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Self-Efficacy of Female School Board Presidents

Vicki VanTuyle and Sandra Watkins

Abstract

Women's representation on school boards nearly equals that of males. As a result women are ascending to the leadership role of school board president in greater numbers. This qualitative study of female school board presidents examined the phenomenon of being a female school board president. Eight female school board presidents from Illinois participated, responding to interview questions about their role, responsibilities, and relationships with regard to the position of board president. The response data were explored using narrative analysis. The theoretical framework for analysis was based on Bandura's Self-Efficacy theory. Responses from the interviews were interpreted vis-à-vis themes aligned to three of Bandura's sources of information for developing self-efficacy: 1) the ability to execute and produce results (Bandura, 1977); 2) triadic reciprocity considering personal factors, behavior, and environmental influences (Bandura, 1986); and 3) mastery experience, vicarious experience, and persuasion of others (Bandura, 1977). This research contributes to a portrait of female school board presidents' self-efficacy. In addition, it serves as a reflective collection of female leadership experiences characterized by high levels of self-efficacy.

School Board Service

In Illinois, as in many states across the nation, school board member service is voluntary and has as its purpose the governance of public schools through elected local control. The voluntary nature of school

board service assumes there are few obligations. Yet the expectations are often substantial: attending meetings, responding to inquiries and complaints, becoming knowledgeable about school law, policies, and practices, and making decisions affecting students, families, and voters. School board governance is time-consuming and complex, navigating power structures in the schools, in the community, and at the board table (McCarty & Ramsey, 1968). Some school board governance effectiveness is challenged by members motivated by personal agendas or “single-issue concerns” (Mountford & Brunner, 1999, p. 2).

Yet school boards realize effective school board governance has a positive effect on improving student achievement in their districts (Iowa School Board Compass, 2000; Goodman and Zimmerman, 2000; Waters & Marzano, 2006). School board member service is valuable for empowering others and building collaborative relationships between school and community, school and local government, school and local business and service groups (Mountford & Brunner, 1999). For many individuals, “school board membership is the highest form of public service” (Carol, Cunningham, Danzberger, Kirst, McCloud, & Usdan, 1986, p. 14), with great responsibility in making decisions that best serve the district’s students. The best decisions are sometimes difficult to arrive at with personal agendas, board member power struggles, and strained superintendent/board relationships. Board members’ positions turn over as do superintendents. The fulcrum, the tipping point, of school board effectiveness resides in the school board president and their ability to effectively work with both the board members, the superintendent, and internal and external stakeholders. The board president balances the interests and agendas of the superintendent and the interests and agendas of the board members. An Education Writers Association (2003) special report on superintendent and board shared governance asserted many school districts “are mired in relationships that often pit local lay leaders against professional managers” (pp. 3-4.) Board leadership, the board president, the report notes, keeps the focus of board members on core beliefs, vision, and a plan, contributes to effective district governance (p. 7). Finally, the report credits Thomas Glass with this point about ineffective school boards: they “lack experienced leaders from other sectors in the community...and [leaders] who do not understand the process of consensus building” (p. 8). This paper will shed light on female school board president leadership and the sources of their self-efficacy.

“A candidate’s sex does not affect his or her chances of winning an election. . . . Winning elections has nothing to do with the sex of the candidate” (Seltzer, Newman, & Leighton, 1997, p. 79.) However, it was not until the feminist movement of the 1970s that females began to disrupt stereotypes of boardroom makeup and of executive offices. The desire for equal representation, equal pay, and equal rights, in general, caused some women to consider what they were capable of doing to get the results they wanted. This is self-efficacy.

The term self-efficacy is grounded in Bandura’s (1986) theoretical framework of social cognitive theory that encompasses three factors: behavior, cognition, and the environment. These three factors are interactive and contribute to the personal motivations and behaviors of individuals. According to Bandura, “*Perceived self-efficacy refers to beliefs in ones’ capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments*” (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). Bandura speculated that the strength of any group or organization is attributed to the collective self-efficacy of the group and the belief that the group could master problems and achieve desired results. The personal efficacy of the leader is of paramount importance in facilitating the collective efficacy of the group. Bandura (1997) asserted the leader of the group needs to possess a sense of personal well-being and feel comfortable in their capabilities to approach difficult tasks and have assurances that these challenges can be mastered. Unique to these leaders is the passion and commitment they demonstrate to challenging goals. Another interesting fact is that if failure is encountered, they quickly recover and attribute the failure to lack of effort or knowledge and continue to approach difficult situations with assurances they can exercise over them. This efficacious outlook produces personal accomplishment and results (Bandura, 1997).

