

Full Length Research Paper

Lessons for a Rural Female Superintendent: Gender, Leadership, and Politics

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Two years before my coauthor and I began this narrative inquiry, as the school superintendent of a rural community, I failed to fire a malicious football coach and resigned shortly thereafter. I floundered for a few months and then decided to pursue a doctorate in educational administration. Soon I met a professor, now my coauthor, who offered me the opportunity to explain what had happened in terms of socially constructed gender roles. We investigated 40 post-World War II urban, suburban, and rural female superintendents whom my coauthor and other scholars had interviewed. After theming their stories into five prototypes we wove these collective representations into my personal narrative and found that operationalizing any political agenda necessitated being aware of how a school community views acceptable womanhood, because it determined how the female superintendent was received. Had I adopted my stakeholders' notion of female demeanor, more school patrons may have heard me. Yet, for me and other superintendents the feasibility and ethics of what might be seen as outright manipulation will forever loom on the horizon of politics, gender and the superintendency.

Keywords: female superintendents, contextual qualitative research, personal narrative, and fictional perspectives

Introduction

One day I awoke and realized I had to quit. I had been a rural female school superintendent for over 2 years but, in my mind, I had failed. A few years before I took office most of the district's students scored high on standardized and criterion referenced tests, excelled in extracurricular activities, and felt a part of the school community. By the time I became superintendent those days were over. Because I worked in my hometown I thought I could reunite school patrons and restore the district to its former glory. I was wrong.

After resigning, I began work on a PhD in educational administration and took a position as a university/school liaison. In one of my first graduate courses my professor/coauthor and I began a narrative inquiry tracing my upbringing and educational career to determine why my dreams had faded. I soon learned why I had been adrift (Tallerico, Burstyn, & Poole, 1993). Politics and power are things that any

superintendent must deal with when negotiating public, professional, and student needs (Brunner, 2007). And I was not good at it. I had been one of many women whose school patrons must see the *female* not just the superintendent, so when I emulated a gender-neutral leadership style, I was doomed to fail (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Grogan, 1996; Lambert, 2002). Society, I discovered would not let female superintendents "not be female" (Sklar, 2008, p. 118). This conundrum is what Skrla (2008) called a "grey zone" (p. 121).

To explore this complexity more in depth, my co-author and I selected and studied 40 post-World War Two urban, suburban, and rural female superintendents whom she and other authors had interviewed. This resulted in five prototypes, each of which contained all of the like-minded women. We focused on the remarkable but common experiences with community, power, and politics. I identified with some more than others but they all gave me insights into my personal self-searching. When my

story slammed into my biggest failure, a publically attended board meeting gathered to consider firing a pernicious coach, my coauthor and I used our five prototypes' insights and experiences to speculate how they and then I might have gotten the job done. In so doing, I realized that irrespective of leadership style the female superintendent must decide how to present herself to others. A successful leadership style varies according to personality and contextual perceptions of appropriate gender roles.

Ever-Evolving History of Women as Educational Leaders

Delving into my co-author's and other U. S. historians' work illustrated how women have slipped into leadership's back door via traditionally stereotypical gender expectations. For example, the American Revolutionary era paved the way for female teachers to enter. Before that time when a cadre of citizens sought an educator, primarily for wealthy White males, they hired a schoolmaster (Mattingly, 1975). During the late eighteenth century influential colonial spokespersons, such as physician Benjamin Rush, supported female seminaries that arose to educate well-to-do White women to be Republican mothers. Because they were natural nurturers, it was argued, they should prepare the new nation's premier citizens to take their places in the elite hierarchy (Smith & Vaughn, 2000). The dye was cast. As in other areas, women's would-be professional lives were tied to biology (Miller, 1986). Although at the turn-of-the twentieth century, remedies to these sexist practices (i.e. flexible work schedules) emerged, Miller maintained that it entails "more changes in social economic arrangements" are needed to bring about equanimity (Miller, 1986, pp. 127-128).

