Advancing Women In Leadership

Female Perspectives on Career Advancement

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Only through a collective, cohesive effort will the plight of females vying for top administrative positions in the school system improve.

There are current inequalities in the representation of females in higher administrative positions in public schools that are a product of historical and societal patterns. These patterns have determined the constraints women have faced and continue to face when they attempt to enter public school administration. Women represent the majority in the teaching profession and in school administration graduate programs, but are persistently absent from the highest and most powerful administrative positions in public education (Shakeshaft, 1999). The top three administrative posts in public school education (superintendent, assistant superintendent, and high school principal) remain overwhelmingly filled by males (Keller, 1999). According to Mary Hatwood Futurell, former President of the National Education Association, in 2002 only 12 percent of the superintendents are women and just five percent are minorities (AAUW, 2002). This astounding figure is approximately the same as was reported at the turn of the last century.

The overall percentage of women who represent leadership positions is miniscule as it is. Thus, the meager percentage represented by women of color demonstrates how severely underrepresented women of other racial and/or ethnic groups are in public school administration (Gupton & Slick, 1995). A report published by the National Center for Education Statistics details this critical point. In the year 2000, 44% of all principals in the public schools were women. Of the total number of principals represented, only ten percent were African American and four percent identified themselves as Hispanic (NCES, 2002). With the the United States Census (2000) reporting 12.9% of the total U.S. population identifying themselves as as

Black/African African American, and 12.5% identifying themselves as being of Hispanic origin, a greater reprensentation of minority administrators is needed in the public schools to equate with the demographic population in the country.

Literature Review

In Coloring Outside the Lines, Mentoring Women into School Leadeship, Gardiner, Enomoto, and Grogan (2000) proclaim that the overriding culture in educational administration is androcentric, meaning it is being dominated with norms defined as white and male. They also assert that although women have gained entry into educational administration, they are still viewed differently. The patriarchal values of white males still permeates throughout public school administration despite the gains women and minorities have made in recent years. When analyzing corporate positions, Davies-Netzley (1998) report that women continue to cluster near the bottom of corporate organizational charts and endure lower earnings and authority, and have less advancement potential in comparison with men. Within gains that have been made, white women have made greater gains in achieveing uppermanagement and professional positions in comparison to women of color (Davies-Netzley, 1998).

Grogan (1996) conducted a study centering on women aspiring to the superintendency in kindergarten - grade 12 public school systems. Her study yielded five significant findings. First, it was revealed that there are alternative approaches to the traditional style of leadership. These alternative approaches are a necessity in light of the diversity educators are faced with which makes it a necessity to "approach administration from a relational, interpersonal standpoint" (Grogan, 1996, p. 176). Feminist inquiry scholarship proposes for the "re-vision of a leader as one who is a facilitator, a catalyst, or a member of a group that together works for social change" (Grogan, 1996, p. 176). Second, Grogan revealed that the "personal and professional lives of the women who particpated in the study were inextricably intertwined" and the "white, gendered nature of the k - 12 educational administration emerged vividly" (Grogan, 1996, p.8). Third, the women in the study felt they were viewed as women first and administrators second causing their gender to always be a factor in their superintendency preparation. Fourth, Grogan developed a greater understanding of the personal and professional factors that contributed to the paths taken by the particpants. Some were prepared and ready for the position professionally, but not personally. Mothering, partnering and homemaking were contributing factors. Finally, it was revealed that the particpants resisted discourging outlooks by keeping focused on their aspirations when faced with difficulties.

Women have incorporated many strategies to assist them in remaining focused while entrenched in patriarchal systems. Among them are attaining advanced degrees and credentials, establishing informal and formal networks with other women, and reconciling work and home responsibilities (Davies-Netzley, 1998). Gupton and Slick (1996), in Highly Successful Women Administrators: The Inside Stories of How They Got There, cite many lessons of success stemming from their study of female public school administrators. The lessons include being prepared,

career planning, persevering, being diligent and professional, honoring, perserving and protecting integrity, reaching out to and through others, mentoring, and leading by example.

