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## Educational Leadership: Where are the Women?

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### *Abstract*

Throughout time, stereotypes regarding women and men have permeated society, creating many obstacles for women, especially in the professional world. Where words like nurturing, compassionate, emotional, expressive, communal, passive, uncertain, subjective and supportive have historically been used to describe women; words like intelligent, powerful, competent, objective, independent, methodical and driven have typically been reserved to describe men (Porat, 1991). These adjectives have long supported the social perception that men are superior and women are inferior. Obviously times are changing. Women are emerging as powerful leaders in business and government and are disproving many long-standing skewed perceptions of females. Despite these advances, however, certain labels for women continue to impede their efforts to be strong leaders in other areas.

Key words: Education leadership, women, society, leaders

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*Introduction*

In education, women are perceived as being better *teachers* than *leaders* (Gold, 1996). The US Department of Education (2007) reported 75 percent of teachers are female while 25 percent of teachers are male. This may be a result of women's stereotypical innate ability to nurture and care for children, which sets the foundation for their dedication to the profession. Their unwillingness to let children fail or be failed by the system serves as the motivation for them to remain in the classroom, to have the most direct influence on their students.

Men characteristically take on the leadership roles as principals and superintendents (Gold, 1996). According to the US Department of Education (2007), 50.3 percent of principals are males and 49.7 percent of principals are females. This breakdown does not reflect the male/female ratio in the teaching ranks. While many female applicants actively pursue administrative positions, data indicates that male applicants are commonly chosen (Reis, Young, & Jury, 1999). It can be speculated that this phenomenon might be attributed to men's stereotypical innate ability to be strong, powerful and intelligent, which drives them to want to be in charge, to want to be the almighty decision-maker. Consequently, men, according to limited social perceptions, naturally seem to fit the mold of educational leader. "Teaching is a good job for women but a career with prospects for men," (Burgess, 1989, pg. 90).

One pertinent fact consistently remains overlooked. Although men may fit the stereotypical role of leader, it is forgotten that women are just as capable. Women of all backgrounds manage households, raise children, and quite often maintain status as full-time employees. If this is not indicative of women's potential to be leaders, then what does leadership entail?

A plethora of definitions of leadership have evolved over the decades. Lunenburg and Ornstein (2008, p. 115) discuss much of the research associated with educational leadership. Leithwood and Duke (1999) classified leadership into six categories: instructional leadership, transformational leadership, moral leadership, participative leadership, contingency leadership and managerial leadership.

According to Leithwood & Duke (1999), instructional leadership focuses on "the behaviors of teachers as they engage in activities directly affecting the growth of students" (p. 47). Transformational leadership encompasses "the commitments and capacities of organizational members" (p. 48). Moral leadership emphasizes "the values and ethics of leadership" (p. 50). Participative leadership stresses "the decision-making process of the group" (p. 51). Contingency leadership focuses on "how leaders respond to the unique organizational circumstances or problems they face as a consequence of the preferences of coworkers, working conditions and tasks to be completed" (p. 54). Finally, managerial leadership encompasses "the functions, tasks or behaviors of the leader" (p. 53).

According to Lunenburg and Ornstein (2008) each type of leadership has as its focus "student achievement, ethics and values, democratic principles and social justice" (p. 116). They further explain that despite the existence of six realms of leadership, a leader adopts not one single style, but rather a combination of styles, depending on the time and situation. The realms

of leadership are fused to create the most effective and productive setting within the organization.

With such a liberal view of educational leadership, why do women struggle to find their place among male school leaders? In education, women face obstacles and barriers, known collectively as the “glass ceiling” (Morrison, White, & van Velsor, 1987). There are sexist assumptions and sex-role attributes regarding female administrators’ ability and competence to perform the role (Funk, 1986), Shakeshaft, 1987). Apparently there is a lack of a multitude of necessities including adequate childcare and support systems (Scutt, 1990). Traditional mentoring opportunities are lacking for women (Randall, 1994). Women tend to be denied access to socialization processes, which limit them from aspiring to leadership positions (Jacobs, 1994). Some believe that there are separate promotion routes for women and men for teaching and educational administration (Nicoll, 1992). In addition, for women, there is a lack of support, encouragement, and counseling from relatives, friends, coworkers and superiors (Anastaski & Koutra, 2005). Women manage the dual role of performing unpaid work in the home, rearing children and working in the workplace (Davies, 1994). Promotion by merit is not a neutral concept but is one based on the values of the dominant group in the organization, which typically is a group of men (Burton, 1997). Leadership is viewed as unfeminine (Lips & Kenner, 2007), which puts women in the unfortunate position of neglecting their natural feminine role expectations to foster their leadership role expectations. And when women do arrive in leadership positions, particularly in male dominated areas, they tend to be judged more harshly than their male counterparts (Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992). People are more tolerant of dominant behavior in men than in women, who receive penalties for exhibiting their power (Carli, 2001). Finally, females who promote their own competence are judged as less likable than men who exhibit the same behaviors (Rudman, 1998).

As a result of these barriers, women in education, regardless of qualifications and aspirations, seem to stay behind the scenes and do work that continues to be overlooked and underpaid. Unfortunately, the good old boys network does not have a counterpart known as the good old girls network. Consequently, the opportunities for women are narrowed.

