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Advancing Women In Leadership

Scarlett Leads the Schoolhouse: Does Being Southern Matter?

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"We love women here, they give us hope, and above all, they give us grace." James Dickey, *Jericho, The South Beheld*

Introduction

I was born and fastidiously bred in the heart of James Dickey's South.. I did all the right Southern white middle class things: music, art, and dancing lessons; professional tips on hair and makeup; a brief stint (though unsuccessful) with high school beauty pageants; acquisition of the right Junior League Cookbooks; a proper finishing at a Southern undergraduate school for women and entrance into the teaching profession. But then, I broke the rules, entered school administration, and became my school district's first female high school principal, a four year experience I detailed in a 1996 publication Speak Softly and Carry Your Own Gym Key: a Female High School Principal's Guide to Survival. Last year, at a journaling workshop, I explored my life experience and became intrigued with how being born and bred in the Deep South might have influenced my experience as a female high school principal.

The larger context of the literature on women in educational leadership, Southern women, and the benefits of journaling provide the framework and impetus for a suggestions for futher research with the following objectives:

1. To develop a statistical profile of women in the Deep South (the eleven states of the Confederacy) in the high school principalship and superintendency.

2. To identify a group of Southern women in these roles for training in the Ira Progoff Intensive Journaling Methodology- Life Experience to provide these women with a life review and introduce them to a possible coping strategy for managing the stress of the role.

3. To identify particular barriers to success (racial, gender, ethnic, cultural) for these women that may be indigenous to the region.

4. To develop for publication and dissemination recommendations for the training and retention of female administrators for these roles and a specific training model based on

journaling.

Literature Review

The movement of women into the ranks of administration in public education in the United States has slowly gained momentum. Barriers still seem to exist, however, in the high school principalship as the following data indicate: 1987-88 Male 90.6%, Female 9.4%; in 1993-94, 86.2% were male and 13.8%, female. (http://nces.ed.gov/pubs/ppsp/97455-2.html#sex). Between 1910 and 1950 women represented 10 percent of school superintendents. Today they represent only 4 percent (Digest of Education Statistics, 1995).

The significant work in this area is that of Charol Shakeshaft (1986) whose studies revealed that men and women approach the job of educational administration differently and respond in ways that are dissimilar. Women tend to have a different leadership style and effectiveness may depend on this alternate approach. Regan and Brooks (1995) identified five feminist attributes to leadership: collaboration, caring, courage, intuition, and vision.

A 1992 U.S. Department of Education study cited the following issues affecting the advancement of women in administration: lack of secondary principal and superintendent placement; lack of mentors, sponsors, and role models; guilt feelings about the implications of advancement; lack of encouragement from other women; cultural, social, emotional, mobility, and attitude barriers; dual demands of work and home; more maturity at entry time is against advancement; desire to stay in positions longer "for experience"; lack of networking skills; often male-oriented training; limited interviewing skills; lack of recognition of acceptable differences in leadership styles.

Edson (1988) identified "the Queen Bee Syndrome" in which a woman who makes it into management neglects to support the advancement of other women. Colflesh (1997) studied four female elementary principals looking specifically at the emotional side of school leadership. She used a quilting metaphor to explore the patterns and variations that emerged from their conversations about school leadership and life histories.

Females who enter the traditionally male roles of high school principal and superintendent face stress and pressure. Napier and Willower (1991) indicated that female high school principals believe they have to work harder and longer to obtain evaluations equal to that of male principals. Petersen and Beekley (1997) in their study of female high school principals noted that women reported a higher level of active engagement than men in the role did. Hargreaves (1996) observed that within the prevalent culture of the high school principal, women are invisible, marginalized stereotypes. Lad (1998) revealed reasons there are so few women high school principals: few have had adequate role models as children, the job as it is currently structured may be impossible for women with family commitments, women often feel they are "passed over" in favor of males, and high expectations for performance in the high school principalship get even higher when the candidate is female.

Similar stress and pressure exist in the superintendency. Wolverton's 1998 study of the superintendency in the state of Washington revealed that even though the state ranked 10th in the nation in the number of female superintendents, the superintendency there is still a "strongly held male bastion" (p.52) where when women do "men's work," they do it in less favorable locations, for lower pay, and with less help. Chase (1995) in her study of women superintendents noted that while they found it easy to talk about their work as superintendents, discussing inequality was painful. She added that for these women "a lonely isolated struggle against inequality is the requirement and cost of personal success." (p.3)

The issue of gender alone perhaps does not account for the stress and pressures of the job but rather the

issue of gender that also addresses, as Mertz and McNeely (1998) suggested, sociocultural and contextual factors. Bell and Chase (1995) called for an examination of gendered contexts and processes through which men and women move. Brubaker (1995) studied the autobiographies of 500 principals over the last 20 years. He noted, in particular, Southern women educators who described themselves as growing up in culture that taught them respect for "good ole'boy administrators" in an "uncle-niece" kind of relationship. These women spoke of the agony of reconciling this cultural expectation with their new feminist consciousness.. They found themselves deferring to these men in social situations but saw the workplace in a different light.