Mentoring and sponsoring has been referenced by many in literature as a strategy for career advancement. Effective mentoring has been described as communicating and connecting on an emotional level with the mentee while assisting with the physical, emotional and logistcal aspects of school leadership (Gardiner, Enomoto, & Grogan, 2000). In a study of thirty-eight African American female school administrators, mentors and sponsors were revealed as playing important roles in their career success (Allen, K., Jacobson, S., & Lomotey, K., 1995). Respondents in the study, who had a mentor during the early stages of their, career acknowledged they received encouragement and moral support which led to higher levels of effort and expectations. This study defined mentors as those who help motivate others in achieving goals, and sponsors were defined as those who enable others to attain goals (Allen, K., Jacobson, S., & Lomotey, K., 1995). The participants in the study viewed sponsorship as the most critical compopnent in relationships for aspiring African American women administrators.

In a study focusing on the relationship between social support and stress as differentially experienced by African American women, white women, and white men both within and outside the workplace, Baliey, Wolfe, & Wolf (1996) revealed that whereas social support was important for all groups studied, it was particularly important for African American women to develop sources of social support at home and at work. The job support assisted white men and women in the study reduce depression and strain, but did not for African American women. The same held true for home support for the particpants in the study.

Gardiner, Enomoto, and Grogan (2000) conducted a study consisting of eighteen women, of whom fourteen were African American and four were Hispanic. The participants revealed six needs of women of color who seek to move into educational administration. Four of the identified needs focused on mentoring and support. First, they expressed a need to understand the political dynamics of public schools and to develop the skills to succeed as both women and minorities. Second, they wished to gain access into networks within and outside the school system. Third, they desired mentors who were similar to themselves. Fourth, because of the few women of color in positions of power, they also sought mentoring from those who were different from themselves. Fifth, they expressed a need for more than one mentor with at least one being female and one being a person of color. Lastly, they saw a need for alternative support systems beyond the formal and informal mentoring established in educational organizations.

Feminist Approach

This study was analyzed using a feminist approach. Gardiner, Enomoto & Grogran, (2000) stressed the importance of a feminist orientation:
(A feminist orientation is important for the) validation of multiple and diverse perspectives to…..clarify …. beliefs and values, and for the pedagogical

opportunities to help one to consider the viewpoints of other individuals. Women learn from other women's voices and experiences.

The dominant perspective in educational administration has been androcentric or male-biased.The contradictions arising from this bias are best exposed by utilizing (a) feminist (approach).

A feminist orientation values women's experiences as the focus of attention. For this study, it is imperative that the chosen analytic approach give voice to the realities of the female experience. M. K. Tetreault (1985) identified the common ways (phases) of thinking about women as reflected in scholarship. The first is male scholarship, which sees the male experience as universal. The second, compensatory scholarship, entails a consciousness that women are missing, but males are still perceived as the norm and representative of all thought. The third phase is bifocal scholarship, which emphasizes the differences between women and men. Phase four, feminist scholarship, emphasizes women's activities as the most valued measure. The final phase, multifocal or relational scholarship, analyzes how women and men relate to and complement one another. Feminist scholarship assists in developing an appreciation of the differences among African American, Hispanic, and white female public school administrators in relation to the barriers they perceive in hindering their climb up the ladder and their strategies for success. It "pursues new questions, new categories, and new notions of significance which illuminate women's traditions, history, culture, values, visions, and perspectives" by allowing the women's experience "to speak for itself." (Tetreault, M. K. T., 1985, p. 370).

Objectives of the Study

This study examined a sample of female administrators serving in higher administrative ranks in the public school system to determine any similarities or differences between African American, Hispanic and white females in three areas: 1) the perception of barriers to career advancement, 2) the perceived effects of barriers to career advancement and 3) the strategies utilized to overcome barriers to career advancement.

This study also gathered data on the personal and professional characteristics of the respondents in order to provide a composite picture and to analyze any significant differences.

Research Design and Methodology

The method of data collection was a survey questionnaire consisting of 49 items and a section for voluntary narrative responses. The population for the study was defined as full-time female administrators employed either as principals, directors or superintendents (region, assistant, associate or deputy) in a large, diverse urban public school system. Of the 260 female administrators identified in the specified positions, 175 returned surveys. This yielded a total return rate of 67.31%. The population consisted of 104 elementary school principals, 14 middle school

principals, three senior high school principals, 15 directors, three assistant superintendents, one deputy superintendent, and 16 other non-school site higher level administrators. The findings were based on the comprehensive information of all questionnaires received from these respondents.