Beating tremendous odds, a few women stealthfully used biological determinism to become the foremothers of female superintendents. In 1909, at 22, Emma Hart married John Willard, 28 years her senior. He had four children of his own, and they had one son in 1910. Her husband's nephew also lived with the family while attending a male seminary. Emma enthusiastically read his books. Her intellectual hunger came in handy because four short years into the marriage her husband's finances went sour giving Emma tacit social permission to open a women's school in her home. In 1819, she moved what became Troy Female Seminary to New York. The curriculum was rich with science, math, and literature but accommodated the current finishing school curricula that included subjects such as dance, French, and sewing. Mastering these, political school supporters thought, would help females be good mothers and further their husband's business interests. Although many of Willard's graduates did become homemakers, others, like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, evolved into suffragists. Willard's husband died in 1825, and she continued to run the school until 1838 when she turned it over to her son and daughter-in-law. Aside from a later short-lived marriage Willard remained single until she died in 1870 (Blount, 1998; Scott, 1979).

The school founder lived to see much of teaching's feminization. As capitalism replaced the mercantilist colonial

economy, male and female immigrants flooded the country. Some worked in steam-powered factories and later built railroads and labored in various manufacturing plants. Common school advocates such as Horace Mann and Catherine Beecher argued that single educated White women leave the home and staff the ever-growing common schools. Mann believed these women were responding to their natural call (Altenbaugh, 2004).

After manumission and the last of the Great Plains Indian wars, there were yet more youth, freed slave and Native American children, in need of *education* primarily for assimilation or, sadly, extinction. It is a tragedy that respected gainful employment for some Euro-American, African American, and a few Native American women came at the expense of their silenced sisters and brothers (Adams, 1995; Blount, 1998; Peterson & Vaughn-Roberson, 1986; Vaughn-Roberson, 1993/2004). In any case, by 1920 only 15 % of the nation's public school teachers were men (Vaughn & Liles, 1992).

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some single women rose to the superintendency, especially after various western and mid-western states passed school suffrage acts, but progress was uneven. Although by 1900, approximately 276 women served as county superintendents and 12 years later the number jumped to around 857 (Blount, 1998), in 1912 the First Assistant Texas Attorney General held that coverture prevented his state's married women from holding such offices. He was responding to an unnamed "married woman from Stockdale" who had thrown her hat in the ring (*New York Times*, 1912, p. 26). Paralleling this time period, married women still could not legally teach in Arizona, but they could run for county superintendent (Bowers, 1994; Nilsen, Pace, & Evans, 1985). However, most of the well-known school and state superintendents were White, single, urban women. While each made inroads for other females, they also faced contentious political environments and their tenures were often brief.

One of the notable, Susan Miller, taught Greek and Latin in New York until she married Patrick William Dorsey in 1881. They moved to California in the 1890s, but Patrick soon absconded with their son. Alone in Los Angeles, Susan returned to the classroom and in 1919 and became the city's school superintendent. Among many accomplishments, she increased teacher qualifications for licensure but also raised salaries. Yet, citizens attacked her for engaging in partisan debates rather than remaining a public servant, and she soon stepped down (McGregor, 1953).

Perhaps Chicago Public School Superintendent Ella Flagg Young, a single White woman, was the most remarkable early twentieth-century superintendent. Supported by suffragists, Young was elected in 1909, and a year later colleagues named her president of the National Education Association (NEA). Young was widowed after a brief marriage to an older man, and

she remained single throughout her career sharing her home with a former teacher and female secretary. According to Young, education was not only a natural endeavor for women but one in which they surpassed their male counterparts (Blount, 2003). Practicing what she preached the superintendent supported women teachers' efforts to equalize the pay schedule, but when she opposed school board corruption she was forced to resign, take up the position again, and finally quit for good. At 55, Young began graduate work with Dewey at the University of Chicago. Her dissertation explored ways to disembowel the rigid, rapidly increasing educational hierarchy. After graduating she taught at the same university and was principal of the Chicago Normal School (Blount, 1998; Smith, 1979).

A fellow traveler, in 1919, Texan Annie Webb Blanton was elected to lead her entire state's school system. Founded in 1893, the Texas Equal Rights Association secured White women's enfranchisement in primary elections in 1918. This opened the door for Blanton, but her campaign was a bitter contest. Opponents accused her of atheism, and Blanton countered by exposing her male opponent's close association with an impeached former governor (Vaughn-Roberson, 1993/2004).

Following Young's lead on the national educational front, Blanton was also elected vice-president of the NEA on three separate occasions. Similar to other national colleagues, the Texan increased requirements for teaching credentials, worked for a non-gender-based pay scale, and improved rural education in her state. After her second term, Blanton ran unsuccessfully for the United States Congress from Denton County. Leaving politics behind, the former school administrator earned a doctorate from Cornell University and then a professorial appointment at the University of Texas in 1927 (Vaughn-Roberson, 1993/2004).