The feminist movement of the 1970’s was led by women with a sense of self-efficacy (Yoder & Kahn, 1992). This movement, along with the election of Barbara Reimers, as President of the National School Board Association (NSBA) in 1973, led to questioning the scarce number of women serving on school boards throughout the United States. Reimers and the Directors of the NSBA commissioned a study to determine why women serve in such small numbers on boards of education. Although the study found little difference in the characteristics male and female board members bring to board service, the study indicated: “*Attitudes about women appear to be a major impediment to women seeking school board office*” (National School Boards Association, 1974,

p. 1). The study found a prevalent attitude among board members: women being elected to a school boards was appropriate “unless ‘a’ woman, or ‘too many’ women, [are] on the school board” (National School Boards Association, 1974, p. 1.) The study highlighted the attitudes that were reported as handicaps and, in turn, hindered women in seeking a school board seat. Women identified their gender as a handicap and as a concern when identified as the only woman, the sole woman, the first woman. Women noted that others had attitudes about mothers, pregnant women, unqualified women, emotional women as board members that could handicap one’s ability to be elected (National School Boards Association, 1974). Whatever the attitudes, the women of the 70s that were elected to school boards attained those seats because of self- efficacy, a belief in their personal ability.

In the 1970s, women’s organizational service was primarily in women’s organizations and in organizations associated with their children such as parent and teacher organizations. The National School Boards Association’s (1974) study reported that women school board members were more likely to receive encouragement and support from members of school-related organizations and non-school related organizations to which they belonged. Women were likely persuaded to expand their leadership capacity when encouraged by others with whom they associated.

Similarly, a study by Bers (1978) of Cook County, Illinois board of education members in 1974-1975 found the female board members were involved in a greater number of organizations than their male counterparts. Bers noted these organization were those where the women were involved with their children and their children’s interests. Despite this involvement with others through organizations, Bers concluded, “Women in this survey were more likely than men to seek board membership on their own rather than relying on a network of associates for encouragement and promotion” (Bers, p. 390). For the women in the study, their self-efficacy was rooted in their personal assessment of their contributions, their recognition of challenges and their persistence in facing them, and in their responses to their environments in seeking collegial and collaborative relations with stakeholders (Bers, 1978).

From the 1970s to the 21st century, what has changed with regard to women and men running for and being elected to a public office? In their book from the 1990s, *Women, Elections, and Representation*, Darcy, Welch, and Clark (1994) noted “... most women who hold public

office in the United States do so at the local level, as members of city councils, school boards, county commissions, and other elected groups governing cities, counties, and other local entities” (p. 30).

In the early years of the 21st century, Richard L. Fox and other researchers took up the study of gender and running for office. Fox, Lawless, and Feeley (2001) found women were less likely to run for public office if they did not have encouragement and support. They posited that encouragement and support contributed to a higher level of self- efficacy.

In a study preceding Fox and Lawless’s Citizen Political Ambition Study (CPAS), Fox (n.d.) authored a report concluding, “women are significantly more likely than men to select school board as the first office for which they might run” (p. 6). He reported finding from a particular professional stratum, male and female lawyers, executives, and educators, “women are significantly less likely than men to have ever considered running for office” (Fox, n.d., p. 4).

He concluded, “Women are less likely to have received the suggestion to run for office, regardless of the source” (p. 9). The author noted, “This is a powerful explanation for why women have been less likely to consider running for office, since...the suggestion to run is among the strongest predictors of whether an individual considers a candidacy” (p. 9). Again these results, demonstrate how women in the 21st century must have a high level of self-efficacy to run for public office such as a school board seat.