Demographic Data

The racial classification of the respondents were evenly distributed among white (32%), African American (33%), and Hispanic (35%). When analyzing the personal characteristics of the respondents, 62% were married, while 15% were single and 20% were divorced. Fifty-seven percent did not have any children living at home. A majority of the Hispanic females (75%) and a majority of the white females (68%) were married. The African American females reported being divorced at a higher level (38%) than the others with only 46% of them reported being married.

In further analysis of demographic information, the number of children living at home proved statistically significant. A majority of the white female administrators (71%) and a majority of the African American female administrators (60%) did not have any children living at home. However, with the Hispanic female administrators, 60% had one or more children living at home.

Discussion of Results

African American Females

The African American female administrators showed a significant difference with the number of years teaching prior to being appointed as an administrator. They had a greater number of years as a teacher with an average of 15.13 years. This indicates they have more instructional experience and it correlates with their perception of barriers hindering their initial placement into administrative positions.

African American female administrators perceived the lack of a professional network as more of a barrier to their career advancement than the other respondents. Along with that perception, more African American female administrators also felt they were excluded from the informal socialization process into the profession (i.e., the "Good Old Boy Network") in comparison to Hispanic and white females. Lastly, African American female adminstrators perceived that they needed more training in order to be competitive with other administrators in comparison to the other respondents in the study. In fact, in response to the 17 barriers to career advancement listed on the questionnaire, African American female administrators answered with a higher mean score on 14 (see Table 1).

Hispanic Female Administrators

Sixty percent of the Hispanic female administrators indicated they have children living at home and a majority reported being married. These characteristics underscore how important the role of the family is in the professional and personal lives of Hispanic women in the study. In addition, Hispanic female administrators

perceived the barrier, conflicts between the roles of wife/mother and career women, as more of a hindrance than the other female administrators. Also, Hispanic female administrators perceived their careers as being delayed due to family responsibility more than African American female administrators. They reported interruption in their careers more often than white female administrators. This is more likely due to the focus on family responsibilities. Maintaining career aspirations and managing personal lives is a challenge faced by many female administrators (Grogan, 1996). One Hispanic female administrator wrote in the voluntary narrative portion of the study, "I feel that I have not been recognized professionally because I dedicate nights and weekends to my family." Another Hispanic female administrator wrote, "I do not seek job choices large distances from my home in order to avoid drive time that would take away from either my family or work."

Hispanic female administrators also appeared to possess more confidence in their careers. An overwhelming 94% of the Hispanic female administrators rated themselves professionally as being very successful. Only 78% of the African American and white respondents rated themselves professionally as very successful.

When analyzing strategies utilized to overcome the perceived barriers, Hispanic higher-level female administrators were more likely to 1) seek advanced training (84%); 2) become assertive in pursuing career goals (62%); 3) become professionally visible (74%); and 4) improve their professional image (82%). In fact, Hispanic female administrators rated themselves more highly successful when using strategies to overcome barriers when answering seven of the ten questions on strategies. It became apparent that Hispanic female administrators in the study perceived themselves as being successful in achieving what the white and African American female administrators were still finding troublesome: assertively utilizing available resources to enhance their careers (see Table 1).

An African American female respondent wrote the following in the voluntary narrative portion of the questionnaire: "Black females have even more barriers, based on the number of Black females in top adminstrative positions. The effects of the perceived barriers is reflected in the limited number of Black females filling top level adminstrative positions." Another volunteered this statement: "It is my opinion that competency, integrity, loyalty and leadership are not components recognized for higher achievement in this school district." Yet another African American female adminstrator stated, "Minority applicants usually start at the more challenging schools, whereas, all others have the full range of available positions that are only accessable to non-Black applicants."

African American females also showed a significant difference when answering the questions on the effects of the barriers to career advancement. They felt they were excluded from informal networks more than white or Hispanic female adminstrators. This barrier effect showed the largest significant difference among groups than any of the questions on the survey. When answering the question regarding problems finding a balance between feminine identity and professionalism as a barrier effect, African American female administrators felt that it was more of a difficulty.

White Female Administrators

The white female administrators did not score significantly higher on any of the barrier questions to career advancement as compared to the others. Of the eight respondents who wrote in the voluntary narrative portion that they had not experienced any barriers to their career advancement, six were white. An example is a white female administrator who wrote, " I believe my particular survey will not help you much. I have never encountered most of the things you have mentioned here. Maybe I was just lucky."