Although the vast majority of female urban and state leaders had to make a choice between marriage and career, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries some professor/teacher lesbians allowed the *old maid school marm* image to shelter them and their partners from public scrutiny. Whatever their gender orientation, however, as the twentieth century wore on, percentages of female to male school superintendents slid into the abyss (Blount & Nash, 2004; Broughton & Palmieri, 1999). Moreover, as educational bureaucracies grew the elected superintendent, supported heartily by newly enfranchised female voters, became a thing of the past. Governors appointed state superintendents and school boards hired their own district leaders. Not until the 1970s did the proportional numbers of women slowly creep above the all-time high of 10 % in 1930. Early in the twenty-first century that figure rose to around 17 %, but just 5 % was non-White (Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Shakeshaft, 1987). During this time period an additional concern was that the proportionate numbers of female applicants were declining,

although the number of superintendentcies were becoming more prevalent (Keane & Moore, 2008).

Ruth Love was an exception to the rule. An African American, in 1971, she was appointed superintendent of Oakland Unified School District. Love created two programs in particular that hosted visiting dignitaries; such as Alex Haley, Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, and Coretta Scott King; to address her student population. In 1981, she took the Chicago public school system's top spot. The second female superintendent since Young, Love echoed her predecessor's earlier admonition that women and their nurturing values especially suited them for and enhanced the moral stature of teaching and administration. In fact a white female, Mayor Jane M. Byrne, had spurned Deputy Superintendent Manford Byrd's aspiration for the job in favor of Love. But the new superintendent's career was short-lived when two years later Harold Washington, an African American, defeated Byrne in a mayoral race and ousted Love so Byrd could become superintendent. Ironically Byrd then claimed the Daley political machine in Chicago was deterring strong black political/community leaders (Johnson, 1989). As we read this we could only think that while political battles raged many of Chicago's school children just slipped through the cracks. Soon after leaving office, Love followed in Blanton and Young's footsteps, becoming a professor and school reformer, especially in third world countries (Arnex 1981; Hayes, 2009).

Echoing Love's sentiments during the late twentieth and on into the twenty-first centuries, leadership theorists emphasized traditional female traits such as listening, caring, and nurturing. Yet, when contemporary men have lead this way they are seen as successful, situational leaders. So as not to seem weak, have worried about appearing *too* female, translated as weak. Conversely, when grassroots decision-making stalemates and the superintendent makes an executive decision to fire someone, for example, *he* is doing what a man must do. A likeminded female authority figure becomes an out-of-control threat. Turning history on its ear, especially when she is single, speculation can arise that she is gay and a threat to children (Blount, 2003). *She* is no longer the forgiving domestic woman (already a suspect leader) that society expects her to be. She has found Eve within her, the harbinger of social disintegration (Peterson & Vaughn-Roberson, 1988; Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich, 2000;).

This tangled web of expectations and judgment are part of why Bjork (2008) wrote, "gender and politics intersect in a system of relationships and power so rich and entangled that we have only begun to explore them" (p. 30). A majority of quantitative and qualitative studies focused on subjects' or participants' collective, thematic, or stratified similarities rather than differences. Moreover, few researchers showcase rural women superintendents, although at least 33% of early twenty-first-century schools are in rural areas where a substantial number of the nation's female superintendents serve (Garn & Brown,

2008). In sum “if we are to ever make progress toward redefining the superintendency to include the presence of women’s representative numbers, we must come to a better understanding of how the social constructions of gender, power, and politics play out in lived experiences and the workplace (Skrla, Scott, & Benestante, 2008, p. 116).

