestingly, at my university, the hiring of our new Dean of the School of Education (SOE) in the summer of 2003, gave us 100% male deans in the university. Within the SOE, we also have two white male department chairs. Although this was not a conspiracy, it is easy to see why there is a great deal of interest in researching gender issues in leadership and career progress as statistics continue to show that women are held at the margins of leadership opportunities (Carli & Eagly, 2001; McDonald & Hite, 1998).

Barnes (2003) described the important role that both women mentors and white men can play as allies to women's advancement. Hansman (1998) and

Chandler (1996) argued that it takes more than formal mentoring programs. Although the university where I teach does not have a formal mentoring program, I have been fortunate in my position in the SOE to experience mentor-type support of both females and males in leadership positions. Joe, a white male, chaired the search committee that hired me. I researched the faculty before meeting for the interview and was concerned that the quantitative research orientation of the search committee chair would be a barrier to his viewing me in a positive way. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that Joe valued diversity and was hoping the committee would hire someone with different research skills than his own. Likewise, the chair of the Professional Studies Department that housed secondary education was a white male. Bill, though not an official mentor, took responsibility for advising me about the kinds of service activities I needed to be involved with to meet the requirements for promotion and tenure. What makes them different?

As I reflectively-reflexively think about the issue of family-career conflicts and the influence that women's priorities play in their lack of advancement in leadership (Herring, 2003; Rhode, 2003), I pondered what has been the difference in my department, where there does not seem to be a shortage of white male support. In part, it is the core values of the males, who each value and equally accept family responsibilities. I also realize that because my children are grown, I no longer have the stress of balancing career and family.

I realized before reading Rhode (2003) that I put my career on hold for ten years to raise two children in a traditional family configuration. I also made a commitment to staying in the middle school classroom even when people in positions of authority encouraged me to move into higher education at an early time in my life. I am conscious that my decisions were influenced by the society in which I was raised during the 1950s and 1960s. I remember a time when I believed that men should be paid more than women because they had to support the family. Everyone, male and female, has decisions to make, and each decision makes a difference or reproduces the status quo. Rhode's edited book is a springboard for reflective-reflexive thinking and for critical conversations about women and leadership, and the difference that both female mentors and white males can make to create a more equitable society, beginning with the legal field, where power is at the center.

Notes

¹ For a review of feminist critique in education, see Lather (1984, 1987, 1991, 1996).

- ² The scholar-practitioner leader concept connotes the development of professional practitioners who move beyond the casual consumer level of research and scholarship to a level of authentic practice where research and scholarship are intimate components of the leader's (including the administrator and the teacher-as-leader) practice on a day-to-day basis (see Jenlink, 1999, p. 1; Moss, 2004).
- ³ Dr. Wiener served as Dean of the School of Education at Indiana University Purdue University for four years, summer 1999—June 1, 2003, when she retired.
- ⁴ See Linda A. Hill's Figure 1 on page 154 of chapter 13, Are we preparing ourselves to lead?, in Deborah L. Rhode (2003) *The difference "difference" makes: Women in leadership*.

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