The representation of women on the nation’s school boards in 1973 was only 11.9% (National School Boards Association, 1974). By 2002, the percentage of women had increased to 38.9% (Hess, 2002), and by 2010, the percentage had increased to 44.4% (Hess & Meeks, 2010). Although the percentages have improved, women must continue to rely on their own self- promotion rather than recruitment by others and then rely on their self-efficacy in the position to succeed.

The Citizen Political Ambition Panel Study, conducted and reported by Fox and Lawless (2010) supported these conclusions concerning the likelihood of women being recruited to run for elected office compared to men. The authors characterized their findings as “striking” (p. 311). “Highly qualified and politically well-connected women from both major political parties are less likely than similarly situated men to be recruited to run for public office by all types of political actors” (p. 311.) Even today, it is typical for females to rely upon their own self-efficacy to run for a public office like that of school board member.

Once women are elected to a board seat they are more likely to be elected the board secretary than the board president. The 1974 National School Boards Association survey reported 35% of male board members had served as president compared to 29% of female board members compared to 18% of the male board members having served as secretary/clerk compared to 31% of the female board members (p. 34). Similarly, Welch and Karnig (1979) found, with regard to local council seats, women win “less desirable and less prestigious council positions more frequently than the mayoral seat” (p. 488). There is little current data concerning gender and elected offices on school boards.

For women, being elected to a board leadership role, as board president, can be as challenging as seeking an executive position. Eagly and Carli (2007) describe a woman’s pathway to a leadership position as a labyrinth, “a complex journey toward a goal worth striving for” (Eagly & Carli, p. 64). The significance of the labyrinth metaphor when compared to the glass ceiling metaphor is the “twists and turns” (p. 64) of a labyrinth compared to the single obstacle of the glass ceiling. These twists and turns mean “passage through a labyrinth is not simple or direct, but requires persistence, awareness of one’s progress, and a careful analysis of the puzzles that lie ahead” (p. 64). A woman’s persistence and awareness to determine next steps, are sources of information for developing self-efficacy cited by Bandura. One specific barrier within the labyrinth cited by Eagly and Carli is “resistance to women’s leadership” (p. 65) which they defined as a “widely shared conscious and unconscious mental association...that link[s] men with more of the traits that connote leadership” (p. 65). Whether at the board table or behind the executive desk, women must have a driving self-efficacy to strive for and maintain a leadership position.

Resistance to women’s leadership, as cited previously, is sometimes rooted in prejudice against women as leaders. Women bring to the board table qualities which may be commonly associated with effective leaders, but which may be perceived in direct conflict with valued qualities because they are displayed by females. These qualities are of two types, communal and agentic, with communal characteristics associated with females and agentic characteristics associated with males. Eagly and Karau (2002) cited these words, among others, to describe communal characteristics, “concern[ed] with the welfare of other people, helpful, interpersonally sensitive, kind” (p. 574) and cited these words to describe agentic characteristics, “aggressive,

ambitious, independent, self-confident” (p. 574). If women seeking leadership positions display communal characteristics, they may be perceived as too nice, not able to be a leader with responsibilities and authority. But if they display agentic characteristics, they may be perceived as acting out-of-character, not as a female should act. In either case, women aspiring to leadership positions are hindered by prejudiced stereotypes. Stereotype activation occurs when a woman perceives a stereotypic response to her leadership or leadership aspiration. This phenomenon was researched by Hoyt and Blascovich (2007) in a study of women leaders, their leadership efficacy, and stereotype activation. Stereotype activation can result in two types of responses. A threat response typically reduces an individual’s perceived efficacy and results in walking away from the opportunity. An activation response does not walk away, but may present itself as a behavior quite the opposite of the expected stereotype, a reassertion of a behavior, or a heightened behavior. In other words, an activation response activates a higher level of self-efficacy (p. 597). The study concluded, “stereotype activation would serve to increase high efficacy leaders’ perceived performance” (p.609).

