Advancing Women In Leadership

Women Transitioning into Leadership: Gender as both Help and Hindrance

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For those who prepare future leaders, the power of socialization to mold and shape behavior must be recognized.

Newly hired school leaders are confronted by the weight of tradition and prior practice (Hartzell, Williams, & Nelson, 1995; Marshall, 1992). They are frequently counseled to adopt "old" norms about priorities and decision-making. Some find that to gain acceptance they must adhere to values and leadership behaviors counter to those that attracted them to school leadership or were espoused in their preparation (Hartzel et al., 1995; Marshall, 1992).

This paper reports on an investigation of the impact of socialization on new assistant principals, particularly women graduates of a redesigned school leadership preparation program in North Carolina. The subjects of this study were women, therefore the investigation also explored the impact that gender-associated leadership preferences had on their socialization.

Context of the Study

Feminine Perspectives on Leadership

Creating better school leaders is more complex than merely altering preparation programs. It necessitates confronting and altering long standing norms about how principals do their work and also requires cultivating the capacity to resist socialization to these old norms.

Questions abound about whether differences in leadership style and preferences are gender related. Without drawing distinct gender lines it is possible to discuss a set of leadership styles and preferences often associated with the feminine. They include the preference for democratic rather than autocratic

organizations, and cultures that are inclusive and collaborative (Eagly, Karau, & Johnson, 1992; Irby & Brown, 1995; Shakeshaft, 1987a). In addition, there is support for the premise that feminine leaders are more attuned to instruction, teachers, and children (Frasher & Frasher, 1979; McGrath, 1992). Finally, there is evidence that because women develop differently, they are more likely to demonstrate an ethic of care that is grounded in relationships rather than laws (Gilligan, 1982, 1985; Porat, 1991).

Women leaders often have an abiding concern for children, especially for marginal students and those without advocates (Brown & Irby, 1993; Edson, 1987; Lightfoot, 1983). Such a preference aligns with expectations for contemporary school leaders (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996).

Language choice is another indicator of a more inclusive style. Several studies found that women leaders tend to use more conditional, tentative language (Marshall, 1988). Based on the work of Holmes (1984), Marshall suggests that such language often used by women does not reflect uncertainty but instead is a deliberate effort to invite others into the conversation, to give others a voice.

Clear parallels between standards for school leaders and feminine leadership beliefs, styles, and preferences for practice emerge. Given the alignment, it might be suggested that women graduates would have success holding on to what they believe when they transition from preparation into jobs. Perhaps they are better equipped to resist the strong powers of schools as institutions to socialize new leaders into old norms. That question is at the heart of this inquiry.

Role Socialization

There is a rich history of research on socialization in varied settings (Merton, 1968; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Merton (1968) suggested that socialization is the process whereby one acquired the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to perform a role.

Studies in educational settings suggest that the process is informal rather than formal, intense and short in duration (Augenstein & Konnert, 1991; Crow, Mecklowitz, & Weekes, 1992; Duke, Isaacson, Sagor, & Schmuck, 1984; Greenfield, 1985). The informality of the process, coupled with the short duration reflects an emphasis on what Schein (1971) describes as a custodial orientation, an unwillingness to challenge traditional norms for the role.

More recent studies of socialization in educational settings confirmed a continued emphasis on custodial socialization. Reliance on such an approach in the face of newly trained school leaders, schooled in different approaches and emphases, may prove problematic for both schools and school leaders.

The Assistant Principal

Perhaps no other role in school leadership is so fraught with ambiguity and role complexity as that of the assistant principal. For many, their experience as an assistant principal shapes and molds their long-term view of school leadership. It is during the assistant principalship when new school leaders are inducted, formally and informally, into the profession. The way they conduct themselves, based on either their own view of leadership, or that espoused by their principal, will shape their career-long response to similar issues (Hartzell et al,, 1995; Marshall, 1992; Marshall & Mitchell, 1991).

Role socialization is most powerful after assuming the role. Essential to success as an assistant principal was conforming to expected patterns of behavior. They include a commitment to do whatever needs to be done, and to spend as much time as necessary to do it and keeping disputes and disagreements with the principal private. Assistant principals were expected to place primary emphasis on work with students (e.g., discipline, lunchroom, buses, sports, and other activities).

Methodology

Data sources for this study were primary and naturalistic (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The importance of context was reflected in the use of the natural setting as the direct source of data, the researchers as instruments, and students as key informants. Within the context of a standards-centered program, data collection allowed the researchers to explore student perspectives. Student views on their transition to school leadership were collected using surveys, individual and focus group interviews, writing samples and reflections on program preparation. Follow-up interviews with program graduates provided data about school contexts and their successes in maintaining personal and program-based values in the face of their socialization efforts to new roles.

A grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to analyze student responses. This approach allowed themes to emerge from the analysis of disparate but interconnected data sources. These data, along with the surveys and interviews enhanced understanding of student perspectives and how those perspectives changed as graduates dealt with the effects of socialization.

Findings for such studies are very context-specific, reflecting the unique orientation of the subjects. Therefore, the results of the study are not generalizable and cannot be construed to be applicable to programs or students in other locations.