We did identify a synergistic school leadership model that helped us frame our study in terms of women’s multiple realities (Brown & Irby, 2003; Irby, Brown, Duffy, & Trautman). The authors employed a variety of leadership theories to describe an alternative, post-modern look at the impact of social factors on female leadership. The model’s four factors are: (a) Organizational Structure, (b) Leadership Behavior, (c) External Forces, and (d) Beliefs, Attitudes, Values. We applied sub points made in each of these areas to guide and interpret our investigation. For example, organizational structures are: (a) formed by leadership style; (b) molded by the way a particular approach is put into practice; (c) inspired by one’s values; and ever (d) observed and evaluated by external expectations from a school community, such as appropriate gender roles. In so doing, I learned that as a female superintendent I needed to be aware at each juncture how I perceived myself as a woman, how my school patrons saw me, and how I could use my gender to accomplish my goals. This article answered Brunner’s (2003) call “to mine” female superintendents’ stories and understand how a variety of ways these women navigate leadership in different social and cultural contexts

Methodology

When we closed the last of our books and articles, we felt the full weight of women superintendents’ historic challenges. At one time, having been the only woman in a university college of education and having done research on numerous female educators, my co-author experienced a renewed passion for our topic. She enthusiastically guided me through my personal quest and the resulting narrative inquiry. Pragmatism and interpretivism inform this methodology. For example, in the early twenty-first century Dewey and Mead both saw the “social situation [as] an organic whole in which both the individual and society are functional distinctions or two abstract phases of the same process” (Odin, 1996, p. 194).

First my co-author and I penned 20- to 30-page personal journals. She wrote extensively about 29 years of chairing dissertations and studying female educators and administrators. I read over her words and conversed with her about experiences that might cause her to objectively evaluate each woman’s experiences. I watched her adhere to that trustworthiness commitment as we read and analyzed the data. My writing was autobiographical and became the first draft of the narrative in this article. We dialogued about it for hours, as I continuously looked backward and then forward to sew my life together. Simultaneously my story resulted also from weaving inside and outside of myself, especially through each watershed period of

my career (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This entailed many rewrites, a type of analysis in itself (Richardson, 1998). To mask the identities of the people in my sojourn, on occasion I created composite characters yet their comments are contextually authentic.

I benefitted from 40 other female superintendents’ reflections. We were fortunate that my co-author had spent countless hours with and interviewed 15 female school superintendents. Adding to this participant pool were twenty-five other women superintendents, represented in five budding scholars’ dissertation studies (i.e. Amedy, 1997; Bran Cato, 1997; Palmer, 2003). My coauthor was the major professor for two (Everett, 1989; Robinson-Hornbuckle, 1991) and served on another’s dissertation committee (Kerber, 1992).

Our superintendents were a diverse group, representing three generations of African and Euro Americans who grew up in single and two parent homes or extended family units within varied socioeconomic circumstances. At the time of their interviews they lived and worked in rural, suburban, and urban districts in numerous states. The superintendents had varied sexual orientations and multiple opinions on religion and/or spirituality. Likewise their political and social views often quite different.

Couched within historical context and points made in the synergistic leadership model (Brown & Irby, 2003; Irby, Brown, Duffy, & Trautman, 2001), we analyzed by coding and theming the 40 superintendents’ interviews and stories. Our major themes are represented in five prototypes: (a) Ruth, the White, rural *lady*; (b) Rachel, the stalwart imposing urban autocrat; (c) Nancy, the African American success story working in a Black inner-city neighborhood; (d) Margaret, the White suburban superintendent who *embraced* the would-be disaffected students of the 1970s counter cultural youth; and (e) Reagan, the contemporary chameleon who united a disparate political community of a rural and suburban constituency.

Thematic Prototypes

Ruth

Ruth could have been my grandmother. She was a White, working-class, rural female educator who became county superintendent during World War II when no men were available to take the position. She had a degree from a teachers college and as a young unmarried woman in the 1930s felt that her place was to teach school, not be a school superintendent but when called on she did her patriotic and community duty. Ruth did not see herself as a leader in her own right but a substitute for a man, eliciting from her staff and communities a kindly authority based on years of Sunday school teaching and nursing home volunteer work. “I wasn’t out to get any men,” Ruth said, “just keep the light burning while they were away.”

Thus Ruth used influence rather than power relying on the “lady” image amidst an agricultural environment. Defusing any potential strife she explained, “I got along just fine with the board members. I treated them like gentleman, and they treated me like a lady. By avoiding conflict at all costs Ruth at least tacitly assumed blame when problems arose, explaining, “It was my responsibility to keep things running smoothly.” Miller (1986) insightfully interpreted situations such as Ruth’s by explaining that even in victory there is defeat. By not confronting conflict head on Ruth unknowingly internalized the belief that she had failed and was truly just a substitute for a male.