The efficacy of the leader is a determinant in an organization’s ability to achieve desired results. Hannah, Avolio, Luthans, and Harms (2008) authored a thorough review of leadership efficacy that concluded with several research propositions for the future. In the introduction to their study, the authors distinguished leader efficacy from leadership efficacy. Simply put, leader efficacy is about an individual; leadership efficacy is about the leader, the followers and the collective efficacy of a group of individuals. The authors sought “an understanding of the contribution of *leader efficacy* in building *leadership efficacy*” (p. 670). A conclusion of their research review was “Leaders who are oriented toward growth and engagement in challenges are more likely to bring about these same outcomes in those they lead” (p.688). Such a conclusion would have importance in the context of school board leadership with today’s school districts facing multiple challenges.

As cited in the introduction, school board effectiveness results in higher levels of student achievement. Although school board effectiveness may be associated with the leadership of the school board president, research has found that “board processes are an important predictor of board effectiveness” (Nielson & Huse, 2010, p. 143). A conclusion from Nielson and Huse’s research that aligns with female school board presidents’ leadership efficacy is the ability to develop

a board culture of practices and procedures that lead to board effectiveness. The authors stated, "We find that boards with high ratios of women are more likely to use board development activities related to the introduction of working structures such as board work instructions, evaluations and development programs. These structures, in turn, enhance board strategic and operational control" (p. 145).

School board leadership and school board effectiveness have been studied in recent decades. Little attention has been paid to the role of the school board president. This research sheds light on the leadership of eight female school board presidents. Specifically the study focuses on their perceived self-efficacy as it relates to their school board president role, responsibilities, and relationships.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were participants in a larger study of Illinois female presidents conducted in the fall of 2012. At that time there were 868 public school districts, of which 236 or 27% had female school board presidents (VanTuyle, 2015). The 236 female school board presidents were asked to participate in a research study that employed three instruments: 1) a survey that gathered personal and district characteristics, as well as responses to questions about motivations, challenges, and decision-making, 2) a leadership self-efficacy instrument, the Leadership Self-Efficacy Scale (LSES) developed by Bobbio and Manganelli (2009), and 3) the Schutte Self Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT) (Schutte, et al., 1998). The response rate for the study instruments was 27%, with 66 women completing and returning study instruments. Of the 66 women returning responses, 46 consented to being contacted for participation in a qualitative study, collecting data for analysis through personal interviews.

In the summer of 2013, a random selection of study respondents who consented to participation in an interview were contacted by email to participate in interviews. The first round of random selection netted six interview participants. A second round of random selection brought the total number of female school board presidents interviewed for this analysis to eight. The eight participants represented diverse districts and communities. In Illinois, districts are of three types: Unit District, grades pre-k-12; High School District, grades 9-12,

or Elementary District, grades prek-8. Illinois school districts size is determined by the Illinois State Board of Education using this percentage calculation, “**large** (largest 25%) to **medium** (middle 50%) to **small** (smallest 25%)” (Durlinger & Haeffele, 2011, n.p.). As well, Illinois districts are categorized by National Center for Education Statistics’ urban-centric locale codes. City, suburban, town, and rural are the four major locale codes. Each of these major locale codes has three sub-codes. The following list reports the number of board presidents representing the following district types and sizes and community locale descriptors.

- 1 president representing Large Unit District, Rural: Fringe Community
- 1 president representing Large Unit District, Suburban: Large Community
- 1 president representing Large Unit District, City: Mid-Size Community
- 1 president representing Medium Unit District, Rural: Fringe Community
- 1 president representing Small Unit District, Rural: Distant Community
- 2 presidents representing Large Elementary Districts, Suburban: Large Communities
- 1 president representing Medium Elementary District, Suburban: Large Community

Design and Procedure

The initial study of female board member self-efficacy employed the Leadership Self- Efficacy Scale (LSES) developed by Bobbio and Manganello (2009). The LSES scale was from 1 to 7 with 7 representing the highest level of self-efficacy in 7 dimensions of self-efficacy. The mean of responses demonstrated high levels of self-efficacy respondents: “The total LSES mean was 5.67 ($n = 66$, $SD = .64$)” (VanTuyle, 2015, p. 54). The results of the LSES scale represent a high level of self-efficacy among these female school board presidents. The results led to a study to uncover the stories of the foundations of their self-efficacy. As Creswell (2008) stated, “In qualitative inquiry, the intent is not to generalize a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon...” (p. 213) In this study, the interview questions

were designed “to develop a detailed understanding...that might provide ‘useful’ information, ...help people ‘learn’ about the phenomenon, and ...give voice to ‘silenced’ people,” (p. 214).