This investigation into the intricacies of role socialization by one cohort of new school leaders provides an opportunity to learn from their struggles, the tensions between their preparation and their practice, and to identify the strategies they adopted to cope with these tensions. Their story can illuminate our understanding of how school leadership is shaped and molded generation to generation.

Findings

The researchers studied these women during and after their preparation. Their preparation program emphasized the importance of teaching and learning, democratic leadership, attention to relationships, and contextual decision-making grounded in an ethic of care, characteristics often associated with feminine leadership styles and preferences.

The women of this cohort saw themselves practicing such leadership, as "living" leadership consistent with both the feminine and their preparation; they saw such preferences as helpful in their transition to leadership (Williamson & Hudson, 2001). The graduates felt prepared and supported in their efforts to resist socialization to old norms. Simultaneously, they saw their style preferences and dispositions as potential hindrances.

Preferences for Democratic Organizations and Cultures

Understanding that "feminine leadership" includes both female and male leaders, an accepted feminine characteristic is the preference for democratic rather than autocratic organizations and inclusive and democratic cultures (Eagly et al., 1992; Irby and Brown, 1995; Shakeshaft, 1987a).

These women saw commitment to inclusive and collaborative culture, communicated through listening, as an asset. One stated that she learned from a particularly difficult situation that such preferences helped her gain acceptance by teachers.

> I think this critical incident showed the teachers and me that I could be there for them and that I sought their input and expertise. I began to see that there were no magic solutions. By addressing issues in a steady, reflective, inclusive manner, difficult situations will improve.

By listening well, these women also learned about the school's people, politics, and culture. As one described,

> I was in a brand new place, a place I had never worked. I needed to learn the politics, who to ask, who to talk with, how to know when things work or don't work. I watched. I listened. I asked questions like, 'How have things been done traditionally?'

Typically, the subjects realized that, "stakeholders want to be heard, to learn, to have guidance, to be appreciated, to be a part of a successful school," and they learned how to move toward new models without discounting the old. That required care with language. As one described, "I was careful about what I said. I was careful not to criticize what had been done in the past, but to choose words like 'refine,' 'strengthen,' or 'enhance.'"

Attention to Instruction, Teachers, and Children

Feminine leaders are more attuned to instruction, teachers, and children (Andrews & Basom, 1990; Charters & Jovick, 1981; Frasher & Frasher, 1979; McGrath, 1992; Pavan & Reid, 1994). Women leaders tend to evidence a special and abiding concern for marginal children and those without advocates (Brown & Irby, 1993; Edson, 1987; Lightfoot, 1983).

The women in this study saw these characteristics as assets. Early teacher resistance to classroom involvement was typically short-lived. Quickly, that involvement was perceived as an indicator of caring —about teachers, teaching and learning, and students. As one student described her acceptance,

> I think I have a good relationship with the staff. …It has to do with having been a teacher for a long time. I can identify with them. But it has to do with being female, too. It seems to me that women just naturally build relationships quicker than men.

Classroom experience and knowing the children were important to another woman's transition. It was not long until teachers were saying, "You're doing a great job" or "I really appreciate the way you handled that for me."

Caring about teaching, learning, and children also created additional stresses and workload. These women could not ignore problems that hurt children though it meant time-consuming documentation, conferences, assistance, even counseling adults out of education.

Ethic of Care Grounded in Relationships

Because women develop differently, women are more likely to demonstrate an ethic of care, grounded in relationships rather than laws (Gilligan, 1982, 1985; Hudson, 1993; Porat, 1991; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2001).

For these women, listening was a tangible manifestation of how they valued people and relationships, including the dissonant and unheard voices. One graduate insisted that students could not be ignored simply because they were poor, lacked academic talents, or could not speak English. In her mind, "There are not an acceptable number of casualties."

Such active listening and caring also can be misinterpreted, perhaps because it is a "new norm" for many in the school. For instance, one leader struggled with other's misperception that "listening means I agree." She described a teacher who felt "validated" and "recognized" in a budget discussion, but was later surprised and hurt when the assistant principal disagreed. Emotionally, the teacher attacked, "I can't believe you would sway people like that. I thought you were listening to me."

Care for the marginal student (Shakeshaft, 1987b) associated with the feminine is revealed in the stories of these women. One works in a school where most students often come to school hungry. This woman worked with the cafeteria manager to ensure that on Mondays and Fridays, the children were served "larger than prescribed" portions because there was little to eat on weekends.

In a high school setting, similar actions emerged from a commitment to, "look at kids individually, to serve the kids that we know right here." As a result,

> We've changed policies, we've created options for earning credits, we've changed how credits are assigned, we've changed courses, we've hand scheduled students to match students' and teachers' personalities, we've bought pantyhose for the prom, we've fed kids, and on and on.

The ethic of care emerged as an asset. Many reported that others knew and appreciated that their decisions were grounded in what was right, not necessarily what was legal. In many stories, even though others affected could not know all the details, decisions were respected because others knew they were based on students' best interests rather than just policy.