The only area in which white female adminstrators showed a significant difference from African American and Hispanic female administrators was in the section regarding the perceived effects of the barriers. White female administrators perceived that they were denied access to power groups that make important decisions more than Hispanic female administrators. This correlates with much of the research on the exclusion of females in general from top adminstrative positons (Gupton and Slick, 1995; Whitaker & Lane, 1990).

Although white female administrators in this study did not show significance with the barriers in comparison to African American and Hispanic female administrators, there is still a glass ceiling hindering the level they are allowed to reach. One white female administrator wrote the following in the voluntary narrative portion of the questionnaire:

"Within the public school system, there is a definitive lack of women in top roles. This is a result of many males at these levels whom I believe are afraid to allow women into the ranks - expecially competent, strong, bright women who speak their minds, as opposed to learn their place."

Another white female adminstrator stated, "The old-boy network is alive and strong."

An area of concern voiced by a few white female higher-level administrators is the race/ethnicity issue. A white female adminstrator stated, "The ethnic/cultural barrier is a greater obstacle now than gender. Gender is not the greatest concern verbalized by female adminstrators now." A few of the other narrative responses from white female higher-level adminstrators who viewed race/ethnicity as a concern were: "The biggest barriers to my becoming principal were my ethnicity and lack of visibility to those who make decisions." Also, "Once you understand they don't desire intelligent, thoughtful, competent people - especially Anglo females - then you're okay." Lastly, "Your data (questions) did not address…the influence of race/ethnicity in decisions, re: promotions."

Summary of Findings

This study provided extensive information on three identified areas of inquiry. The first area of inquiry explored the differences among African American, Hispanic, and white female public school administrators on the perception of barriers to career

advancement. It was revealed that African American female administrators in the study perceived more barriers as hindering their career ascension in comparison to Hispanic and white respondents. They answered with a higher mean score on 14 of the 17 areas identified as barriers. The significant areas were the following: the perception that they had lack of access to professional networks, the perception that they were excluded from the informal socialization process, and the perception that they needed more training in order to be competitive. The Hispanic female public school administrators scored significantly in the area of conflicts between the role of wife and career. A majority of the identified areas of significance concerning Hispanic females centered on the family and personal life.

The second area of inquiry centered on the differences among African American, Hispanic, and white female public school administrators on the perceived effects of barriers to career advancement. African American respondents scored significantly in the areas of being excluded from the informal network and having problems balancing femininity and professionalism. Hispanic female public school administrators scored significantly in the areas of having an interruption of their career and having their careers delayed career due to family responsibilities. The only area in which the white female respondents scored significantly was the area of being denied access to power groups as an effect of the barriers to career advancement.

The final area of inquiry referred to the strategies the respondents utilized to overcome barriers to career advancement. The Hispanic female respondents scored significantly in two areas: improving their professional image and becoming professionally visible. The paucity of strategies showing significance among the female study participants indicates a need for an improved, concerted effort focusing on giving alternative options to assist in advancement endeavors.

Recommendations for Change

This research study provided available information on the major barriers to career advancement facing African American, Hispanic and white higher-level female administrators in a large diverse urban public school system. The results of the study added to the accumulating body of research on female administrators and the factors that create barriers to their full participation in educational administration. A feminist orientation of analysis allows for the conclusion that barriers identified as significant provide strong evidence of the persistence of discriminatory practices that limit the representation of all female leaders, particularly those of color.

Mentoring and Support Networks

To assist in the elimination of barriers, women of all races and ethnicities should take the initiative in counteracting the stereotypic attitudes regarding their roles in educational administration. An important advancement in that direction is the formulation of mentoring and support groups among those represented in this study as well as those not represented. The male administrators have mastered the informal network and actively practice its advantageous strategies. As cited earlier,