Three general questions were designed to gather perceptions of participating school board presidents. They were: What is your perception of the role of school board president? What is your perception of the responsibilities of school board president? What is your perception of the relationships of the school board president? The questions gave the women the freedom to provide anecdotal accounts of interactions with others. These accounts clarified and augmented their answers with descriptive examples from lived experiences. This allowed the researchers to gain a richer picture of their role, relationships, and responsibilities as school board presidents. The research findings emerged from the personal stories of the participants. During the interviews, the researchers prompted the participants for details. The researcher interviewed each female school board president by phone. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Each female school board president was assigned a pseudonym.

In initial analysis of the interview responses, we noted emerging themes related to the sources of these women’s self-efficacy. For our next phase of analysis, we developed a code list aligned to three of Bandura’s sources of self-efficacy: 1) the ability to execute and produce results (Bandura, 1977); 2) triadic reciprocity considering personal factors, behavior, and environmental influences (Bandura, 1986); and 3) mastery experience, vicarious experience, and persuasion of others (Bandura, 1977). Transcripts were coded aligned to these three sources.

Results

We present the participants’ responses that align to Bandura’s three sources of self- efficacy.

The Ability to Execute and Produce Results

All of the women interviewed were confident of their personal abilities to execute and produce results. They were forthright about asserting their effectiveness as school board presidents. Their self-appraisals were freely and openly given. Dana credited her success as a board president for over ten years, through participation in Illinois

Association of School Board professional development and through extensive reading about organizational leadership. "It was a growth process for me....I'm continually growing and changing." Her service as board president "feels like it has become almost a profession." Her success as board president led her to believe, in the future, she could help other boards of education achieve great results by "acting as a facilitator for the Illinois Association of School Boards." Similarly, Barb felt she was most effective because of her "willingness to address issues or conflicts, not afraid of hurting relationships, but trying to get conflicts on the table so we can work through them." Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy research supports this. Expected, effective practices become routine as they minimize challenges and produce positive results (p. 193). Fran noted that under her presidency, not all school board actions or results were in agreement with what she would have chosen to do. But she said,

"There are two big factors that go into feeling that I was able to affect change. One is being true to myself, and the other is respecting the democratic process. I was true to my values and the thing that I was elected to do."

Fran's statement aligns with a conclusion from Bandura's (1977) research, "The strength of people's convictions in their own effectiveness is likely to affect whether they will even try to cope with given situations" (p. 193). Anne has been a board member for thirteen years. As board president, she led the district, the board, and the school community through a highly-publicized resignation of a superintendent and the hiring of another. She felt "challenged" to get past the district turmoil, but she carried on. She said, "And here's the thing, you know, I think as individuals we mostly do what we think we are good at. And, this is something I am really good at." As Bandura (1993) asserted, "Personal goal setting is influenced by self-appraisal of capabilities" (p. 118). In Cela's case, a source of self-efficacy was her ability to keep the board on task resulting in a streamlined meeting. She said, "I think the biggest thing is being able to keep the meeting on task. I've been told when I'm not there, the meetings are a lot longer." This "outcome expectancy," (p. 193, 1977) of a streamlined board meeting, is a self-appraisal that influences Cela's ability to ensure a streamlined meeting. Strong beliefs in ability result in outcomes. Erin stated this emphatically, "I work very hard at this....I think I'm really good at what I do.... There's a comfort in our board, community and administration and

frankly our staff in having me as the school board president.” Gina, as well, stated,

“I feel like I’m able to lead difficult discussions and rein them in...I think I have been able to...through data and different facts been able to show or convince people of my way of thinking on some important issues. Not just to convince them that I am right, to show them.”

Jane articulated most emphatically the importance of effective school board leadership in this comment:

“I sat through eight years before I was president while somebody takes their turn. I suppose it was easy, but it didn’t help the school move forward. I think most people recognize someone when they are not a leader, but when the board gets in that ‘Oh, it’s their turn’ mode, they’re not holding the district’ needs first and foremost...I certainly saw that it wasn’t healthy. Yet it’s difficult when some people have that birthright of saying, ‘It’s my turn, and I’m going to do it, and if you have a ‘yes’ board that isn’t going to be taken away.”