A loyal soldier, it was interesting to hear her talk about her enthusiasm for sports, a community mainstay. Unlike I, she seemed to have little trouble with the board over the coaching staff and continued to be an avid fan when she returned to the classroom. As she talked about her enthusiasm, the *lady like* personality seemed to melt a bit. I could see her loudly cheer on her team. A metaphor of sorts, she was not the community’s heart but part of its sidelines. Now deceased, she lies in her grave that is unattended in a small county cemetery.

Rachael

Rachael was young enough to be Ruth’s daughter. She earned her first superintendency in an inner city school where no men wanted to lead. White and single, as a principal in the same district, Rachael had taken advantage of her size and forthright personality to control her high school. “I just squared off with a lot of those tough kids and backed them down,” she remembered. This did not go unnoticed by her board. In a class-oriented world the less money one has the more one depends on the body for sources of power. Physical and reproductive capacities are a major source of capital. The community wanted order in a deteriorating neighborhood, and she delivered.

Nancy

Rachel’s contemporary, Nancy, also won her first superintendency in the 1970s in an urban district on which male leaders had given up. An African American Nancy was divorced and the first female to head the predominantly black community. She was dedicated to turning her bedraggled urban community into a place of hope. However, in some respects Nancy resembled New Yorker Meier (1995). She spent hours listening to community members who had not lost hope. Pointing out the ironies of her own segregated schooling, Nancy explained, “Now don’t get me wrong, I’m not for segregation, but we learned valuable lessons in those schools—to share books and see black role models lead our schools.”

Margaret

Another woman of the same era Margaret first became superintendent in an urban/suburban community. It was a plumb job even for a white woman in the 1970s, but Margaret had social and cultural capital on her side. A businessman, her father had taken her to numerous professional meetings

throughout the country. As the only female in attendance, Margaret had learned to act like the *boys* with impunity but, like all of the superintendents in our study, her passion for children’s education was always in the back of her mind.

In addition to socioeconomic class, Margaret had history on her side. She began teaching the decade I was born when the country was very afraid of up-and-coming hippie revolutionaries. Margaret developed a reputation for being able to quell potential chaos. Her first job was instructing English in an alternative high school. Undaunted when Johnny came to the board to spell the word “fame” he wrote “f-u-k,” she calmly took the chalk from his hand and said, “Johnny, if you are going to cuss, spell it correctly,” Margaret then inserted a “c” after the “u” in Johnny’s word and said, “If you are here to learn, now write ‘f-a-m-e.’” The student did as he was told and sat down. Word spread like wildfire. Her deliberate but caring personality became part of her district’s cultural lore.

Meagan

Meagan is a more recent portrayal of the female leader. Just 10 years my senior, she was a comely relatively unassuming white woman who could use her feminine mystique (Friedan, 1963) to work a crowd. She conceptualized her job as a set of interchangeable roles not a task, as did another superintendent in Skrla, Scott, and Benestante’s (2008) study, who declared, “what is right for kids is right but what wins out is politically negotiating the landscape,” (p. 124). Meagan could change hats at will, relating to each person as if she had been part of their world since birth. Although she did tout and sometimes employed a transformational, educational, and school patron-centered leadership style, Meagan could dial her femininity up or down to maximize communication. After dealing with her older, bucolic school patrons one such woman remarked, “After I first met Meagan I went home and told my husband, ‘that’s a great little girl and we need to support her.’” But wearing a taciturn smile, Meagan also politely, *but* stubbornly, refused to leave the state superintendent’s office when a special school program was in danger of being cut. In effect, she wore her opponent down with polite resistance. On occasion, she shed this skin, but not in a school board meeting, behind closed doors with a recalcitrant staff member. Just feminine enough to soften her *masculine* resolve, she was able to put innovative programs in place for students and raise test scores.