Women not only deserve to be in educational leadership positions but have earned the right to be leaders if not for equity for style and influence. In terms of equity, legislation dictates that women have the same access to power and resources as men. Women often lead and manage differently than men. They bring a clearer set of values about developing and supporting colleagues and students and a closer understanding of interpersonal relationships than men (Gold, 1996). Women can effectively lead even though their approach differs from men because they bring a style that fosters relationships and growth (Gold, 1996). Gender stereotypes aside, women are equally as capable of being effective leaders as their male counterparts.

Effective leaders can adapt to varying situations. They tend to be in tune with their social environment. Effective leaders are ambitious and achievement oriented, assertive, cooperative, decisive, dependable, dominant with a desire to influence others, energetic in terms of their high activity level, persistent, self-confident, tolerant of stress and willing to assume responsibility (Lundenburg & Ornstein, 2008). It is imperative for them to be intelligent, creative, organized, persuasive and social; to show strength in conceptualization; to display diplomacy and

tactfulness; to speak fluently; and to have knowledge of group tasks; (Lundenburg & Ornstein, 2008). Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) conclude that qualities of effective school leaders are either innate or developed. Effective leaders inspire others by relating to their feelings. They work through their emotions whether in a large urban school district, in a small classroom or in a PTA meeting. Goleman (2002) and his colleagues have studied the effectiveness of leaders for the past two decades. They found that highly respected and successful leaders exhibit “motivating power, empathy, integrity and intuitive ability” (Goleman, 2002). Most importantly, Goleman (2002) believes that leaders are developed and not born with leadership ability, thus supporting the notion that anyone, women included, can foster and develop leadership qualities and be effective leaders if given the opportunity and necessary support. Ultimately, women need to exhibit the qualities that define effective school leaders and not be leery of outwardly displaying those characteristics.

Research has described qualities of a successful leader and has discussed the obstacles women need to overcome, but what will it take to be an effective educational leader in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) developed a leadership model entitled *Selecting and Developing the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Principal*. Components of the model include “educational leadership, resolving complex problems, communication and developing staff and others” (NASSP, 2002 p.3).

The NASSP defines the first component, educational leadership, as having three facets: “setting instructional direction, teamwork and sensitivity” (NASSP, 2002 p.3). Setting instructional direction focuses on implementing strategies for improving teaching and learning including putting programs and improvement efforts into action. It is developing a vision, establishing clear goals and providing direction in achieving stated goals. Setting instructional direction encourages others to contribute to goal achievement and to secure commitment to a course of action from individuals and from the group. The second facet, teamwork, emphasizes seeking and encouraging involvement of team members; modeling and encouraging the behaviors that move the group to task completion; and supporting group accomplishment. Finally, the third facet, sensitivity, revolves around perceiving the needs and concerns of others. Sensitivity is dealing tactfully with others in emotionally stressful situations or in conflict and knowing what information to communicate and to whom. Sensitivity is the ability to relate to people of varying ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds.

The second component of the NASSP’s principal selection model is resolving complex problems that are also defined by three aspects: “judgment, results orientation, and organizational ability” (NASSP 2002). Judgment refers to reaching logical conclusions and making high-quality decisions based on available information. It means giving priority and caution to significant situations. Judgment requires seeking out relevant data, facts and impressions and analyzing and interpreting complex information. Results orientation requires assuming responsibility. It is the ability to recognize when a decision is required and then taking prompt action as issues emerge. Results orientation requires resolving short-term issues while balancing them against long-term objectives. Organizational ability focuses on planning and scheduling one’s own work and the work of others so that resources are used appropriately. It includes scheduling the flow of activities and establishing procedures to monitor projects.

Organizational ability requires the individual to practice time and task management and knowing what to delegate and to whom.

The third component of the model describes two forms of communication, oral and written. Oral communication refers to the leader's ability to clearly communicate and make oral presentations that are clear and easy to understand. Written communication refers to the leader's ability to express ideas clearly in writing, demonstrate technical proficiency and write appropriately for different audiences.

Developing self and others is the fourth component of the NASSP's model for selecting and developing a principal for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This component contains two aspects, the development of others and the understanding of one's own strengths and weaknesses. The development of others focuses on teaching, coaching, and helping others coupled with providing specific feedback based on observations and data. Understanding one's own strengths and weaknesses requires an understanding of personal strengths and weaknesses. It means taking responsibility for improvement by actively pursuing developmental activities and striving for continuous learning.

It is apparent that developing into an effective school leader in the 21<sup>st</sup> century entails harboring and exhibiting desire, diligence and dedication. With all professions, including education, leaders need an inherent desire to want to lead. Potential leaders must demonstrate diligence with respect to doing whatever it takes to create a productive and inviting environment. They must be dedicated to the cause of providing the best experience for all involved. None of the cited literature is gender specific. Essentially, effective school leaders, male or female, must keep the interests of students at heart, be a leader of learners, act ethically, put instructional leadership first, practice efficient management, build strong relationships, know what to expect, orchestrate school-community partnerships, be a lifelong learner and build a positive school climate (Alvy and Robbins, 2005).

Women have been training to be effective leaders since the beginning of time in the home and recently in business and government. Unfortunately, they have not been equally afforded the opportunity to display their adeptness and competency in education to the level at which women dominate education. Society must develop a greater trust in women to lead our schools and school districts just as they have developed trust in women to teach our children. Women must tackle the obstacles before them with full determination. When this is accomplished, women will experience equity as leaders in the educational world.

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