When Jane became board president there were “complicated relationships” on the board and in the community. It took “patience and pushing.” She said, “It’s not in my vocabulary to give up.” She exhibited perseverance in executing actions to produce results.

Triadic Reciprocity Considering Personal Factors, Behavior, and Environmental Influences

Triadic reciprocity as a source of self-efficacy relies upon the collective influence of one’s person, behavior, and environment. Self-efficacy develops from consideration of personal factors, especially experience based on practiced skills as opposed to some “inherent intellectual aptitude” (Bandura, 1993, p. 121.) Many of the female school board presidents referenced their other life experiences, practiced skills, as a basis for their leadership self-efficacy. Gina had been an employee in the district for a number of years before being elected to the board. Her “long history” in the district and experience in union “negotiations or grievances” provided her with insight into creating common understanding of issues among the district

governance team. Cela credited her work experience in government social work as providing her with insights into the life experiences of diverse students and families and as providing her with skills to be an effective communicator with a variety of stakeholders. Jane's background as a policy advocate provided leadership which led to board discussions that were "a bit more open-minded." Barb noted that she is self-described and described by others as a "connector." She said, "This relationship piece for the board president is about really showing great care and interest for your role. And, as much as possible, having fidelity around that role and honoring those relationships." This is an example of reflecting on how she had acted, behaved in response to environmental influences. Later she added this characteristic allowed her the "willingness to take the heat and to be able to walk into conflict." Again, there is no doubt about expressing her ability to act and get results. Dana credited her volunteer-work experience with a national organization for young women with developing her organizational leadership skills. Dana "was motivated to get on the board because she could see how it needed to be facilitated better." This observation and belief provided the impetus to become a candidate for board membership.

Bandura (1977) noted, "The capacity to represent future consequences in thought provides one cognitively based source of motivation" (p. 193). As the board president, Dana described her role "as a facilitator." She noted that board success is dependent upon the individuals who are on the board. "You can't change people," she said. But she realized she could change the culture of the board by engaging in regular IASB board member training and modeling what she learned as a board member. When she became board president she noted,

"Now as we get new board members in, it's the new board member orientation. Then the superintendent and I either sit down with them individually or we have a meeting as a group and say this is the way we do things, here are our procedures, this is what you can expect, and we review our board agreements every year for a board self-evaluation."

Bandura (1993) cited such personal growth as a "functional-learning goal" employed "to seek challenges that provide knowledge to expand...knowledge and competencies" (p. 120).

Mastery Experience, Vicarious Experience, and Persuasion of Others

Several participants related how they were able to see themselves as a board president by observing effective female and male board presidents. They were able to see themselves in these persons' places as board presidents. They spoke of modeling their board leadership after these individuals' leader behaviors and actions. As well, they spoke of how some of these individuals persuaded them to use their leadership talents as board president and how they continued to support their self-efficacy by coaching and mentoring them. Anne spoke of the former school board president she served with as secretary. They were the only women on the seven-member board. "She was a model for me....I supported her....I was there for her. She appreciated my presence. We developed a transition in her last year on the board. She was on the board as I became the president." Erin described learning about board leadership as the Vice- President watching the President lead the board and community through a district reorganization. It was an "incredibly controversial" decision in the district.

"I think that experience made me incredibly strong in a way that I could have never anticipated. And it's something that when something comes up, I can go back to and kind of remember, okay, if I could get through that, I can get through anything."

Gina was most articulate about her years of experience in union leadership that helped make her "a person who can't be bullied...not so much from the school board part, but from the community." Gender she thought played a role, "People that we have to meet with in government or private citizens are mostly men, and it's amazing how many think they can bully a woman into doing what they want." Her summation of handling organizational conflict, "You don't have to like each other to work together." Cela, as well, spoke of her ability to "be assertive without being confrontational" as central to her self-efficacy. Cela spoke of a female school board president who influenced her, saying she had

"tried to model [her] behavior after what she exhibited....She was the one that said we're not all on the same page and I think we need this. She recognized the problem very quickly...and got us into this class [ISAB Board Training]."