My Narrative

Having compiled the above composite characters my coauthor and I then began threading their lives into my narrative. Throughout this process, we confirmed our appreciation for Richardson’s (1998) earlier noted claim that writing is truly a legitimate analytical technique. The result was my four-framed personal narrative: (a) Growing up Female and Male; (b) The Interview; (c) Putting out Fires; and (d) The Board Meeting. In a fifth frame, Fictive Successful Scenarios, we then speculated how our five archetypes might have handily conducted my ill-fated board meeting and gotten a vote to fire the coach. Richardson (1998) identified four criteria for presenting

research findings in this matter: substantive contribution; aesthetic merit; reflexivity; and impact and expression of a reality. My fifth frame draws from the latter two. I hope that all or parts of my story will resonate with other superintendents, thereby fulfilling an important narrative inquiry goal (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Looking Backward and Forward Inside and Outside

When I enrolled in graduate school in 2008, I was burning to study the superintendency. I internally flinched during a qualitative research class one night after speaking about women superintendents' experiences. One of the two professors teaching the class said, "Sounds like you might want to take a feminist perspective." At this time my belief system resembled that of Judy (represented in Ruth, the White rural *lady* prototype). who explained, "I really have this hang-up that we women dwell too much on the fact that we are women.... I think of myself as an educational administrator and not a female and it bothers me in those realms that we identify ourselves and make ourselves different" (cited in Robinson-Hornbuckle, 1991, p. 51). Echoing Judy, I mustered my courage and shot back, "I'm not a feminist. A person is just a person." The other professor, now my co-author, offered, "I can understand that. When I grew up, my dad had all the power inside and outside the home. He derided my mother, and I decided I wanted to be out there with him as a professional. I clearly didn't want to be a homemaker."

I had been ready for a fight, but the second professor had given me a modicum of support. The only thing left to do was to keep reading and thinking, so that I could posture my egalitarian thoughts in more sophisticated terms. Yet, I came to disagree with myself as evidenced in this paper's introduction. In that class, I learned that female superintendents face exaggerated political problems compared to their male counterparts. They are torn between behaving as traditional women or as men: juggling this conundrum by having two homes, one within and the other without the community; appearing at school and social events alone; and working more hours than men (Bell, 1995; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Pavan, 1999).

Growing up Female and Male

I was like many other *good* rural children who grew up oblivious to the cultural context in which they were reared. It was the 1960s, but my hometown and surrounding farms were removed from the civil rights tumult. A racially homogeneous population, no one said to me, "You are White and entitled," not "different." Yet, I wore an invisible *stigma*. I was a girl. My father was the family patriarch, a school administrator who instructed me to get an education and become a teacher. Yet interestingly, he also encouraged me to work hard and achieve any administrative opportunities that came along. At the time, I identified with one female superintendent in Brunner's (1999) work who said, "my father said you can be anything you want" (p. 190). Modeling my father's leadership style when he was a principal my demeanor was never classically "feminine," and

before I married and bore two children some straight and gay people thought I was a lesbian. After reading Blount (2003) I realized that I was not the only *older* single woman who had been stereotyped. Although I am sure my father breathed a sigh of relief when I tied the knot with a man, he still kept telling me I could do anything I was big enough to do.

After college, I taught for 11 years, first away from and after I married in my hometown. But unlike other women in my family, I moved for my job, not my husband's. I soon became an elementary principal, and like many other women, as Evans (2007) corroborated, this was my springboard to become an assistant superintendent. My promotion paralleled a school community in transition. Farmers feared losing their land to corporate agriculture. It became harder and harder to find blue collar jobs, because so many workers had gradually moved to urban areas while more impoverished residents moved in to find any type of menial work. The district suffered commensurately.

In addition to financial and personnel problems, the physical plants were a mess, filled with countless, dirty, old boxes packed with trivia, but also with crucial documents needed for tax purposes and student records. A Christian zealot, the superintendent anointed my office with oil shortly after I assumed the job. Biblically and socially, I was Eve who had pushed Mother Mary's role aside and he was very afraid. Peterson and Vaughn's (1988) work on educational and nursing professionals among Catholic nuns recounted several similar situations. The all-male school board was not as adamantly opposed to me, but it still wrestled with the oxymoron of a female leader. Like Joan, another of our rural participants subsumed in the Ruth prototype, when my superintendent left and the board was desperate to find an immediate replacement, the president of the board asked me temporarily to fill in (Brancato, 1997).

The Interview

When initially advertised, I did not apply for the permanent position. Consciously, I based this decision on the school system's disarray, but I may have been conflicted over my dual responsibilities of administrator and homemaker. My mother had been a teacher, never an administrator. If I took the job, I would have been much younger than the average female superintendent whose children, if she had any, were already grown (Brunner, 1999; Kowalski & Stouder, 1999; Young & McLeod, 2001).