a study by Bailey, Wolfe, & Wolf (1996) revealed that social support was particularly important for African American women. A female administrator wrote the following in the voluntary narrative portion of the questionnaire: "The barrier presenting the most obstacles to me has been the "boys club" mentality of upper administrators. Only the chosen "guys" get the jobs, and the top jobs go by direct appointment….not the interview process." Women have yet to fully participate in the beneficial tactics employed by male administrators. As another female administrator wrote in the questionnaire, "Women do not necessarily support other women. Men are more supportive of other men." Yet another female administrator stated, "Females are sometimes their own worst enemies. In their quest for success, they are not willing to share their knowledge. In addition, rather than admit that they don't know a policy or procedure, they become defensive and aggressive toward other females." Yet another female administrator summed up the barriers faced by women administrators by writing, "Often, women are more of a barrier to other women getting advancement." Only through a collective, cohesive effort will the plight of females vying for top administrative positions in the school system improve. As reported in the Glass Ceiling Commission Study sponsored by the Department of Labor (1995), women who obtained top positions attribute their success principally to individual effort and performance. The findings support the results of an earlier study by Elman and Gilbert (1984). They investigated how 97 women in dual-career families with preschool children manage typical conflicts between their professional and parental roles. Two coping strategies, increased role behavior and cognitive restructuring were the most utilized strategies. Increased role behavior involved efforts by the participants to "do it all," by working harder and more efficiently. Cognitive restructuring and personal role redefinition involved thinking about the situation differently and altering personal role conceptions. It was concluded that the women in the study most typically used coping strategies in which the responsibility for conflict reduction remained with the individual. This correlates with the results of the present study in that a majority of the respondents reported never utilizing a "new girl network," which is the female version of the male "good old boy network." Support systems are a must considering that many times shared success is more gratifying than individualized accomplishments. Such networks will allow female administrators to form a collective voice to counteract the present status quo of male dominated power.

School Boards

It is the responsibility of local school boards to become aware of the inequities that exist in hiring and employment practices. School boards and districts carry the responsibility to investigate the extent to which women of various racial and ethnic backgrounds are represented in the upper-administrative staff and closely examine their hiring/promotion practices and procedures in order to achieve equity. Women are well represented among elementary school principals. An effort must be made to equalize their representation in the senior high principalships and superintendencies (region, associate, assistant, and deputy, etc.). School boards must be diligent about maintaining equitable work environments and leadership opportunities for all employees. When social justice and equity are modeled by the school leadership on a consistent basis, the potential exists not only to enrich the

professional opportunities for female leaders, but, more importantly, to enrich learning opportunities for the children that are served. (Tillman, B. A. & Cochran, L. L. & 2000).

Reconciling Professional and Personal Responsibilities

It is advantageous for female administrators to strive to give equal energy to both the professional and personal arenas. In a study of women aspiring to the superintendency, Grogan (1996) outlined several areas expressed by the participants as causing tension. Fear of failing as a mother, responsibility for maintenance of relationships, and coping with household labor (partnering, mothering, and homemaking) were the areas cited. Grogan concluded that the women in the study moved "back and forth between the different discourses, professional and personal, never at any time able or willing to abandon completely the practices that have constituted her as partner, mother, or homemaker" (Grogan, 1996, p. 110). Maintaining personal support systems (family, friends, informal groups) places women at equal advantage with males by allowing them to benefit from the very networks that assist males in advancing.

Receiving Advanced Education/Training

Of the 156 female administrators who responded to the questionnaire, only 12 (8%) had doctoral degrees. In order to be competitive with males, more females must obtain higher educational degrees. Education beyond the masters and specialist levels could assist female administrators in obtaining the knowledge, skills, and credentials necessary to overcome many of the barriers they perceive in hindering career advancement. As stated by Davies-Netzley (1998, p. 348), "Earning advanced degrees and credentials (higher than those of most men) appears to be a way that women compete with men for elite positions."

Higher Education

It is imperative that university preparation programs in teacher education, educational administration, and related areas address issues of race, ethnicity, and gender in more authentic ways than in the past (Tillman & Cochran, 2000). Strategies that would contribute to gender, racial, and ethnic equity in public school administration include recruiting and retaining diverse faculty, diversity training, offering courses focusing on gender, race, and ethnicity issues in leadership, and promoting a greater understanding of the alternative styles of leadership women offer. Lastly, providing high quality field experiences in urban schools could result in greater sensitivity to diversity on the part of those preparing to teach and lead children in today's schools (Tillman & Cochran, 2000)
Albino (1992) summarizes the status of women in educational leadership by stating, "Conventional wisdom says women are at a disadvantage in moving ahead in management. We …….. have not been playing the game as long. The fact is, there are many different ways to win; it all depends on how you play the cards you've been dealt. And you don't need dirty tricks; you just need to know the rules of the game."

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