Cela added, "She has been very instrumental in helping me develop the abilities to do what she did so well."

Another source of information used in Bandura's (1977) development of efficacy expectations is "emotional arousal" (p. 195). Emotional arousal in self-efficacy research revolves around a negative message such as a threat, or a stressful situation, that produces anxiety and, as a result, negatively impacts the development of self-efficacy. For researchers of self-efficacy, this emotional arousal requires individuals to practice "desensitization," "relaxation," and "avoidance" (p. 195) to maintain or raise one's level of self-efficacy. Bandura stated, "People displaying intractable fears and inhibitions are not about to do what they dread" (p. 196). Three of the women in the study related experiences as school board presidents that would be regarded as threats to their self-efficacy. Notable among their stories was their ability to face fearsome challenges and to effectively lead their boards in decisions and actions to meet the challenges. As noted in the introduction to this article, board presidents are the fulcrum point on which the administration and board of education balance. When administrators are dismissed or when issues are divisive in the school community and board members retreat from public view, the board president is often the face of the district, the person turned to for answers and for leadership. Board presidents are expected to step up and face the threat or situation.

Fran spoke of the balance necessary to develop and support both new superintendents and new board members. "There is always this juggling about what the board member needs to feel comfortable and what I thought the superintendent needed to run the district." Fran's self-efficacy was challenged when she could not balance the governance scale with the administration and the board understanding each side's role, responsibilities, and relationships. "In retrospect, when those relationships were that bad, in a year or so the superintendent was gone," she concluded. Continuing to cultivate effective school board/superintendent relationships in her second term as president, Fran noted, "evidently they are doing something right...I feel as though I brought them a long way. They have turned out to be good committed board members."

Barb spoke of a very challenging year making decisions around district growth and facilities. According to Barb, discussions "created an uproar in the community." The board members were on the same page, "until the heat got too hot" with meetings, characterized as "packed

houses” with “temperatures rising.” Barb recognized that this would be tough, but it was important to her to carry the collective message to the public and to be the constant presence at these meetings.

Barb’s way of desensitizing was to think in terms of “pull[ing] up our big boy and big girl pants.” Later as board president, Barb’s service on a board committee was questioned and followed by a deliberate departure from past practices removing her from the committee. Barb did not fight the decision. She did express her feeling that “this is personal...but I will respect the majority of the board.” She added, “I made the decision that I would not fight them because it would have hurt the board and would have hurt us going [forward]...The end result of that is, I think, I gained some respect.”

Cela talked of a district situation when she was president she regarded as “the most challenging thing I’ve ever had to do.” This incident was the urgent and immediate dismissal of the superintendent. Cela had to act quickly and judiciously while responding to public demands for information and while keeping the board apprised of the consequences of breaches of information. “It’s hard when you are used to being a support person for a superintendent. And then to realize that this person has betrayed your trust.”

Anne was the only board president to speak about a challenge in her district, coupled with a health issue that caused her to question her efficacy. She talked about a challenging situation in her district when a newly hired superintendent rescinded the acceptance of the position. A fractious board of education that put school leadership issues on public display required peacekeeping and information feeding. She said, “I am a challenged manager...I am trying to manage all of our arrows being focused on the same target.” Her frustration with the circumstances was expressed this way: “You’re the leader of that board and for someone who doesn’t know that you are not part of that dysfunction, that’s hard...There’s a part of me that wants to go up and say, ‘I’m not the crazy one.’” While not walking away from her role, she did offer, “If they felt for one minute that anybody could do a better job than me, I want them to say that because I will walk away gladly.” As Bandura (1993) asserted, “It requires a strong sense of efficacy to remain task oriented in the face of pressing situational demands and failures that have social repercussions” (p. 120).

Additional Results of Note

Among the women's expressions of the interdependent roles of board president, superintendent and board members in shared decision-making, some responses are worth noting as results. These were responses that expressed personal growth, community responsibility, and appreciation. About her role as board president, Barb said,

"That relationship, I have come to understand much better now, is really what allows the board to understand the vision of that senior leader....The crux of their [a board president's] responsibility is to really, truly have a partnership with your superintendent and then your fellow board members."