Due to a lack of applicants, a week before the final interviews a board member asked me to submit an application. As usual, I went to my father for advice. He mulled the question for a few days and finally, as an afterthought said, "You know, if you ever want that job now is the time to try for it. The school is at the bottom of the barrel and you can only move it forward. I am not telling you what to do but it is something to consider." I took his advice but, like the women Grogan and Shakeshaft

(2011) referred to in my situation, I applied mainly because I wanted to serve what seemed to be the forgotten school children rather than to further my career.

The board narrowed the pool to five candidates. On the evening of the interviews, I was the last to be questioned. I spoke honestly about the schools' problems. After I left the room the board deliberated for hours, then called me back in for additional repartee. The president informed me that they had narrowed their selection to two candidates, an older White male and me, but the representatives were concerned that if I were not given the job I would leave the district. The board's first choice, I now reason, was to have an industrious, long-suffering assistant female superintendent who did most of the work for a male leader. Probably due in part to my father's stature, the board capitulated and offered me the job. Brunner's (1999) research, I later discovered, suggested that, like mine, women's advancement into leadership positions benefit more from having a male rather than a female mentor.

Putting out Fires

Naively, I expected hometown support. My goals were simple: create individualized instruction for special needs students; encourage learning-by-doing across curricula; hire teachers and administrators who put the youngsters' welfare first; and nurture bad teachers through failure (Lightfoot, 1983), but without haste get rid of the ones who were bad for children. I was also concerned with professional inequalities among teachers and administrators. For example, in my district and others throughout the country (Carter, 2002) it was an enduring historical practice that male teachers/coaches made more money than did females who also sponsored clubs and did other service work.

I was decisive but tried to be as inclusive as I could be with teachers, staff, and school patrons, but I did not want to lose control. I listened with curiosity when certain male patrons told me I "had more balls than a man." At the time, I did not appreciate what Skrla, Scott, and Benestante's (2008) participant maintained: "You're not supposed to be competent in everything. You're supposed to need somebody to help you in something. And if you're (a woman)...and look like you don't need help, I think that...just gets at people. It gets at other women; it gets at other men"(p.125).

Because my style often smacked of the masculine-identified autocrat, my community did not know what to do with me either. Apparently I was not like many other women who, as Grogan's (1998) work suggested, try to avoid the weak female label by casting themselves in a gender-neutral *role*. I must have sold this image to some people because at meetings where the board and I sat at a long table placed on a raised platform in front of the public crowd, the newspaper photographer was so oblivious to my gender that he thoughtlessly positioned the camera to give a clear view up my dress.

A few patrons appreciated my gender-neutral no-nonsense style, especially when I quickly arranged for optimal educational placements for special education students and other youngsters in dire need of extra attention. Yet, overall my style was ineffective, as one disastrous board meeting demonstrated.

The Board Meeting

The meeting was conducted in a packed auditorium with an imposing grey fuzzy microphone that a large city news crew had plunked down on a table in front of me. The issue was whether to fire a male football coach. He was insidious, but a winner. He bullied and belittled students, refused to learn any innovative teaching styles, and behaved in other inappropriate ways that did not legally justify his being fired. Yet, in a fractious community with a constantly shifting population, football was a narcotic. A successful team was all many people felt they had and provided the community with bonding experiences. I began the meeting by introducing the dilemma in a didactic way—to fire or not to fire. Soon a heated debate emerged, and my efforts to charge through and not deal with the conflict failed. In graduate school I later read about other besieged superintendents (Arnez, 1981). A few days later I quit, applied for a doctoral degrees program in educational leadership, and was accepted. I hoped that my studies would help me understand why I had failed. I read about other optional leadership styles that involved sharing responsibility and creating learning communities (e. g. DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Lambert, 2002) which made me feel worse than I had before, because I then believed I should have known about them before I became a superintendent. My coauthor encouraged me to work through this guilt by speculating about how our five prototypes might have resolved a similar board meeting such as mine where they too wanted to fire the coach.

Fictive Successful Scenarios

Although Ruth never really challenged her board directly, she would have used her subtle influence to accomplish the desired goal. Most of the adults in her crowd would have come that night with childhood memories of Ruth's kindly, but unyielding Christian teaching. Also an older woman, Ruth was Mother Mary's progeny, never Eve's. What might have been a strident bunch of cowboys would have been more deferential to her than they had been to me and would have voted to fire the coach.