Does being Southern make a difference? Research on the South and Southern women provides a strong basis for the argument that being Southern does indeed impact on women in traditionally male roles. Clinton (1995) maintained that Southern women construct their psychological and social selves within the confines of fixed, repressive gender stereotypes and occupational roles. The same author (1994) argued that Southern women have been seriously handicapped by sexism in history in general and Southern history in particular. She described a regional chauvinism in women's history and made a case for the tremendous impact of race, gender and class in a region of rigid, extreme economic and social nuances.She argued that context adds to and defines the study of Southern women and stressed the power of the plantation myth with the stereotypes of Mammy and the Southern Lady defining gender roles.

The myths are indeed powerful. Farnham (1997) said, "The Civil War, perhaps more then any other period in American history, generated a veritable minefield of mythology." (p.121) Clinton (1995) described the power of the Tara myth where "the cult of the Cause" (p.16) became a kind of religion in the postwar South with Scarlett O'Hara as the most significant symbol of America's love affair with the Old South while the lives of black women remain obscure and uncelebrated. Clinton maintained that while Southern women may never escape the trappings of the myths of the Belle and Mammy, they must reshape their understanding of the plantation myth error. Blackwelder (1991) argued that these myths have created tension between the ideals of feminine behavior and the reality of most women's lives and that "the centrality of good grooming" has not changed for women in the South. Daniell (1980) in On Sin, Sex, and Suicide in the Deep South said it this way: "One's success as a women was immediately assessed by Southern standards: an added pound, a less flattering hairdo, the state of one's wardrobe were all commented upon becoming the cause and effect of the failed husband, child, and marriage." (p. 6) She added that a Southern woman's power comes only through a powerful man and that the only acceptable outlet for a woman's ambition was religious fervor. She described Southern women as resorting to the roles of "manipulative magnolia or the hysterical matron." (p.33)

Have such stereotypes and pressures for Southern women changed? Lynxwiler and Wilson (1988) argued that typifications of Southern women are still used to structure women's own experiences as well as their audience. They described the Code of the New Southern Belle: Never forget your status lest others forget theirs; Honor the "natural differences" between men and women; Don't be a slut; Remain loyal to the Southern tradition; You can never be too rich or too thin; Pretty is as pretty does. The researchers argue that these stereotypes function as controls in the lives of Southern women, monitor their behavior and restrict their presentation. Others react to them in ways that encourage continuation of the behavior. Brabant (1988) described the "covert level of socialization of the Southern female" (p.103) as well as a code of survival with dignity, responsibility for others, the ability to adapt to change, and the ever-avoidance of anything "tacky."

Examining the role of women in the Progressive influence in Southern education, Fraser, Saunders, and Wakelyn (1985) indicated that women encountered a Southern individualism that was very different from other regions of the country. Women were denied a significant role in the administration of schools and were relegated to beautifying schoolhouses and engaging in home demonstration work and home economics. Dehart (1997) maintained that Southerners of both sexes resisted the dismantling of the

gender hierarchy in 1920 and that half a century later most of the states refused to ratify the ERA. She cites Protestant fundamentalists, scriptural traditionalists and the suspicion of federal intervention as the reason. How does such a persistent and pervasive culture impact Southern women in traditionally male leadership roles in education and what are the best ways to enable women to survive in such roles?

Research to date is based on structured interviews, surveys, and observations. Missing from the literature is a study of women in traditionally male leadership roles in public education in the Deep South. Also missing from the literature is the application of a journaling methodology as a way to study these women and to provide a possible coping strategy.

The benefits of writing about experiences were documented in the April 14, 1999 issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association. Described are the results of a study conducted at the State University of New York. Half of the 112 participants with arthritis and asthma improved significantly after writing about stressful events. Dr. David Spiegal, a Stanford University psychiatrist, in an interview with the Chicago Sun, said the results of the study, "indicate that a very minimal psychological social interaction can have very substantial medical effects." Kalb (1999) described the power of confessional writing. She notes that even healthy, well-adjusted people acquire emotional baggage through life experience and benefit from writing about those experiences. Pennebaker's work with students at the University of Texas at Austin showed decreases in visits to the health clinic, an increase in the level of disease-fighting lymphocytes and modest declines in blood pressure. Writing can be a cathartic approach that dulls the emotional impact of an experience or helps an individual confront it and enables people to read their own minds. Kalb cites psychotherapist Kathleen Adams who sees journal keeping as a powerful addition to talk-therapy that builds self-trust and self-esteem. Kalb recommended the Intensive Journal Method developed by Jungian-trained psychologist Ira Progoff (1997). The program involves a rigorous two day workshop designed to help the individual develop a structured journal method that can be continued on one's own. The importance and relevance of this work is that we must find a way to attract and retain more women in the high school principalship and superintendency and the management of stress through journaling may be a key.

Conclusion

Though we know women experience educational leadership in ways that are different from men, what we do not know is how women born and raised in the Deep South experience educational leadership in traditionally male roles. Are their barriers unique as a result of a specific gendered cultural context? Is a structured journaling methodology a method for not only revealing the impact of Southern culture on these but also for keeping them in these roles? Are Southern girls really different? Tina Turner, Southern born African American entertainer, maintains, " I'm a Southern girl. We have mud on our feet." (p.150) Further research should seek to define, explore, and determine the impact of that "mud" on the experience of Southern women in the high school principalship and superintendency.

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