Fran, as well, made a similar statement about the board president role, "I see it as the board president is in fact there to help the superintendent succeed...not rubber stamp everything the superintendent does...[but] try and bring the board around." She added that the board president is "a sounding board for new ideas and new initiatives" for the superintendent, and in turn, the dispenser of "the info they [board members] need and ...all the data they need to make decisions." One comment from Dana added a different perspective. "As board president you really lose your voice publicly at the table....Make sure all board members are heard....Don't talk until they are all done." She went on to add, "Some presidents will use that chair to give their speeches...swaying other board members."

Another prevalent responsibility several board presidents spoke of is understanding while the superintendent is the chief executive officer in the district, he or she is also, in many cases, a parent, a spouse, and person with a life outside their job. Barb said the superintendents she has worked with "want someone who they [can] build a collegial relationships with and that ... care about them on a personal level." Erin spoke of respecting the superintendent having a life outside the school district. She said,

"... when he became our superintendent, he had a young family, and it was my philosophy he couldn't be a good superintendent if he didn't have the time to be a good dad and husband....he knows that it's my strong belief as well as the board's that if his kids have something that he needs or wants to be at...that's where he needs to be."

Some women offered concluding remarks that summed up their experiences as board presidents. Barb said, "I think that my experience for the two years was enriching. I learned a lot about myself, but certainly a lot about my community both good and the not-so-good. And I learned a lot about humility and hostility." Anne responded, "I am contributing something very valuable. I don't need other people to see that, but I just know it." Cela said,

"...it really is an honor and a responsibility together to just serve on the board. Just serving on the board makes you feel good to know that you are doing what is best for all these children. We really believe in it in our school district ...And I'm very proud of that. I'm proud and glad that I've been able to serve."

Erin said,

"This is something I've done with great love and passion...When I went on the board, I knew that I would love this job and be able to contribute at a really high level, but I never ever imagined the friendships I've made and the skills and the honor that's come to be because of my role in the school district."

Gina told me, "I've enjoyed being president. There were also times I hated it. ...I will tell you I'm glad this term is over but if I waited a few years I would be ready to do it again." Jane was recognized as not only the board president but a highly involved parent in her district, chaperoning and volunteering at extra-curricular activities. To this she added, "I was still challenged by parents when firing a coach or something, but the recognition helps."

Discussion

In this paper we examined the self-efficacy of female school board presidents. Through the analysis of their responses to interview questions, we identified themes aligned to Bandura's sources of information for developing self-efficacy. The stories of these women confirm their high levels of self-efficacy with their passion and commitment to serving as the president of their school boards. They were able to set goals, produce results, facilitate collective board efficacy and recover quickly from setbacks and perceived failures. Their words attest to the importance of having role models who encouraged them to consider

their personal factors as foundational for becoming an effective school board president. They were clearly able to articulate their effectiveness as school board leaders. They were reflective, learning from observing others and from assessing and modifying behaviors or actions to obtain desired results. The results of this research highlight how the self-efficacy of these women contributed to the role they played school district leadership in challenging times. From the study, it can be concluded that women school board presidents who participated have the self-efficacy to be effective as school board leaders.

Limitations and Future Research

Overall, the accounts of these female board presidents provide examples of how their high levels of self-efficacy were developed from sources of information from everyday experiences in both personal and professional life. Although these results cannot be generalized to apply to all female school board presidents, it is important for these stories to be shared as a source of information for other females seeking similar leadership roles.

The limited number of female school board presidents willing to be interviewed was a limitation of the study. A larger number of participants would have gathered different experiences and perspectives that may have yielded different conclusions. However, the small number of participants did allow for interviews of length with greater opportunity for detailed responses.

Similar research with male school board presidents is needed in the future. This research should be focused on uncovering male board presidents' assessment of self-efficacy with regard to their role, relationships, and responsibilities as board president. As women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions at the school board table, it is important for qualitative researchers to share stories that reflect on self-efficacy. Reading the stories of others provides glimpses into our own lives and helps us generate a vision of whom we can become.

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