Rachel and Nancy were both urban superintendents during the tumultuous 1970s; however, due to their distinctively different personalities and situations, they would have handled their meetings in diverse ways. Rachael's patrons would have responded to her direct manner and fired the coach without reservation. But I was not Rachel, and my board would have never appointed her. We were both White, but our rural and urban contexts were completely different. Without belittling Black, especially male school patrons, Nancy would have opened the meeting, not with a fiery, but with a confident tone, and would have lined out enough facts to illustrate the coach's

individual infractions that stood in the way of rebuilding the school community. The group would have discussed the situation, but Nancy, the luminary, would have won over any detractors.

Margaret might have started the board meeting with a friendly joke about Fred being too drunk to attend the function. The crowd would have laughed, and the board would eventually have voted to fire the coach. Margaret's professional child, Meagan, would have begun the session with a tempered tone and greeted attendees with diffidence that masked steel blue determined eyes. Just feminine enough to soften what her community might have tagged an unacceptable *masculine* resolve, she would have gotten the job done.

My coauthor and I devised a fictional scenario for me. My male assistant superintendent could have initiated the discussion. After the crowd debated for a time, I could have introduced my nurturing side and, in the name of resolution, I might have called on certain attendees whose views were in the middle ground much closer to each other than apart. Then I could have guided the group to consensus. Because I am not a *girlie* woman, that strategy might have worked. I would have taken advantage of the female image as peacemaker to win over enough of the opposition who appreciated my ability to quiet the crowd.

The Beginning of Never-ending Reflection

Following narrative inquiry edicts, with the help of my coauthor, I reached back into Euro-American history of emergent women leaders, especially superintendents. This gave me a heartfelt respect for those who had come before me and the ways in which they obtained educational leadership or superintendent positions despite tremendous social pressure to remain at home, or, at best, aspire to nothing but a teaching position. Willard took advantage of an economically failing husband to begin her own school. Miller benefitted from an absentee spouse and Young from widowhood to be, from my perspective, accepted as women who had once conformed to society's expectation that women become wives above all else. Of course, during and after being elected they had to fend off criticism for engaging in what might be described as unladylike behavior or thoughts. Miller and Blanton were accused for being political activists; Blanton was labeled an atheist; and Young suffered politically for attacking graft.

After investigating the 40 participants' lives I learned that contemporary female superintendents still wrestle with cultural and personal views of womanhood. As if working with the public was not hard enough, they had an extra layer of problematic concerns regarding gender. Ruth's image as a maternal Christian teacher would have dissuaded the roughest cowboy from challenging the pure of heart. Margaret knew just how much assertiveness or motherly intimidation she should employ in her suburban district to be effective. Rachael was the strict larger-than-life caretaker who inspired working class

students to adopt middle class decorum. Nancy was the female crusader who brought civility and some degree of continuity back into a fragmented Black community. And Meagan was a twentieth-first century woman who took advantage of feminist insistency that women could be leaders but at the same time owned her femininity.

In sum, achieving the superintendency is not simply breaking the glass ceiling that sexism creates to prevent women from obtaining chief executive-type positions. Rather, as Eagly and Carli (2007) put forth, women's rise to the top varies by individual and context, and consequently is better seen as a labyrinth. Moreover, as the synergistic leadership model explained, keeping such positions is based on any number of factors related to the way one acts to develop an organizational structure (Brown & Irby, 2003; Irby, Brown, Duffy, & Trautman, 2001). I should have been more aware of external community based social constructions of gender and more introspective about the kind of woman I perceived myself to be. This study helped me do just that. I decided that I am incapable of projecting Ruth's Sunday school or Meagan's pretty woman image. Nor am I like Margaret who was tutored in the ways entitled upper-middle-class men jockey for power. In another non-rural setting similar to Rachael and Nancy's my stature and aggressive persona is imposing enough to at least, in the board meeting scenario, bring order out of chaos and achieve my desired goal of firing the coach. But for me herein lies the rub. Ethically how much cultural manipulation am I willing to engage in to accomplish positive goals? To what extent does the end justify the means? Having not as yet answered these questions for myself I invite my readers to contemplate them and share their reflections and in so doing contribute to an ever-changing scholarly conversation that intends to inform practice.

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