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Advancing Women In Leadership

Teachers' Perceptions of Women In The Principalship
A Current Perspective

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Teachers appear to not want extremes and prefer a balance in both male and female principals.

Women are still under represented in educational administration during the 1990's. When one compares the number of women teachers with the number of women in hool administration the number is disproportionate. The majority of teachers are females. Criswell and Betz (1995) noted that 66% of the teaching force is female. However, the percentage of women in school administration is quite different. Women hold 5% of the superintendent positions, 20.6% of assistant superintendent positions, and 30% of the principalships (Restine, 1993). A survey conducted by The Executive Educator and Xavier University (Natale, 1992) revealed that in the 1990's women hold 39.7 % of the elementary school principal positions, followed by 20.5% at the junior high/middle school level, and 12% at the high school level. What factors contribute to the low numbers of women in educational administration?

One of the most common reasons presented in the literature for the under representation of women in school administration is negative perceptions of women's leadership (Tyree, 1995). Studies of female and male approaches to leadership document a distinct difference in the way women and men manage (Shakeshaft, 1989). Management attributes traditionally associated with men, such as authoritative, decisive, controlling, and unemotional, are often more respected by potential employers in education than a more decentralized approach to leadership which involves the

principal as a facilitator of a shared vision and shared decision-making. Tyree (1995) stated that the under representation of women in educational administration is fostered through a series of myths: " (a) women don't have what it takes, and (b) women lack support of teachers and the community." According to Helgesen (1990), women still must deal with the negative views of female administrators held by peers, parents, and employees of both sexes. Gupton and Slick (1995) quoted a female elementary principal as saying that "even after women have obtained administrative positions they are not afforded the status or the respect given their male colleagues," (p. 10).

Within the school environment, the attitudes which teachers have toward women administrators may have

a direct effect on how well the administrators' job performance will be evaluated by her supervisor. These attitudes may also be a deterrent to more women seeking administrative positions.

Recent school reform efforts which include transformational leadership, site-based management, empowerment of teachers, and other forms of decentralized decision-making now celebrate the stereotypical characteristics of women school administrators. In fact, contemporary theories and studies of leadership indicate that the characteristics of the leadership style used by most women are becoming the dominant model of leadership (Aburdene & Naisbitt, 1993; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Helgesen, 1990 as cited by Gupton & Slick, 1995). Now that collaborative, participatory leadership styles are valued, has the attitude toward women elementary and secondary school administrators changed to the positive?

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine teachers' attitudes toward women principals. Do teachers perceive that women administrators foster collaboration, cooperation, participation, and shared decision making? How do women teachers perceive the effectiveness of the female administrator? How do male teachers perceive the effectiveness of the female administrator? Do teachers prefer a female administrator over a male administrator?

We developed a questionnaire to gather data relating to teacher perceptions of women and men in the principalship. Each item on the questionnaire was developed from a review of the literature on women and men's ways of leading and leadership qualities principals need in order to provide effective leadership while transforming schools into the 21st century (Crogan, 1996; Dunlap & Schmuck, 1995; Lunenburg, 1995; Restine, 1993; Sergiovanni,1995; Shakeshaft, 1989; Tannen, 1994; Tichy & Devanna 1990; Tyree, 1995).

Procedures

The questionnaire was distributed during the spring of 1996 to 1,047 public school teachers in Missouri and Kansas. Of the surveys distributed 479 were returned for a 45.7% return rate. The data were analyzed by gender. There were 349 female participants and 126 male participants. Four teachers did not specify gender.

Results

Describe the Qualities of a Successful Male Principal and a Successful Female Principal ?

Participants were asked to indicate which qualities they thought were desirable in female and male principals. Table 1 presents the collective responses of male and female participants. *Good verbal communicator* was checked by 92.5 % of the participants for a male principal and 93.1% as a desirable quality for a female principal. One can conclude that good communication between principals and teachers is important regardless of the principal's gender.