Inclusive and Invitational Language

Inclusive practices within the school and its community are both program emphases and characteristics of a feminine style. Such an inclusive style is reflected in language. Several studies found that women leaders use more conditional, tentative language (Holmes, 1984; Marshall, 1988) not to reflect uncertainty but to invite others into the conversation, to give others a voice.

One student saw her principal escalate an angry parent who threatened to call the superintendent by saying, "Go right ahead. It won't do you any good." Faced with a similar situation, the graduate chose a different path. In response to the same threat, she replied, "That certainly is your right. Here's the number."

Another student saw her commitment to seeking and giving feedback as a key to acceptance by teachers. It was not long, she said, until teachers began to "feel comfortable coming to me and asking for things."

On the other hand, some of the women feared that inclusive, invitational language could be "read" as uncertainty. One described her approach:

> You don't have to rant and rave to be firm and get your point across. I'm careful that my 'calm' is not seen as a sign of weakness. I listen and respond, but I also need to be assertive occasionally. Language is important. I'll say 'No, that's not going to happen, but here's what we can do.' They need to know I listened.

Feminine as Helpful, but not Enough

The women in this study perceived feminine styles and preferences as more asset than liability, but not as sufficient. While important, none saw those predispositions as "enough" to ensure their success as school leaders.

As one women said, "It is ultimately how you deliver that matters." Another woman described it this way,

> Everybody comes to me and asks me the hard questions. They want to come to me. I think it's the female thing. Part of why people come to me is that they know there will be appropriate follow-up. While teachers appreciate the fact that I listen to them, there is more.

They know that I will follow up on their questions and requests, and they really appreciate that. That's more style than gender.

The Toll of the Feminine

Feminine preferences took a toll, both personal and professional, in obvious and more subtle ways. Some experienced blatant and unpleasant behavior due to their gender. One woman assuming her first principalship in a small district of "good ol' boys" encountered demeaning comments like, "Don't worry your pretty little head."

Another woman detected discrimination in interactions with a district "superior" whose job included mentoring new leaders. She asked for feedback about why she was not offered a principalship.

> The director told me that I was the best candidate but because I was a woman and white, I wasn't offered the job. When I informed her that I was unhappy with that decision and would consider moving, her reply was, 'I didn't realize you were mobile. You have a family.' I felt insulted, as though because I'm a woman I'm place bound because of my spouse. How little do they know!

More frequently, the graduates experienced a more subtle "testing." Some of their feminine preferences were questioned. One commented, "I needed to act aggressive to show I wasn't a wimp." Another shared an instance where she dealt successfully with an angry parent and "disarmed" a potentially volatile situation. While she felt good about the outcome, she was careful that her calm demeanor "was not seen as a sign of weakness."

Studies of leaders found that ambition, position power, and prestige were less important motivators for women than for men (Helgeson, 1990; Neuse, 1978; Stamm & Ryff, 1984). The experience of these women confirmed that finding. Service and the personal and professional fulfillment that comes with "making a difference" mattered to them.

Caring, especially for the marginal student, was a hallmark of these women. Such caring took a toll, however. One woman described an incident where police were called to remove an "out of control" student.

> As I watched them shackle him, hands and feet, to the back seat of the police cruiser and leave to take him home, I wondered what kind of madness I had stepped into. It was a heartbreaking experience. It was not the first time nor would it be the last. I prayed for help for the boy and strength for myself and went on.

These women are competent, confident, and caring. They are good at what they do. They resist socialization to old norms and are truly "living" leadership styles consistent with the feminine. Yet several are concerned about the cost and have begun to second-guess their decisions to become school leaders. As one of them put it, "Is this really how I want to spend my time?" Another, under some pressure to accept a principalship, commented, "It's not that I can't or that I don't feel prepared. It's just, 'Do I want to?' I'm not sure I really want to." There are more important things than ambition." Others wondered, "Is it worth it?" and, "Given how I have to spend so much of my time, can I really make a difference?"

Conclusion

Feminine preferences in leadership align closely with expectations for contemporary school leaders (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996). The women in this study graduated from a preparation program closely aligned with these expectations. It emphasized the centrality of teaching and learning, the

importance of democratic and inclusive organizations and cultures, decisions grounded in an ethic of care, and the importance of context and relationships. This study demonstrated that such preparation could, indeed, serve graduates when they begin their careers.

Such preparation is essential. But, there is a need for more.

For those who prepare future leaders, the power of socialization to mold and shape behavior must be recognized. Beyond acknowledgement, preparation programs must help students create the capacity to anticipate and resist such socialization. They must help students learn to balance their care for others with care for themselves, to find a working balance between competence and burnout. One student described her emerging success:

> I see that I try to balance personal responsibility and passion with realism. There comes a point when I must recognize that I have done all I can do for today, when I must go home or to the gym, call a friend, do something to rejuvenate myself. I remind myself each day that this job is challenging and unpredictable. It will never be 'done.' I am not God, I am not responsible for everything, I have limitations. I am learning to put emotional and physical limits on what I do. That is the reason I love it and one of the reasons I am called to it.

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