The least desirable quality of a male (17.3%) and female (19%) principal was *unemotional*. The quality *emotional* was also one of the least desirable qualities for male (23.2%) and female (26.3%) principals. Teachers appear to not want extremes and to prefer a balance in both male and female principals. The low percentage of responses for the quality *authoritarian*, (21.7%) for a male principal and (19.4%) for female principal, indicate that an authoritative style is also an unacceptable quality for any principal. There are eight qualities which were checked by 80% to 90% of all participants for both male and female principals. Those qualities are: good verbal communicator, good manager, good listener, problem solver, knowledgeable of curriculum and instruction, shares power and credit, and seeks variety of input. The researchers concluded that these were the most desirable qualities for a principal to possess, regardless of the principal's gender.

It is interesting to note that the quality *shares power and credit* received a higher percentage of responses, 82% for a male principal and 83.7 % for a female principal, than did the quality *collaborative* which received 74.5% for a male principal and 76.4% for a female principal. One would think that in an era of shared decision making "collaborative" would have been a much more desirable quality. It was also interesting to note that *decisive* was slightly more desirable in a female principal than in a male principal. Is this because women traditionally are perceived to be less decisive than men?

Table 2 presents the desirable qualities of male and female principals by gender of the participants.

Women selected *good communicator, good listener, knowledgeable of curriculum and* instruction, personable, good manager, problem solver and seeks input as the top seven qualities for both male and female principals. Being a good communicator was the most desirable quality. Of the women participants, 92% thought being a good communicator was a desirable quality in a male principal while 94% thought this was a desirable quality in a female principal.

Male participants' responses differed slightly. Men selected good communicator, good listener, knowledgeable of curriculum and instruction, good manager, problem solver, and seeks input as desirable qualities in both male and
female principals.

However, men felt being decisive was more important than being personable. Of the male participants, 82% selected decisive as a desirable quality for male principals and 81% selected it as a desirable quality for female principals. Personable was selected as a desirable quality by 75.4% of the male participants. The data on Table 2 substantiates the data on Table 1.

Do Male Principals have Legitimate Authority?

The majority of female participants (63.9%) responded yes, that males do have legitimate authority (See Table 3). Slightly more than half of male participants responded that men do not have legitimate authority. This suggests that men are not in agreement amongst themselves as to whether men step into the position of principal without having to earn their authority.

Do Female Principals Have Legitimate Authority?

The information on Table 4 overwhelmingly says no female principals do not have legitimate authority. Female and male teachers equally say that women have to work to earn their authority. Female principals in the 90's still have to prove themselves. Comments on the surveys stated that this authority has historically been given to males in the American culture.

By Whom Would You Prefer to be Supervised?

Although participants in this study were limited to the choices of male or female for their replies, many chose to add an extra line indicating *either*. As a result, the category of either was added as part of the data analysis. Female and male teachers stated that gender of the principal did not make a difference. They had no gender preference for their supervision. Comments such as the following were made by participants: "I respect the person and the job he/she does - not gender." The data raise several questions. If teachers have no preferences for whom they work, why do female principals still have to prove themselves? To whom do they need to prove themselves? Are teachers contradicting themselves?

Conclusion

The primary purpose of this study was to examine teachers' attitudes toward female principals. The results show that female and male teachers want the same qualities in a principal regardless of the principal's gender. Teachers want principals who are good communicators, good listeners, knowledgeable of curriculum and instruction, personable, problem solvers and who share power and credit as well as seek variety of input. This study strengthens the contention that in the 1990's characteristics traditionally attributed to women's ways of leading are desirable today in male administrators as well.

Several questions arose as a result of the responses to legitimate female authority: Why do women still not have legitimate authority stepping into a leadership position? Why must women earn the authority? If teachers are receptive to female principals, to whom must female principals prove themselves?

The question still remains, Why are women under represented as educational leaders? The answers may be within the responses to the questions above. A follow up study examining this issue and the questions above is warranted.

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